

Rwandan Refugees Caught 'Between Two Deaths'

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A group of Rwandan refugees decamped to a roofless stone house held a spirited discussion this afternoon on whether to return to their country. At a camp just across the road, the volcanic rock was piled with bodies, a jumble of at least 200 thrown on a heap, evidence that a cholera epidemic continues unabated.

The effort to bury the victims, which was running with relative albeit grim efficiency two days ago, has now been overwhelmed by the numbers. But the refugees who were chatting together today believe — as others do — that returning to Rwanda to escape cholera means facing death at the hands of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the Tutsi-dominated rebel army that is now the Government.

“Going back or staying here, either way we die,” said Wilson Ndabateze, a 35-year-old carpenter who, like others staying around the Munigi refugee camp, is a member of Rwanda’s Hutu ethnic majority. He has concluded that for the moment it is better to stay.

“We are caught between two deaths,” said Martin Munyanganizi, 35, a farmer. On Sunday, Mr. Munyanganizi wrapped up the body of his 10-year-old daughter in a cloth and laid her beside the road to be picked up by a truck and carried to a mass grave.

She died of cholera, he said.

Today four other children, caked with dirt and sickly, lay next to him on a straw mat on the hard ground. His wife leaned listlessly against the rock wall of the house, as her 1-year-old daughter, longing for milk, wailed and pulled in vain at her mother’s dirty blue sweater. “We are only farmers,” Mr. Munyanganizi said. “If the international community could help us go back home, we would go.” The sorghum and beans he planted on his 650-square-foot plot before fleeing in April are now ready for harvesting, he explained.

Officially, 1,316 refugees crossed at the border post here back into Rwanda, according to a young man who was keeping a tally in a stenographic notebook. But the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that 10,000 refugees may have crossed at unofficial places where there are no fences or natural barriers.

“It is a small trickle that is slowly gaining momentum,” Machivenyika Mapuranga, assistant secretary general of the Organization of African Unity, said late this afternoon when he visited the border.

The relief agencies here in Goma, who were ill prepared and then overwhelmed by the massive refugee influx this month, remain as confused and

divided as many of the refugees over what to do now. Should they provide buses to take the refugees back? Should they set up feeding stations inside Rwanda to draw them back?

"We have had no reports at all from Rwanda of anyone who has gone back being killed," said Ray Wilkenson, a spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner. "Our reports are that they are being cordially and openly received."

Most of the refugee agencies here have no plans to disseminate that information. They are leaving it to reach the refugees by word of mouth, from those who have returned to their homes safely.

Repatriation and Relief

The thought of undertaking a repatriation effort when a relief operation is barely under way here in Zaire is daunting for the aid agencies.

"From one operation that almost sank the aid agencies, we are now being asked to undertake another one," Mr. Wilkenson said. "We're not going to be able to work two miracles."

Only today did American soldiers start setting up the first water purification systems in Goma, considered indispensable to halting the cholera epidemic here.

Death among the refugees still overwhelms the relief agencies. After finding it difficult to locate suitable places for more mass graves, the United Nations refugee agency obtained the reluctant assent of the local authorities to burning of bodies, which goes against the cultural traditions of most Africans, Roman Catholics included. Rwanda is a heavily Catholic country.

Now the relief agencies face another problem. "We cannot find anybody to do the grisly task of burning the bodies," Mr. Wilkenson said. Several nongovernmental relief organizations have said no to the task, as has the French military. The United Nations considered asking the Americans, but Washington has scaled back the number of troops it intends to send to Zaire.

Role of the Military

It had been reported that the United States would send about 1,400 troops to Zaire. But the French were not pleased by the prospects of being overshadowed here by Americans, and Washington has now decided to set up the headquarters for its refugee operations in Kigali, the Rwandan capital.

From Kigali, the Americans will truck food along the hard-surface road about 100 miles west to Goma. Along the way they will set up stations where beans and cooking oil will be available. It may be just enough to persuade more refugees to undertake the trek home – if they hear about it.

Driving the 40 miles of twisting mountain roads from the border to the northern Rwandan town of Ruhengeri, one can see cabbages, tall corn, tomatoes and undulating fields of tea plants. Most of the fields were abandoned, but there are a few women at work with their hoes.

Among the refugees, the fear of returning home seems to arise both from a lack of information and from disinformation.

Mr. Ndabateze, the carpenter, said he would return when the war was over. He was surprised to learn that it

was. Told that he could cross safely at the official border post, he said he had not even known the border was open.

“There are so many rumors,” said Jeanne Uzabakiliho, 20, a farmer who was sitting at the stone house with the others.

“Some people say we can go back and there is no problem, others say if we go back we will be killed by the

R.P.F.,” she said. “We don’t know who we can believe.”

Asked whether they preferred that the international community provide them with food and water so they could stay here in Zaire, or help them return home, the 30 people who had gathered at the house answered in a chorus – “We want to return home.”