

# UN could suspend refugee operations in DR Congo: UNHCR chief

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UNITED NATIONS, Sept 9 (AFP) - The United Nations may suspend aid operations for refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo if they do not get more government protection, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata warned Tuesday.

Expressing her "concern, sorrow and anger" about the refugee crisis, Ogata said she asked the UN Security Council to press governments in the troubled Great Lakes region of central Africa to ensure the refugees' safety.

The crisis was triggered by the DRC's expulsion last Thursday of 800 Rwandan and Burundian refugees from a camp near Kisangani in the northeast, a move Ogata called a blatant violation of international law.

The forcible repatriation took place two days before DRC President Laurent Kabila confirmed in writing that a UN team investigating

human rights violations in ex-Zaire could start traveling to alleged massacre sites.

"The implementation of the suspension (of UN activities) will depend on developments in the situation" in the region, Ogata said.

After being briefed by Ogata, the Security Council issued a resolution urging Great Lakes countries to respect human rights. US ambassador to the UN Bill Richardson, serving as council president this month, said he would telephone the regional leaders to express support for Ogata's stand.

The 15 permanent members of the Security Council expressed "in the strongest terms" their support for the UNHCR's efforts, as well as their "strong concern" about the well-being of the 800 refugees, most of them women and children.

Ogata said that the UNHCR was no longer operating in Kisangani, because after last Thursday's expulsions

"we have no more people to protect."

But the UNHCR was still trying to help refugees in Goma and Bukavu, also in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, she said.

"What we face in the Great Lakes region is really a crisis in protection. 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.

If the UNHCR could not obtain assurances concerning the refugees' protection, she said, "we would be obliged to suspend our operations with regard to the Rwandan refugees in Congo."

Over the last few weeks, hundreds of refugees have been pushed out of the DRC and sent to Rwanda as aid organizations have come under attack or been denied access to the refugees' encampments.

Before the expulsions took place, about 2,500 Rwandan and Burundian refugees were living in camps in the

DRC while another 20,000 were scattered throughout the country.

The UNHCR has estimated a total 200,000 people remain in the DRC unaccounted for after fleeing Kabila's offensive on the then Zaire, when soldiers in his rebel alliance marched westward from the Rwandan border, ultimately taking the capital Kinshasa and ousting longtime leader Mobutu Sese Seko.

Diplomats and humanitarian groups fear that the recent expulsions are another DRC government strategy to block a UN inquiry into the massacres by getting rid of potential witnesses before investigators can interview them.

Despite Kabila's confirmation the UN investigation could proceed, the Security Council, anticipating more obstacles from Kinshasa, announced Tuesday it would watch developments there closely.

On Tuesday, the UN mission was in Kinshasa awaiting security guarantees before setting off for the area, an investigator said.

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