

RPF Troops « kill Hutus On Their Way Home »

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Famine may strike the French-held zone. Lindsey Hilsum in Kaduha

Soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which leads the new government in Kigali, have mistreated and killed members of the majority Hutu ethnic group trying to return to their villages, according to people returning to the refugee camps.

Louis Nyandwe from Kareba village named two women and five children killed by the RPF with machetes and hoes in his village and five men shot at Munyira after being seized by soldiers.

He said that he and 10 others escaped; his father was among those killed.

These are the first eyewitness accounts of abuse by the Tutsi-dominated RPF since it seized power on July 17 from the Hutu-led government and army which led massacres of up to 500,000 Tutsis earlier in the year.

In the village of Kaduha, in the French-protected zone, Charles Murera showed severe rope burns on the inside of his elbows and small scars on the back of his knees and on his ankle.

He said he left his village in Ntogwe district in May when the war was at its height and fled to Kaduha with his six children. Last Friday he tried to go home.

« We were caught by six Tutsis as we arrived at our village. The others I

was with are still young, but I am old and could not run. »

Mr Murera said that the leader of the six Tutsis was angry about his brother, who had been killed by Hutus. The villagers tied Mr Murera's arms behind his back and led him to an RPF military camp at Kinazi.

Soldiers jabbed him in the knee and ankle with nails and knives, before throwing him – still tied – into a room with 10 other men.

« We untied the ropes with our teeth. We found a place in the wall where a brick had been moved and made a hole so three of us escaped. »

Mr Murera is a slightly built man. He said only the three thinnest could get through the hole. As he escaped, he saw dead bodies lying around the camp.

Mr Murera is one of five Hutus in Kaduha who gave detailed testimonies of abuses they had seen committed by RPF soldiers and Tutsi villagers. All come from south-eastern Rwanda, and had tried to return home within the last two weeks.

The RPF has been broadcasting radio appeals for the nearly 3 million Hutus who fled from their homes during the war to leave camps in Zaire, Tanzania, Burundi and the French-protected zone, saying they will not be harmed when they return to their villages.

Any evidence of widespread abuse will severely damage the RPF's standing with the Western governments which are providing substantial support to a programme to rehabilitate Rwanda and encourage the repatriation of refugees. It will also further frighten refugees already anxious about what will happen to them if they go home to live under an RPF government.

Colette Mukandamutsa and her husband returned to their village in Ntogwe district a week ago. She said she saw seven bodies lying in the village, all with knife wounds in the neck, and RPF soldiers searching houses during the night and leading people away.

« One young man came to my house and asked where my husband was. So that night my husband said 'let us hide and see if they come for us'. That night about 15 came and knocked on the door at about 9 o'clock, while we were hidden in the trees. »

They fled. She has returned to Ka-

duha, but she does not know where her husband is.

Aid workers in the eastern sector of the French-protected zone fear that if people do not return to their villages, famine will strike the region, where up to a million people are dependent on irregular deliveries of food aid. The rains due in about a month will turn the roads to impassable mud, making it even more difficult to provide supplies.

The French forces, who have largely stopped the violence in the region, are due to be replaced by 800 United Nations troops on August 21. Local people do not trust the UN, which they say did not protect them when the war re-started in April.

If they dare not return home because of RPF abuses, and feel the UN cannot protect them where they are, they are likely to follow 1.5 million other Rwandans into Zaire, where food is scarce and disease rife.