

UNHCR braced for up to 50,000 Burundi refugees

AFP, March 25, 1995

GENEVA, March 25 (AFP) - UN aid teams in Zaire were braced Saturday for thousands of civilians fleeing ethnic clashes in Burundi, as sources in Kinshasa warned the influx could explode existing tensions in overcrowded refugee camps.

Officials of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was standing by to help up to 50,000 new Burundian refugees in Zaire, a spokesman said here Saturday, following the latest exodus from the Burundi capital Bujumbura.

Reports from Bujumbura said some 20,000 people fled the districts of Bwiza and Buyenzi on Saturday following inter-ethnic clashes between Hutu extremists and Burundi's Tutsi-dominated army.

The mostly Hutu refugees were headed on foot to Kagunga, north of the capital, reports said.

But as Zaire braced for a new influx of refugees, there were grow-

ing signs that the country, already a temporary home to some two million Rwandan and Burundian refugees, is rapidly running out of space and tolerance for its new charges.

A source close to the Kinshasa government said Saturday that Zaire was alarmed at the possibility of yet another influx of refugees from Hutu-Tutsi strife in its neighbour countries, and had already "reached its tolerance threshold."

However, there had been no official reaction from the government by midday Saturday.

Zaire is already hosting some 300,000 Hutu refugees from neighbouring Rwanda in its South Kivu region alone. Between 100,000 and 200,000 Burundians are also part of the country's huge refugee population, according to government figures.

Some 800,000 Rwandans, also Hutus, are in camps around Goma in north Kivu.

UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond said here that some 5,000 people, including 3,000 Zaireans, had fled the Burundi capital in the last few days.

Around 2,000 were headed towards Uvira, on the Zairean side of Lake Tanganyika, but only 600 had managed to get through by mid-afternoon Saturday.

"The rest were impeded by the Burundi authorities. This is of concern to us," Redmond said.

The UNHCR spokesman said the body could cope with "up to 50,000 refugees. There are a dozen camps pretty well organized in the region," to cater for them, he said.

But the new arrivals could further

exacerbate an already tense situation in the camps, where food rations have fallen by up to two-thirds because of supply difficulties and lack of World Food Programme funds.

The local population is also angry at the amount of space being devoted to the refugee camps.

Meanwhile, the deployment of some 750 Zairean troops on security duty in the camps around South Kivu has been delayed because of logistical problems. The troops are part of a contingent of 1,500 soldiers to be deployed in South and North Kivu following an agreement between Zaire and the UNHCR.

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