

UNHCR suspends DR Congo refugee operation, but leaves door open

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UNITED NATIONS, Sept 9 (AFP) - The UN High Commissioner for Refugees on Tuesday announced the suspension of aid operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo unless the Security Council obtains safety guarantees.

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata told reporters after briefing the UN Security Council on last week's Congolese expulsion of 800 Rwandan and Burundian refugees that the UNHCR was facing "a crisis in protection" in the troubled Great Lakes region.

Ogata said that if the Security Council could not obtain assurances concerning the refugee protection in the Democratic Republic of Congo, "we would be obliged to suspend our operations with regard to the Rwandan refugees in Congo."

"We cannot protect refugees if the host governments do not abide by the principles and standards of laws,

which means that refugees have to be protected, and that those who do not volunteer to go back have to be examined," she said.

UNHCR representative in New York Soren Jessen-Petersen confirmed that the decision to suspend all UNHCR operations for the mainly Hutu Rwandans in DRC had been taken, but that "the process will be gradual."

He added that it was hoped that an intervention by the UN Security Council would prevent the total suspension of the UNHCR operations by ensuring the required conditions.

"But as of now those conditions do not exist," Jessen-Petersen said.

According to the UNHCR, the 60 relief workers in DRC were being threatened and abused. In the eastern part of the country they have been the target of a radio hate campaign.

Security Council president Bill Richardson, the US ambassador who

has previously travelled to the region, said that he would telephone the regional leaders to express support for Ogata's stand.

Diplomats said Richardson would notably telephone Congolese President Laurent Kabila and Rwandan Vice-President Paul Kagame, as well as the Gabonese government which forcibly repatriated seven Rwandans and a Burundi last month.

Ogata said that the UNHCR was no longer operating in northeastern Kisangani, after last Thursday's expulsions, because "we have no more people to protect."

However the UNHCR was sending a delegation to Rwanda to insist on access to the forcibly repatriated refugees.

Diplomats and humanitarian groups fear that the recent expulsions are another Congolese government strategy to block a UN inquiry into alleged massacres by getting rid of potential witnesses before investigators can interview them.

Ogata said that the UNHCR

would continue to assist refugees in Goma and Bukavu, also in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Jessen-Petersen said that the agency was also retaining staff in Mbandaka, in western DRC, where about 3,000 refugees remained.

Diplomats present at Tuesday's closed-door Council session said that Kenya and Guinea-Bissau, the two African countries on the Council, as well as other members such as Britain, Sweden and France, expressed concern at the UNHCR decision.

The diplomats said that Ogata did not ask the Council to take any specific action, but that the Council volunteered to intervene in the hope of influencing the regional players.

The UNHCR has estimated a total 200,000 people remain unaccounted for in DRC after fleeing Kabila's seven-month offensive from the Rwandan border which culminated in the ouster of veteran president Mobutu Sese Seko.

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