

Nearly 200,000 Rwandan refugees have returned home: UNHCR

AFP, January 15, 1995

GOMA, Zaire, Jan 15 (AFP) - Nearly 200,000 Rwandan refugees who fled to the Zairean border town of Goma in July and August last year have since returned home, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said Sunday.

Joel Boutrou, UNHCR representative in Goma, told AFP the refugees, mainly ethnic Hutus fleeing the arrival of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in power in Rwanda, were continuing to return at a rate of around 1,000 a day.

Estimates vary of the number of refugees who poured into Goma last year, with some figures put as high as 1.2 million.

Boutrou said the refugees who have gone back have returned to their country voluntarily, escorted by the UNHCR and Zairean army soldiers and taken to transit camps set up in Rwanda.

The UNHCR late last year

warned against repatriating refugees after claiming that many of the returnees were the subject of revenge attacks by RPF soldiers, but the group has since resumed repatriation operations.

The returnees have received 10-day food rations as well as, in some cases, agricultural basics to enable them to return to their farms and restart planting, Boutrou claimed.

They have then been taken in convoys to their chosen destinations, Boutrou said.

"The talk among leaders of the former Rwandan government army is a lot more moderate now," Boutrou added.

Leaders of the soldiers who fought the Rwandan Patriotic Front late last year threatened to wage a war against the new regime in Rwanda and were regularly accused by humanitarian groups of threatening any refugees who wanted to return to Rwanda.

Boutrou said the former army leaders appeared to be making an effort at dialogue, talking about reconciliation though only if they were allowed to operate on "an equal footing" with the current government.

The government in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, has so far refused to countenance accepting back leaders of the former Rwandan army whom they accuse of organising the massacre of up to a million Rwandans between April and July last year.

However, they have started a programme for retraining former army soldiers and integrating them into their own forces.

The Zairean army claims to have recently cracked down on some of the hardline Hutu extremists and the Zairean government has said it will not allow the extremists to use the country as a base from which to launch a new attack on the authorities in Kigali.

Relations have been tense for some time between Zaire and Rwanda with the new authorities in Kigali uneasy about the alleged lack of action taken by Zaire against the suspected perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide.

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