

UNHCR registers Rwanda refugees in Zaire

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GENEVA, Jan 31 (AFP) - Relief workers have started registering some two million Rwandans living in refugee camps in east Zaire in an operation that has gone smoothly, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said Tuesday.

UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond Sylvana Foa said Friday that registration in and around camps in the Goma region, north of Lake Kivu on the border, "has been going smoothly since Sunday" and that the agency expected to register about 730,000 people there.

During the month of February, the UNHCR plans to register refugees in the Bukavu region, south of Lake Kivu. About two million Rwandans are still thought to be in east Zaire.

They fled across the border during and after Rwanda's bloody civil war which broke out anew after the death of Hutu president in a suspicious plane crash on April 6 last year.

Many are majority Hutus who fear the new government installed

by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) after it seized power the following July, though it includes moderate Hutus.

The RPF accuses former government troops and extremist Hutu militias of the genocide of up to a million Tutsis and Hutu moderates last year, out of a pre-war population put at some eight million.

Some 1,400 employees of humanitarian agencies have been asked to start issuing the refugees with identity bracelets to make it easier to distribute aid and to help prevent ex-militiamen from intimidating them.

A previous registration attempt last October failed because of opposition from the leaders of the Hutu militia who wanted to maintain their control over the camps and prevent the return of refugees to Rwanda.

Zaire agreed on Friday to deploy a 1500-strong force of soldiers, police and security agents to tighten control over the sprawling refugee camps and assist UN aid officials in carrying out

their mandate there.

The deal was signed in Kinshasa by UNHCR special representative Carol Faubert and the Zairean deputy defence and justice ministers, Admiral Mavua Mudima and Gerard Kamanga Wa Kamanga.

The first phase of the project will cost an estimated 15 million dollars over three months, to be paid for by the UNHCR. Other countries will provide about 40 liaison officers.

Asked about an US press report that Zairean elite soldiers earmarked for the operation had been responsible for looting, Redmond said: "We are going to check. We don't want unruly, undisciplined troops."

After the registration process, the UNHCR hopes to step up voluntary repatriation, he added. "A lot more (people) have approached us saying they want to go back. This is a good sign."

Two-thirds of the Zaireans are to be deployed in the Goma region,

which is sheltering more than 800,000 refugees, compared to the estimated 200,000 to 300,000 in Bukavu, where the rest of the force will patrol.

The deal with Zaire was pursued after the United Nations abandoned the idea of deploying a multinational force to maintain order in the camps, where tensions are still high.

In a separate development, the United Nations has announced that it is sending an Italian vulcanologist, Dario Tedesco, to Goma to assess the risk of eruption of a volcano near the camps.

The UNHCR has said the risk appeared less than it was last November, but it has prepared emergency plans to evacuate the 200,000 occupants of the Mugunga camp and the 280,000 in Kumbumba.

The lack of available water has made it impossible to find alternative sites.

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