

Defeated Rwandans Vow to Return

Scott Peterson

Christian Science Monitor, October 18, 1994

Ousted Hutu soldiers exiled in Zaire are regrouping, but UN officials are divided over the threat they pose

MUGUNGA CAMP, ZAIRE — WHILE the new Tutsi-led government in Rwanda makes overtures about national reconciliation, boastful Hutu officers of the defeated army, living in exile in Zairean refugee camps, vow to regroup and fight their way back into their country.

United Nations and relief officials are divided over the scale of the military threat from these soldiers. Rumors of a counter-offensive from the sprawling refugee camps - compounded by violence and intimidation meted out by militia and roving gangs of thugs in the camps - have done little to foster reconciliation.

The former Hutu-dominated army is largely responsible for the deaths of an estimated half a million rival Tutsis during the spring and summer. The rebel victory in mid-July pushed 1.2 million Hutus across the border into Zaire, along with the Army.

Gen. Augustin Bizimungu, chief of staff of the losing Hutu forces, has called for a power-sharing deal with the new government as a precondition for peace. The new government urges reconciliation, but has said nothing about power-sharing.

And the general's efforts have been undercut by varying reports about the possibility of an imminent counter-offensive by the exiled Hutu soldiers.

The threat of attack was described in a Sept. 6 UN report : "Military-aged males, along with large supplies of rations, water, and arms have been observed coming across the borders of Zaire and Burundi into Sector 4 [the southwest] of Rwanda."

The UN special envoy, Shaharyar Khan of Pakistan, reported to New York headquarters that "classic preparations for guerrilla warfare" were being made by Rwanda's ousted Army.

He also described unconfirmed reports that 10,000 soldiers of the former Army had regrouped in Zaire across from the border town of Cyanguu, that 30 percent of them still had their weapons, and that they may be receiving training from the Zaire military. Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko has promised to disarm the Army, and not to allow them to use Zaire as a base.

Ambassador Khan said in an interview that the threat to Rwanda is "more in the form of guerrilla acts, sabotage, and attempts at destabilization, rather than a military campaign."

Three weeks ago, a large group of former Rwandan soldiers in Zaire was shifted by the Zairean Army a mile

further away from the main refugee camps, and 120 tons of ammunition and weaponry were confiscated. Relief workers say, however, that they witness men - some in military uniform - drill regularly on the outskirts of Mungungu Camp, where 20,000 to 30,000 soldiers and 50,000 militiamen cling to their units.

Some 8,000 of the soldiers camped for 10 weeks with 500 military vehicles on the lakeside property shared by an American missionary, Winston Hurlburt. They did not dig one latrine in all that time, Mr. Hurlburt said; pollution and campfire smoke killed 65 percent of the rabbits on his farm.

The soldiers "on the whole were nice," he said, though they did kill 20 local Zaireans whom they believed to be Tutsis. The Rwandan colonel in charge gave Hurlburt permission - only half in jest, he said - to kill up to 100 of the young soldiers if they kept causing trouble.

"They compensated us with two tins of sardines and two boxes of tea bags," says Hurlburt, who was born in Zaire and has spent his life in Africa. "They have no structure, no weapons, and are completely demoralized, so they won't go back."

AFTER losing their weapons to the Zaireans three weeks ago when they were moved off Hurlburt's property, soldiers "re-armed" by digging up a smaller cache of 30 pistols and some rifles. Most heavy weapons were turned over in July to the Zaireans and the French Army; the latter trained and supplied Rwandan forces for years.

As the Hutu stay in Zaire lengthens, however, calls for action are increasing.

"The refugees say they will give every dollar they have to support a

military push back, because they are so frustrated," said John Skinnader, an Irish priest working with the charity Goal. "They feel the UN refugee agency is not doing enough to get them back, and that the UN does not have enough troops in Rwanda to protect them."

Hutu militias are already active inside Rwanda, operating from remote bases or from the camps, according to the UN. Ambushes and violence - caused by either the militias or troops of the new government, who try to hunt down the militias - have persuaded refugees not to return.

In the large refugee camp in Ngara, Tanzania, the refugees are taxed anyway for the promised onslaught: Militiamen collect a tithe in relief food that they call rations for the next military campaign.

The potential of an invasion exists, but sources in Goma doubt rumors that France or Zaire would intervene to help the defeated soldiers.

"There is only so long these guys will live under plastic sheeting, so it's only a matter of time before they go back," says Declan O'Brien, an Irish Army captain and field director for Goal. "If they get proper aid from outside, anything is possible."

So far UN plans for the soldiers seem unrealistic: They are to be issued with 16,000 sets of civilian clothes, and to be separated from the main camps - and their families - and sent to camps up to 600 miles away.

That won't ease the suspicions of the new government.

"They ran away with their arms, so they have the potential to launch guerilla attacks," says government spokesman Major Wilson Rutayisire. "But I don't see their cause. Are they not sa-

tified with the million they killed? Do they come to kill more?"

The UN report discusses reconciliation between the two sides, but UN sources admit that such thoughts

amount to "pie in the sky" fantasies without some kind of penal system in place first, to bring the former army and culprits of genocide to justice.