

African summit bids to avoid catastrophe - minister

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NAIROBI, Jan 7 (AFP) - The Rwandan refugee timebomb was expected to be the main topic as leaders from seven Central and East African countries prepared to meet here Saturday.

"Everyone is conscious that if the problems of the Rwandan refugees are not resolved, the whole region could become embroiled," Burundi Foreign Minister Jean-Marie Ngendahayo said as leaders from Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia gathered for a summit to address the region's problems.

The glaring absence of Zaire's Mobutu Sese Seko, the only head of state to stay away from Nairobi, will undoubtedly detract from the summit, according to Kenyan press reports.

A Zairean government source said Mobutu will be represented by his Prime Minister Kengo Wa Dondo.

"Without him, you can be almost assured there will be no progress at the meeting. The questions that will be asked need Mobutu's personal response," a delegate told The Nation newspaper after Friday's preparatory discussion by foreign ministries.

"The questions asked during the preparatory meeting was 'who is blocking the return of the refugees', said Ngendahayo. "The intimidation of refugees by the former Rwandan military or militia are one reason, but there are others," he added.

Some refugees who left camps in Zaire and Tanzania to return home complained of extortion by soldiers from the new Rwandan army, or civilians who had occupied their abandoned homes. More than two million Rwandans refugees fled to neighbouring countries.

Ministers called for the creation of working committees, transit camps for returning refugees, and interna-

tional assistance for a judicial system, he said.

Burundi, which itself teeters on the brink of a bloodbath comparable to Rwanda's, will also be high on the Nairobi agenda.

There are some 300,000 Burundian refugees, mostly in Zaire, while several hundred thousand others are displaced within their own country.

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