

There Are Many Refugees in Government-Run Rwanda – But Few Are Tutsis

Mark Fritz

Associated Press, June 29, 1994

CYANGUGU, Rwanda (AP) – With the arrival of French troops, relief agencies are moving deeper into the most forbidding parts of Rwanda and starting to find the mysterious half-million refugees they knew existed but couldn't locate.

But they say precious few of them are Tutsis, giving further weight to fears that the minority group was virtually wiped out in the one-third of the country controlled by the majority Hutu government.

"We find some minorities but not a lot," said Ariane Tombet, director of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Rwanda. "It's in the hundreds."

A United Nations report Thursday blamed the Rwandan government for planning a genocide of Tutsis and opposition Hutus and recommended international war crimes charges be brought against the Hutu forces.

In this oppressive border town,

guarded by abusive and drunken government soldiers and customs authorities, few locals will talk frankly about the anti-Tutsi killings that erupted across Rwanda after April 6, when Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana died in an unexplained plane crash.

"The militias are not killing civilians as such. What they are doing is looking for enemy soldiers," said Phocas Fashaho, 30, who said he was a former interpreter for U.N. peacekeeping units in Kigali, the besieged capital.

But across the narrow southern tip of giant Lake Kivu, in the Zairean resort town of Bukavu, witnesses and relief officials remember the carnage in Cyangugu.

"We documented about 16,000 to 17,000 killings," said N. Vander Eecken, head of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees delegation in Bukavu. "Outside of Kigali, this is

the worst place. They are all killers there.”

French troops last week launched their peace-keeping mission in Cyangugu, where Hutus cheered their arrival. They were pleased to see soldiers from a government that helped finance and run their defense of the 1990 Tutsi rebellion.

”We’re dealing with the devil. They killed all Tutsis,” said Vander Eecken, who has to deal on a regular basis with the Cyangugu authorities.

”Huts were burning in the hills. Trucks carried bodies,” he said, describing the view of Cyangugu from Bukavu. ”And people were still water-skiing on the lake.”

The French troops’ first action in Rwanda was to make a carefully publicized visit to a camp in Nyarushishi, where 8,000 Tutsis amazingly survived in the middle of extremist Hutu territory, under the guard of 11 policemen.

Vander Eecken said he believes the camp is probably the biggest anywhere in government territory, and that the people there were being kept as prisoners and bargaining chips.

French troops since then have found only small pockets of hiding Tutsis, none of whom lived among the general population.

Relief workers have complained about France’s intervening in a conflict in which it has a historical

bias. The aid group Doctors of the World was forced out by the Rwandan government for criticizing the French arrival.

But the aid agencies clearly have taken advantage of the slightly more relaxed atmosphere among the Hutu militias and government soldiers, who are happy to see their old allies just as the rebels had them on the run.

”Before the French came, the (militias) were more intense, more aggressive,” said Alison Campbell, a CARE spokeswoman.

Relief agencies and aid workers are pumping one another and journalists for information on where to find the estimated 500,000 people who supposedly were on the run from the rebels’ recent advances.

An estimated 250,000 mostly Hutu refugees were found in the past week in the Gikongoro region, most of them from the rebel-battered cities of Kigali and Gitarama. The Red Cross plans to begin a massive feeding program next week.

An estimated 2 million people have been driven from their homes in Rwanda either Tutsis fleeing Hutus or Hutus fleeing the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels.

The difference between the two territories is striking. In rebel territory, refugees are organized by civilian rebel officials who instruct village elders to assign specific jobs, such as food gathering and hut-building.

The many rebel checkpoints are organized, disciplined and sober, staffed by generally businesslike uniformed rebels.

"The RPF from the beginning got very involved with the agencies," Campbell said.

In government areas, great cross-currents of refugees seem to alight en masse by collective decision, on the sides of hills and edges of towns, squeezed and scattered randomly. They generally fend for themselves and must pass the scrutiny of youthful Hutu militiamen who are little more than thugs.

Relief workers have to go through layers of corrupt bureaucracy to deliver critical food and medical supplies.

"It would be beneficial if we had some indication of the government's position on these huge numbers of people. Or will we have to continue to be involved in tedious negotiations with local officials?" Campbell said.

Some fear that the rebel push may eventually drive this Hutu heartland into Zaire, where many minority Tutsis have settled. Last year, resentful Zaireans massacred thousands of Tutsis.

Overlooked among the Rwandan refugees are 22,000 Zaireans who had been living and working in Rwanda when war and mass murder broke out.

Many came to Bukavu, like Aloys Sema, 35, who was teaching English at the main university in the southern Rwandan city of Butare when the mass hunt for Tutsis began.

Sema said he saw babies put into the massive mortars used to pound cassava and rice, then beaten to a pulp.

"It was horrible," he said. "I don't have words to describe it. Maybe there will be Tutsis hiding there, but I don't think they will find many."

©1994, The Associated Press