

A million flee Rwanda war amid fears of Somalia-style famine

David Chazan

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MURAMBI, Rwanda, March 8 (AFP) - An upsurge of fighting in Rwanda's civil war has left up to a million people homeless, raising fears of mass starvation that could equal the horrors of Somalia's famine.

The exodus has bled the fertile northern hill country, which produces about 60 percent of Rwanda's food, of almost all its peasant farmers.

Banana and tea plantations have been left to grow wild in territory seized by the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) in a major offensive against government forces launched a month ago.

Hundreds of thousands of hungry peasants reaching the capital Kigali have ripped up sugar cane plantations and food crops around the city.

Desperate for firewood to keep warm at night and branches to build shelters against rain, the displaced people have stripped the hillsides around the city of trees in the past

three weeks.

Estimates of the number of people displaced by the fighting vary from 860,000 to a million, including 350,000 people forced to flee for the second or third time since the rebels invaded from neighbouring Uganda 28 months ago, according to aid agencies.

With nearly a seventh of Rwanda's 7.5 million people on the move, aid workers say the agricultural economy of one of Africa's smallest but most densely-populated countries has collapsed.

"We need about 16,000 tonnes of food a month to feed the displaced people one meal a day," said Walter Stocker of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). "Donors have almost covered that until June, and 140 tonnes of food are coming in daily in an airlift with the World Food Programme and other agencies. But the problem isn't going to go

away after June.”

German donors angry at having to pay customs duty on food and medical supplies have already threatened to end aid unless Rwanda’s government drops the demands, German officials said.

”Each new day brings an influx

of thousands more homeless people,” said Benedicte Poucques, a Belgian Red Cross worker at Murambi camp, sheltering more than 30,000 people 25 kilometres (15 miles) north of Kigali. ”Today five thousand more arrived.”

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