

UN warns of serious consequences if its DRC mission must pull out

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UNITED NATIONS, Sept 16 (AFP) - The United Nations warned Tuesday of "serious" consequences for the Democratic Republic of Congo if it forced a pullout by UN officials investigating alleged massacres of Rwandan Hutus by its troops in the former Zaire.

"It could trigger a suspension of (international) aid," Fred Eckhard, chief spokesman for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, said.

The government of the DRC on Tuesday again blocked the investigators' work, despite written assurances to Annan from President Laurent Kabila, a UN spokesman said in Kinshasa.

The spokesman, Jose Diaz, said the government had banned the mission from setting out Wednesday for Mbandaka in the north of the country, one of the alleged sites of the slaughter of hundreds of Rwandan Hutu refugees.

"The implication for Congo of a pullout is very serious," Eckhard said. "The secretary general has been as patient as he can with the Kabila government."

Eckhard said UN officials in New York and at the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva "will weigh the events of today." He said he did not expect a UN response on Tuesday.

The UN mission, headed by Togolese lawyer Atsu Koffi Amega, has run into constant obstacles from Kabila's ministers and officials in its bid to investigate allegations that rebels massacred Hutu refugees from Rwanda before ousting longtime Zairean president Mobutu Sese Seko.

Mobutu died in exile in Morocco this month.

His army was routed as the rebels steadily advanced westwards between September 1996 and May 1997 and numbers of Rwandan refugees fled be-

fore them while hundreds of thousands of others poured back into Rwanda.

A previous UN mission chief, Roberto Garreton, said that in December and March he had discovered undeniable evidence that Kabila's Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation, which began as a mainly Zairean Tutsi force, had massacred Rwandan refugees.

More than a million of the latter had fled Rwanda in 1994 as the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front marched on the capital Kigali, ousting Hutu former government troops and extremist militias held responsible for the genocide of up to 800,000 Tutsis and Hutu moderates between April and July that year.

Kabila's new regime earlier on Tuesday denounced what it described as a UN "ultimatum" to allow the rights team, which has been on hold in Kinshasa for the past three weeks, to start work and accused the United Nations of engaging in politics.

"Issuing ultimatums is unacceptable to us," DRC Foreign Minister Bizima Karaha said in Brussels after talks with his Belgian counterpart Erik Derycke.

The regime has been particularly vigorous in stalling investigations in the eastern part of the country, where thousands of Hutu refugees are believed to have been killed in the first stages of Kabila's sweep across the country.

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