

Kabila denies throwing Rwandan refugees out of DR Congo

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AFP, September 10, 1997

KIGALI, Sept 10 (AFP) - Amid controversy, President Laurent Kabila on Wednesday denied that his Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) had expelled refugees from Rwanda last week and said he was complying with UN requests.

Kabila told a press conference in the Rwandan capital Kigali that the DRC had "expelled nobody", referring to both Rwandan Hutu and Burundian refugees who had fled to the neighbouring former Zaire from civil war in their own countries.

"We are doing what the United Nations has asked us to do, in other words sending refugees back to their home territory. You cannot ask us to repatriate refugees one day and then to keep them the rest," Kabila said.

His government in Kinshasa, which seized power last May after an eight-month uprising against dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, currently faces

charges that his former rebels massacred many of the refugees in Zaire and has been hindering UN human rights investigations into alleged atrocities.

Kabila was speaking after spending two days in Rwanda for talks with officials there on military cooperation and border security between the two countries and mainly with his counterpart.

During Kabila's insurrection, the collapsing regime in Kinshasa accused Rwanda, notably, as well as Uganda, of backing his rebel alliance, initially dominated by Zairean Tutsis from the east. A Tutsi rebel front seized power in Kigali in 1994, after three months of genocidal civil war which caused more than a million Hutus to flee, many of them into Zaire.

Last Thursday, 800 refugees from Rwanda and Burundi were forced out of their camp near the northeastern DRC town of Kisangani, sparking strong criticism from the the

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Sadoko Ogata, and her staff.

Ogata on Tuesday said that that the United Nations would be compelled to suspend operations to help refugees in the DRC if states in the region continued to violate their rights.

Kabila's alliance has been accused of slaughtering Rwandan Hutus during the course of their uprising, amid counter-charges that armed Interahamwe extremist militiamen among the refugees were fighting Zairean rebels in the border region, which has long been an ethnic powderkeg.

Ogata said in New York that if the Security Council could not obtain assurances concerning the refugee protection in the Democratic Republic of Congo, "we would be obliged to suspend our operations with regard to the Rwandan refugees in Congo."

"We cannot protect refugees if the host governments do not abide by

the principles and standards of laws, which means that refugees have to be protected, and that those who do not volunteer to go back have to be examined," she said.

UNHCR representative in New York Soren Jessen-Petersen confirmed that a decision to suspend all UNHCR operations for the mainly Hutu Rwandans in DRC had been taken, but that "the process will be gradual."

He added that it was hoped that an intervention by the UN Security Council would prevent the total suspension of the UNHCR operations by ensuring the required conditions.

"But as of now those conditions do not exist," Jessen-Petersen said.

Kabila's visit to Rwanda was his first since he ousted Mobutu, who died in exile in the Moroccan capital Rabat at the weekend, and became president of the newly renamed Democratic Republic of Congo.

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