

UNHCR says volcanos threaten Rwandan refugee camps

AFP, January 5, 1995

NAIROBI, Jan 5 (AFP) - The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is drafting a contingency plan to evacuate up to 200,000 Rwandan refugees from camps in Goma, Zaire, should two nearby volcanos show signs of erupting, a UNHCR spokesman said here Thursday.

The official, Jean Brigou, released an HCR document that said a lateral fissure in the most dangerous volcano, the Nyiragongo, "could send lava flowing down its slope at a speed reaching 40 kilometers per hour (25 miles per hour)."

The lava could thus reach refugee camps in as little as 15 minutes.

But its last eruption dates from 1977, and Brigou said the Nyiragongo "is not showing any sign of that type of eruption."

"There is no need to panic," he

added. "We can't be certain there will be an eruption, but we don't want to be caught unprepared."

The second volcano near Goma, the Nyamuragira, whose lava is much less liquid and therefore less dangerously fast, erupted last in July and is considered likely to have another eruption in March.

Lava from the Nyamuragira, Brigou said, would take two or three days to reach the nearest camps, where 200,000 refugees are housed, mostly Hutus who fled the Tutsi takeover in Rwanda.

Sophisticated equipment has been placed on the slopes of both volcanos to monitor their seismic activity, and the HCR is preparing to explain to the refugees how the evacuation of the camps would be carried out.

at/cp/ms

AFP AFP