

Humanitarian concerns must precede political needs: Ogata

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NAIROBI, Feb 19 (AFP) - The humanitarian concerns of the 3.8 million refugees from Rwanda and Burundi have to precede political worries over stability in the countries, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata said Sunday.

"The humanitarian approach is more acceptable now," she said.

An international conference held in Burundi last week to discuss the refugee problem of east-central Africa was a success, Ogata said. "A torch has been lit ... we've started a process."

But it is still vital to see that a follow-up action plan adopted by the conference was now put into practice, the top UN refugee official said.

She said the "steady, well-planned" return of refugees to their country of origin was the only viable solution to the refugee crisis.

Aid groups have complained that several obstacles still stand in the way

of returning refugees, notably threats by leaders of the former Rwandan regime - those held responsible for massacres in Rwanda last year - and rumours of reprisals by the new authorities in the Rwandan capital Kigali.

Rwanda's neighbours have demanded that the parties excluded from the current government and parliament for their suspected involvement in the massacres - the killing of up to a million people in April, May and June last year - be allowed to join.

For the moment, though, Ogata said that "the most important thing (is) that intimidating does not stop refugees from going home."

The UNHCR has no plans, however, to force the militia leaders and former government soldiers out of the refugee camps housing civilian refugees, she said.

There is "no plan to separate, but

the leaders will be watched carefully," she said.

The deployment in the Zairean camps of 1,500 Zairean soldiers under UNHCR responsibility, along with around 40 civilian monitors should improve security in the camps, she added.

Some 150 Zairean soldiers have already been sent to a camp at Kibumba, north of the Zairean border town of Goma, and have begun escorting returning refugees back into Rwanda.

Ogata said meanwhile that the international criminal tribunal set up to judge those held responsible for the massacres was getting down quickly to its work.

The Rwandan government and aid groups have heavily criticised the international community for the tardiness of its response to appeals to find and prosecute those responsible for the genocide.

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