

The Rwanda disaster: The overview At Rwanda Border, Mass Graves And the Start of a Journey Home

Jerry Gray

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As the death toll from cholera among Rwandan refugees climbed to 14,000, relief officials started digging six new mass graves today and began burning the bodies of some victims in order to prevent spread of the disease.

A moderate but steady stream of refugees began today to make the trek along hilly and curving roads from refugee camps in Zaire to return to their homes in Rwanda. Relief officials said about 3,000 refugees crossed the border today, the first full day since the border between the two countries was reopened.

But the slight reduction in the numbers of refugees did not dramatically improve conditions in the camps in Zaire. To dispose of bodies piling up in the camps, relief officials said they had received permission to burn some of them.

Encouraged by the reopening of the Rwandan border and the now regular and increasing arrival of aid, some United Nations officials said that for the first time since the crisis began they felt that they have started to gain control of the situation. "Very tentatively we may be turning the corner, hitting rock bottom," said Raymond

Wilkinson, a spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "We may be finally climbing out of the abyss."

Mr. Wilkinson said that nearly 350 metric tons of food for the refugees was scheduled to arrive in Zaire today. That figure is just over half of the 600 metric tons of food that is estimated to be needed to feed the refugees in Zaire, but twice the amount of relief that was arriving several days ago.

And the Israelis joined the relief effort today, as a small group of their soldiers arrived aboard a United States C-130 to set up a 150-bed hospital that includes an operating theater.

[An American C-5A transport plane landed at Goma delivering a purification plant that will be able to provide up to 87,000 gallons of water per day for the refugee camp, The Associated Press reported. Three C-141 aircraft also arrived containing 60 million saline rehydration packets to be used to help fight the cholera epidemic.]

[The United States military stopped airdrops of food to Rwandan refugees in Zaire today as the United Nations evaluated the exercise, Reuters reported from Entebbe, Uganda. "We

halted the flights pending clearance for further flights,” said Lieut. Gaelle Glickfield, spokeswoman for the United States aid operation based at Entebbe. The United States military described its first drop of 36,000 pounds of food north of the refugee camp at Goma on Sunday as a success, but relief workers said the food packets missed their target and called the operation unnecessary and a waste of their own resources.]

property, though it is open land.

But late today, officials said that the situation had worsened so that it was now necessary to burn hundreds of bodies.

As relief workers and doctors fought to contain the cholera at the refugee camps, the ousted government of Rwanda issued a statement from Kinshasa, the Zairian capital, asking for international support in their claim to be given a share of power in Rwanda.

Death Toll Still Rising A Claim to Power

Mr. Wilkinson said the death count in the camps was rising daily. Among the dozens of relief agencies working here, there is no universal figure on the total death count or the number of cholera victims or the deaths from the disease, and it is a source of constant frustration for aid officials and journalists.

“These are just ballpark figures,” Mr. Wilkinson said. “Counting bodies isn’t a top priority for us these days.” The spokesman said that no donor nation or private aid group had yet agreed to assume the critical job of digging even one of the 60,000 latrines needed to try to prevent cholera and other diseases from spreading. “There is still enough of the bad news to go around,” he said.

Among the worst news is that bodies have started to pile up in the area, sometimes lying for days on roadsides before they are removed. Officials said the Zairian Government had agreed to allow six new mass graves to be dug in a national park, whose volcanic peaks cast shadows over many of the refugee camps. Before now, Zaire had prevented refugees from settling on the park

Calling themselves the legitimate government of Rwanda, the ousted Prime Minister, Jean Kambanda, some of his Cabinet ministers, and the head of his army, Gen. Augustin Bizimungu, issued a communique today calling for the deployment of an international force in Rwanda, the disarming of the victorious Rwanda Patriotic Front, repatriation of their own army and elections to establish a new government.

Until today, the ousted government, which was mostly composed of the dominant Hutu tribe, had made no official statement since the rebels seized power and established a new government, although radio broadcasts controlled by the former leaders continued to influence many of the 1.2 million refugees who had fled to Zaire.

Relief officials have blamed Mr. Kambanda’s ousted government for discouraging refugees from returning home, through intimidation by soldiers of the defeated army and through propaganda broadcasts saying that the new Tutsi-dominated Government will seek vengeance for the mostly Hutu-led massacres of Tutsi during the last few weeks. Like the defeated leaders, the

refugees are mostly ethnic Hutu.

In their communique, the officials of the ousted government asked for international assistance in returning Rwandans to their homes. They also called for an international tribunal to investigate human rights violations in Rwanda since October 1990, the start of the Rwanda Patriotic Front's campaign against the government.

Charges From Both Sides

Each side accuses the other of human rights abuses, including the massacres of thousands of civilians. The United Nations Security Council has

voted to conduct such an inquiry once things are settled in Rwanda.

Peter Hansen, the United Nations Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs, visited the sprawling refugee camp here today and said that "despite all the good work that we all are doing, it is not sufficient."

Mr. Hansen, the highest-ranking United Nations official to visit Zaire since the start of the refugee crisis, came to Africa in advance of a donor meeting in Geneva, Switzerland on Aug. 2 to discuss aid for the Rwandan refugees. He first came to Goma to visit a refugee camp and then to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, to meet with the leaders of the new government.