

DRCongo, Rwanda, pledge cooperation with UNHCR

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UNITED NATIONS, Sept 11 (AFP) - The Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda have pledged to cooperate with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR,) the UN Security Council president said Thursday.

Western diplomats said after a closed-door Council session that Council president Bill Richardson informed his colleagues that he had won the assurances from the Congolese and Rwandan ambassadors to the United Nations.

Richardson promised to contact the governments after the UNHCR announced the suspension of operations in Congo on Tuesday to protest the expulsion of almost 800 Rwandan and Burundian refugees from the DRC.

The US diplomat also spoke with the permanent representative of Gabon to the United Nations, whose country expelled seven Rwandans

and a Burundian refugee last month, and to the Organisation of African Unity envoy here.

According to diplomats, Congolese ambassador Andre Mwamba Kapanga, who presented his credentials to UN chief Kofi Annan on Thursday, told Richardson that Kinshasa had no problem with the UNHCR.

Kapanga also said that many of the repatriated refugees had asked to return home, and that the UNHCR did have access to them now in Rwanda.

Rwandan ambassador Gideon Kayinamura also said that Kigali was cooperating with the UNHCR, adding that Rwandan authorities supported the return home of refugees who fled during the 1994 civil war.

The UNHCR, which says that the refugees were forcibly expatriated, said Thursday that it was too early to say whether the agency would reverse its decision to suspend operations in

the light of Richardson's statement.

UNHCR New York office director Soren Jessen-Petersen told AFP that he had not been informed directly of Richardson's contacts. "We're waiting to see," he said.

Diplomats and humanitarian groups feared that the expulsions, which were ordered as a UN team investigating alleged massacres was

about to begin its work, might be an attempt by Kinshasa authorities to remove potential witnesses from eastern ex-Zaire.

The Tutsi rebel forces of Laurent Kabila, who is now Congolese President, have been accused of massacring Hutu refugees from Rwanda.

ap/pfm