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Rwandan Refugees Describe Horrors After a Bloody Trek

By DONATELLA LORCH,

Their clothes are blood-soaked, and their wounds are eerily similar. Pursued by fear, the 450 or so men, women and children in the makeshift hospital here made the same journey across the border from Rwanda, nursing the deep gouges made by the machetes that struck their skulls, necks and hands.

They submit without a murmur of complaint to the painful scrubbing of their jagged wounds, then curl up on stretchers or on the rain-soaked lawns to sleep.

These are among the survivors who somehow escaped the massacres that have killed tens of thousands in Rwanda since the country's President was killed more than two weeks ago.

[On Sunday the killing continued with a report that about 170 patients and staff members were massacred in a hospital in Butare, Rwanda, Reuters said.]

The villagers and townspeople, most of them members of the minority Tutsi ethnic group, told of being hunted down like animals as they hid in fields and forests, of watching friends and relatives hacked to death and of walking wounded for more than a week without food or water.

Most of the killing has been done by Hutus, whose ethnic group dominates the military, the militias and the armed gangs roaming the capital and the countryside.

Augustine Rugwizangoga said he was 15, but his small frame is that of a 10-year-old. Both of his hands are swathed in bandages, his wrists and his fingers having been hacked by machetes. Like many of those who made the journey from Rwanda to Burundi, he lost his family in the fighting. Today, he stares ahead numbly, speaking in clipped sentences.

"My family is all dead," Augustine said. "I saw men with machetes hit my mother on the head. I hid in the forest, but they found me there. They killed my friends and cut my hands. There was no food, but even if there had been, I could not have used my hands to eat."

Rwanda fell into anarchy after its President, Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, was killed in a suspicious plane crash near the capital, Kigali, on April 6 along with President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi. The crash reignited the centuries-old hatred between the majority Hutu ethnic group, which dominates the Government, and the minority Tutsis.

What began as political violence aimed at Tutsi and moderate Hutu officials in a Rwandan interim Government has widened into what appears to be a methodical killing of Tutsis across the countryside. Battle for the Capital

For two weeks, troops of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, made up mostly of Tutsis, have been battling the Rwandan Army for control of Kigali. Tens of thousands of Rwandans fled Kigali on foot more than two weeks ago, but there is no trace of them across the border in Burundi.

As the fighting spread from the capital into the countryside, tens of thousands of peasants began a mass exodus to escape drunken marauding gangs.

But so far, only about 18,000 of an estimated 1.5 million displaced Rwandans have managed to cross into Burundi. Another 30,000 Rwandans have crossed into Tanzania, Zaire and Uganda.

Relief officials and Rwandans say the rest either have been killed or are trying to hide in the countryside.

Most of the Rwandans in Burundi come from areas around the southern town of Butare. The refugees and foreign missionaries interviewed at the border reported heavy fighting in the countryside and said Butare's population had swelled to double its normal size and the town was running out of food.

Most refugees walked at night and hid by day. The survivors traveled in groups of several hundred to a thousand for protection, because smaller groups had been immediately attacked with machetes, clubs and spears. In at least two cases, when they were trapped at the border, they stormed the crossing into Burundi as Rwandan soldiers fired at them. "Tried to Cut My Head Off"

"I was walking with friends on the village road when about 30 men just attacked us," said Donatilla Mukabayira, 22, who walks stiffly because of deep machete gashes on her neck and shoulder. "They tried to cut my head off. They hit me three times. I fell to the ground and played dead."

"We were 5,000 in our village. I do not think that more than 1,500 made it out. I think they killed my mother and brother. They killed the children because they couldn't run. I hid in the forest and then walked for six days. There was no food and no water. Mostly people die. Very few made it across."

The fallout from the massacres in Rwanda is beginning to affect stability in Burundi, which has the same ethnic divisions. In apparent retaliation for Rwanda killings, Tutsi high school students in this small town killed their Hutu headmaster, and diplomats say the assassination foreshadows a possible showdown between ethnic groups. For more than a week, heavy fighting has continued in a suburb of Bujumbura, the capital, between Hutus and the Tutsi-dominated military.

The safety of the Rwandan Tutsis now in Burundi is far from guaranteed. Relief workers are concerned that hospitals and camps could easily be overrun by armed gangs. It has become increasingly difficult for relief workers to get to the Rwandan border, because the main road is blocked by fighting near Bujumbura.

As the Rwandan refugees crossed the border in different areas, United Nations trucks took them to newly made camps and drove the wounded to Kayanza. Only the wounded who could walk made it across the border.

Belgian Red Cross doctors in the hospital in Kayanza say they have treated mostly machete wounds to the neck, head and hands. The hospital has no painkillers, only antibiotics and some basic food, and the doctors say that once they treat the refugees, they are unable to feed them. Sea of Bandaged Heads

It is a sea of bandaged heads and hands. On a stone hedge, hospital orderlies are shaving the heads of four men and scrubbing the gashes on the back of their skulls. Another man is given a hard black brush and soap and told to clean his own hands, wounded with jagged cuts to the bone. He does not

even flinch. Children on intravenous drips are curled two to a stretcher.

"These are very specific wounds," said Dr. Ann Meeussen of the Belgian Red Cross. "I have never seen anything like this. They are very, very deep to the back of the neck. You wouldn't believe it. These people walked. They walked! They are so resistant against pain, it's incredible. How in God's name is it possible to survive this?"

At the border town of Kanyaharu Haut, it was eerily quiet and empty on Saturday, and no refugees crossed. Several bodies floated down the river, and trailing across the bridge linking the two countries was a distinct set of bloody footprints marking the crossing of a refugee bleeding from a wounded leg. ----- 170 Slain in Rwandan Hospital

NAIROBI, Kenya, April 24 (Reuters) -- In the latest massacre in Rwanda's civil war, about 170 people were slain in a hospital today amid conflicting reports on whether peace talks to end the killing had collapsed.

Doctors with the international relief group Doctors Without Borders reported that about 170 patients and staff members had been killed in a hospital in Butare.

"This has been the most vicious single incident in this current wave of violence," said Anne-Marie Huby, a spokeswoman for the organization in London. "It was a direct attack on civilians in what is usually a neutral place." She said the group was pulling its staff out of southern Rwanda.

A top-level Rwandan Government delegation in neighboring Zaire said that it had signed a cease-fire agreement arranged by President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, but that the Rwandan Patriotic Front had failed to attend the ceremony.

And in neighboring Tanzania, rebel negotiators walked out of talks, saying the Government delegation had failed to turn up.

"I'm leaving for Nairobi," Theogene Rudasingwa, the secretary general of the rebel group, said before walking out of the hotel in the northern Tanzanian town of Arusha where the talks were supposed to take place.

Tanzanian officials said a Rwandan Government delegation to the peace talks, called by Tanzania and originally supposed to start on Saturday, had never arrived in Arusha.

The confusion was compounded by members of the Rwandan Government delegation in the Zairean capital, Kinshasa, saying that the accord, signed in President Mobutu's palace in Gbadolite on Saturday, had previously been approved by the rebels. But the rebel movement failed to make an appearance.

Photo: A wounded Rwandan boy watching another refugee being treated for machete injuries in Kayanza, Burundi, on Saturday. More than 450 victims of fighting in Rwanda made the trek to this hospital. (Liz Gilbert for the New York Times)(pg. A7) Map of Burundi showing location of Kayanza. (pg. A7)