

Expelled Burundian, Rwandan refugees on way home from DRC

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KIGALI, Sept 8 (AFP) - Most of the 780 Rwandan and Burundian refugees who were ordered expelled last week by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) will be repatriated on Monday, the UN refugee agency said.

Most of the Burundians will go home in buses provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), spokesman Paul Stromberg told AFP, while some 500 Rwandans who were airlifted to Rwanda last week were at a transit camp near Kigali.

The refugees were expelled after soldiers surrounded their camp near the northern city of Kisangani last Thursday.

The move prompted UNHCR chief Sadako Ogata to condemn a "blatant breach" of international conventions and call for a review of her agency's operations in the former Zaire.

According to an expert on the

Great Lakes region, the expulsions may be linked to a UN investigation into alleged massacres of thousands of refugees in which President Laurent Kabila's forces have been implicated.

The expert suggested that the DRC wanted to avoid the refugees' questioning by investigators, whose work has been stalled the past two weeks because of renewed objections by the DRC government.

However UN chief Kofi Annan said Monday he had received assurances from Kabila that the mission would be allowed to proceed.

Several tens of thousands of Rwandans and Burundians who initially fled ethnic bloodletting in their own countries have been missing in the former Zaire since Kabila's rebellion started a year ago, prompting the flight of refugees - either homeward, or further inside the DRC.

At least 200 of the 318 Burundians expelled last week will go home

Monday, Stromberg said, adding :
 "They are all volunteers and will be
 taken to one of the areas of Burundi
 that is considered safe."

He said the 457 Rwandans who
 were expelled are at a transit camp in
 Runda, a few kilometers (miles) east
 of Kigali. Seventy of them were still
 awaiting identity checks, while one
 has been arrested, Stromberg said.

All had fled murderous attacks
 in April on camps sheltering some
 80,000 refugees in the area around Ki-
 sangani.

The UNHCR said the Burundians
 who refuse to go home will be trans-
 ferred to a camp in southern Rwanda
 where other Burundian refugees are
 staying.

More than 1,300 people were re-
 patriated from this camp to Burundi

last week, Stromberg said.

Last month Gabon expelled 168
 Rwandan refugees despite UNHCR
 protests.

UNHCR spokeswoman Pamela
 O'Toole said in Geneva last Friday
 that Ogata planned in an address to
 the UN Security Council to launch an
 urgent call to solve the growing refu-
 gee crisis in the DRC.

She is in constant contact with
 Annan and is still trying to convene
 an extraordinary meeting of the Or-
 ganisation of African Unity.

"There is a great need for an in-
 tensive focus on what is an abso-
 lutely appalling situation for refu-
 gees across the Great Lakes region,"
 O'Toole said.

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