

UNHCR stalling return of Rwandan refugees: Rwandan official

AFP, September 13, 1997

KIGALI, Sept 13 (AFP) - A top Rwandan official on Saturday accused the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) of stalling the return of Rwandan refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo so that it can maintain its presence in the former Zaire.

"The UNHCR is not interested in solving the (refugee) problem. They still have massive logistic and staff and they need the refugees to maintain them there," Ephraim Kabaija, president of the commission for the repatriation and reintegration of Rwandan refugees, told AFP.

Kabaija applauded last week's forcible repatriation from the DRC of some 800 Hutu Rwandan and Burundian refugees from a transit camp in Kisangani, in the northeast of the former Zaire.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata strongly condemned the move, saying

it violated international conventions on refugees.

On Saturday, the organisation threatened to suspend its operations in the African country if the DRC, led by former rebel leader Laurent Kabila, continued to violate the rights of refugees.

However, Kabaija accused the UNHCR of "playing with him (Kabila).

"You can't accuse Kabila of killing Hutu refugees and maintain them on his territory at the same time," he said.

The Tutsi rebel forces of Laurent Kabila, who is now Congolese President, have been accused of massacring Hutu refugees from Rwanda during their campaign to overthrow former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko,

Kabaija claimed that many refugees in DRC camps were members of the former Hutu-dominated army, the Rwandan Armed Forces

(RAF) which were involved in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda during which over 500,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed.

"Some have been recruited in the FAR in 1995 and 1996. They are not refugees, they are Rwandese who have to be arrested," the commission president said.

Gabon expelled 168 Rwandan refugees in August and around 100 have still not returned to their home

town, reliable sources say.

Kabaija said these refugees are still being interviewed by Rwandan authorities who accuse some of them of trying to hijack the Gabonese aeroplane that was being used to repatriate them

"They were brought here as criminals and we treat them as such. They were not refugees, they are not returnees," he insisted.

dla/jp/bb