

Stricken Refugees Accept Safety Pledge and Start Return Trek to Rwanda

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United Nations assurance of food and security in Kigali draws thousands back through the forests

THIRTY thousand Rwandan refugees began the long trek back home from Zaire yesterday after assurances of their safety from Rwanda's new government and the United Nations.

Major-General Romeo Dallaire, commander of the UN forces in Rwanda, said at the border crossing between Zaire and Rwanda that he had passed about 30,000 refugees on his three-hour drive through Rwanda from the capital, Kigali. "People are crawling through the forest," he said. A UN aid worker counting refugees passing through the main border post between Goma and Gisenyi said about 560 had crossed between 9am and noon.

General Dallaire said he wanted to direct aid into Kigali so it would be a magnet for refugees. "Aid vehicles

could go through Rwanda to Goma bringing aid and go back as taxis," he said.

The US military halted food airdrops flying from Entebbe in Uganda for refugees in eastern Zaire when the UN High Commissioner for Refugees stopped authorising them after complaints from aid agencies that the drops were being misdirected, a US military spokeswoman said.

Colonel Dallaire's news of the returnees offers the dimmest glimmer of hope that the refugee crisis in Zaire may end. It came as Peter Hansen, head of the UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs, said that the situation was out of control. "It is extremely dangerous. We don't have the capacity on the ground to deal with this," he said.

Last night, aid workers said they would begin burning bodies of the cholera victims, estimated at up to 14,000 six days into an epidemic, be-

cause burial sites were full.

General Dallaire said the refugees were tired and hot and stopping on the hills because of the heat. He called on the UN and other relief agencies to start feeding programmes in Kigali which would “act as a magnet to draw refugees home. I don’t want them to think that the only place where they can get food and be safe is in the southwest (where French forces are policing a safe zone),” he said.

For all his enthusiasm, many Hutu refugees, who have been conditioned to think that they will be slaughtered by the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front, must overcome this fear and intimidation from their own leaders who do not want them to return home.

In the Muganga camp, home to about 200,000 refugees, a group of women sat quietly tending their children and stirring a saucepan of beans. When asked whether they would rather stay in Goma and risk dying of cholera or return home, they were driven away by a portly and officious man who refused to identify himself. “I am a Rwandan citizen, that is all,” he said. “We will not go home until the international community guarantees our safety there. We know we will be killed as soon as we cross the border.”

At the frontier, RPF troops lounged about and smiled as refugees gingerly approached them. They are re-

gistered and sent on to a former hotel for further processing and transport not to meet the fate they all dread. Though the officious man denied he had been a member of the former ruling party, the Revolutionary Movement for National Development, others with him, who were organising a meeting of their commune’s elders, admitted that they came from the Karago commune in Gisenyi. Karago was the birthplace of the founding father of Hutu extremism, the late President Habyarimana.

“The RPF cut out our eyes and will kill us. The refugees who have crossed the border are just a fake, they are inyenzi (cockroaches, the RPF’s nickname) in disguise,” said a young man wearing a hockey shirt. The fat man agreed.

While they yelled abuse about the RPF and claimed, against available evidence, that the former rebels were mass murderers, a group of three men approached another journalist. He was asked : “Have you been to Ruhengeri (50 miles inside north-west Rwanda)?” They whispered : “We would like to go back there.” They asked whether it would be safe for them in RPF-dominated Rwanda. They asked anxiously : “How many roadblocks are there on the way?”

They said that the men interrupting discussions with ordinary civilians and telling them that they would be killed in Rwanda were in-

deed members of the former government's administration and had been party to the genocide of Tutsis and Hutu moderates.

Nevertheless, the three men said they would wait until people who had crossed the border reported back.

Leaders of Rwanda's Hutu former government, which fled into exile in

Zaire with about 20,000 soldiers, attempted to hold a news conference in Goma yesterday, but a Zairean colonel with an armed escort broke up the meeting, saying they had no authority to speak there.

By Sam Kiley in Goma and Our Foreign Staff.