

Exodus From Zairian Camps Left Many Refugees Behind

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The river of refugees returning to Rwanda dwindled to a trickle today, but another half-million remained cut off from international aid, somewhere in the hills and valleys around Bukavu in the south.

In addition, hundreds of ragged people have begun to emerge from the rain forests and volcano-studded wilderness here, near this border town on the north shore of Lake Kivu. They tell of tens of thousands of other refugees in the woods, who are eating grass and collecting rainwater in buckets to stay alive.

The once-teeming refugee camps around Goma – tent cities that had become havens for Hutu guerrillas fomenting violence in Rwanda – are now empty fields of debris, left to scavengers and rats.

“The camps are empty,” said Ray Wilkinson, a spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “They will not be reopened. That is what everyone involved had wanted, and today it’s a reality.”

At least a half-million people have crossed the border into Rwanda on foot in the last three days. This afternoon, the last few thousand refugees who had inhabited the huge camp at Mugunga, nine miles west of Goma, were trud-

ging toward the border, a long string of people marching single-file carrying their belongings on their heads.

In Rwanda, the head of the column had reached Ruhengeri, 30 miles from here, and thousands were drifting off the main highway, down dirt roads to villages they had not seen in two years. Aid workers expected the exodus to end by Tuesday.

The flood of returning refugees began three days ago, after Zairian rebel forces with ties to Rwanda’s Tutsi-led Government encircled the Mugunga camp and attacked it, quickly routing the Hutu guerrilla army that a majority of refugees said had been essentially holding them hostage for months.

Zairian rebels had already seized a 200-mile strip of land along the eastern border with Rwanda and Burundi, pushing out the Zairian troops, who were allies of the Hutu forces in the camps.

The Hutu refugees arrived in Zaire in 1994, fleeing an advancing Tutsi army. Among them were 40,000 soldiers loyal to the former Hutu-led Government and tens of thousands of militiamen who helped carry out the 1994 genocide against Tutsi, in which at least 500,000 people perished.

It was still unclear tonight where

the retreating Hutu forces were or if they remained a viable fighting force. United Nations officials said the rebel soldiers had pursued them west past the town of Sake, about 18 miles from Goma. They said that the retreating Hutu fighters appeared to be moving northwest toward Masisi, a fertile region another 27 miles away with a Hutu ethnic majority.

Just outside the Mugunga camp, the aftermath of Friday's battle could be seen. There was a line of twelve burned-out buses and trucks on the road after an ambush by the Tutsi rebels. The convoy had apparently been carrying officers of the former Rwandan Army along with copious records. Scattered around the buses were thousands of documents belonging to the Hutu officers.

Rebel soldiers today were collecting the papers, which some journalists had already mined for information the day before. Some documents reportedly outlined the Hutu army's plans to retake Rwanda, while others provided proof of arms deals between the Hutu guerrillas and British gun traders.

A few miles down the road, groups of gaunt refugees who had spent the last two weeks hiding in the forest were staggering into the Mugunga camp. They were stunned to find the camp deserted. They said they had been marching for days to reach it in the belief that the militiamen would protect them.

The refugees had abandoned the Katale camp, about 37 miles north of Goma, when it was attacked more than two weeks ago and had headed west into the forests around the Nyiragongo volcano. They said they had survived by eating berries, grass and roots and

by collecting rainwater on plastic sheeting. Still, many people in their group had died of dysentery and other illnesses, they said.

"Many are dying," said Boniface Kajangwe, who had stopped walking because his feet were cut and infected. "They are sick, tired and hungry. Some of my relatives are in the forest. I don't know if they are alive."

Mr. Kajangwe said most refugees from Katale were still in the rain forest, about three days' walk from Mugunga camp. United Nations officials said they were sending a team on foot to investigate.

Officials from Care International, the aid organization, said they had received radio transmissions on Saturday from one of their employees who is still traveling with refugees from the Katale camp. According to the employee, there are hundreds of thousands of refugees who have left the forests around the volcano, and are now in the fertile cattle country in Masisi. Some people were left behind, the employee reported.

Aid workers said that if the reports are true, the Katale refugees are in a remote area where it would be nearly impossible to reach them by plane or car. "If they drop off the world stage, they could very likely disappear," said Lockton Morrissey, a Care official.

At the same time, there were signs that the last people on the march back into Rwanda were suffering from disease, aid workers said. There were 200 reported cases of cholera among refugees at a hospital in Gisenyi, Rwanda. About 1,200 people were also treated for dehydration along the road in Rwanda, according to Doctors Without Borders, another aid organization.

The United Nations sent a fleet of buses and trucks into Zaire on Sunday night and today to collect about 6,000 stragglers, most of whom were old, sick or too weak to make the journey on foot. Aid workers also took about 1,700 lost children to shelters in a local school or in camps.

Many refugees said they were hungry, having eaten nothing but biscuits given by aid workers at way stations. Emergency rations of maize, rice and beans still had not been delivered to refugees tonight because of the Rwandan Government's bureaucratic delays in approving charitable organizations to distribute the food to villages, said Brenda Barton, a spokesman for the World Food Program.

There were also problems in finding transportation for refugees from a transit camp near the border to more remote parts of the country, United Nations officials said.

Despite those problems, few people

were reported to have died in the exodus, officials said. United Nations workers discovered 17 bodies of refugees along the road in Zaire today, victims of dysentery and dehydration, a relatively small number when compared to the half million people who poured out of the country.

Swiss Deny Visa to Mobutu

GENEVA, Nov. 18 (Reuters) – Switzerland today denied a visa to Zaire's ailing President, Mobutu Sese Seko, in what appeared to be a calculated snub.

A spokesman for the Foreign Ministry said that Mr. Mobutu, 66, who underwent more than two months of cancer treatment in Lausanne, had applied for a new visa for a checkup but that his request had been turned down.

He left Switzerland on Nov. 4 for the French Riviera, where he has a villa.