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Workers insist international forces still needed in Zaire

GISENYI, Rwanda (AP) — Out of food and out of touch, up to 700,000 Rwandan refugees still face death in eastern Zaire, aid agencies said Monday. The agencies urged Western powers to stick to their plans to quickly send soldiers to central Africa.

Ragged columns of refugees returning home, many exhausted, hungry and with bleeding feet, stretched 35 miles into Rwanda. But those still trapped in eastern Zaire were in even greater danger, aid workers said. No decision on a military mission to help them is likely before Thursday.

Although the crush of refugees had eased since the weekend, more than 5,000 people an hour poured across the border Monday, U.N. officials said.

An estimated 500,000 Hutu refugees have walked home to Rwanda since Friday — many barefoot over the rough, volcanic soil — after escaping from Hutu militants who once dominated the world's largest refugee camp.

Aid workers were caring for some 1,050 children — abandoned, orphaned or separated from their parents during the exodus.

"I was holding her hand yesterday, and then suddenly she disappeared," said Marceline Myiramzbrimba as she found her 8-year-old daughter Vestine at one U.N. tent. "I am so happy she is with me."

Aid officials say an international humanitarian force must now focus on the refugees in Zaire's hills and forests south and west of Lake Kivu, some 60 to 120 miles south of here.

"People are dying because they're out of touch, with no food or water," said Peter Kessler, spokesman for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. "We need the kind of protection that could be provided by an international force."

Military officials from nations offering to join the 10,000- to 12,000-strong multinational force are meeting Thursday in Stuttgart, Germany, to decide the fate of the mission.

Canada, which will command the operation, and the United States, which has offered up to 4,000 troops, agree that it is still needed, but officials in Rwanda think otherwise.

The U.S. commander in the region, Maj. Gen. Edwin Smith, met with Zairian officials Monday and later told reporters that no specific course of action had been determined.

The Hutu refugees still in Zaire fled camps around the cities of Bukavu and Uvira in October amid fighting between Zairian government troops and rebels supported by the Tutsi-led Rwandan army.

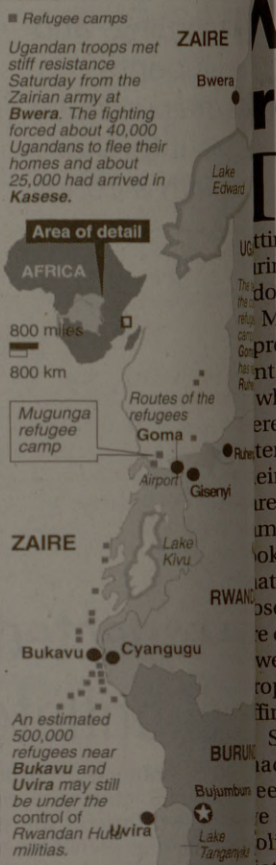
The refugees have been cut off from the outside world since the rebels drove out the Zairian army and closed border crossings from Bukavu into Rwanda and from Uvira into neighboring Burundi. Relief workers don't even know where to find most of the refugees.

Some of those refugees may still be under the control of the extremist Hutu militias who fled last week from advancing Zairian rebels.

In Goma, Zaire, just across the border from Gisenyi, the Hutu militias' power was broken Thursday by rebel shelling that cleared the way for the massive exodus. However, up to 150,000 refugees are believed to have fled west with the Hutu militias, U.N. spokesman Sylvana Foa said.

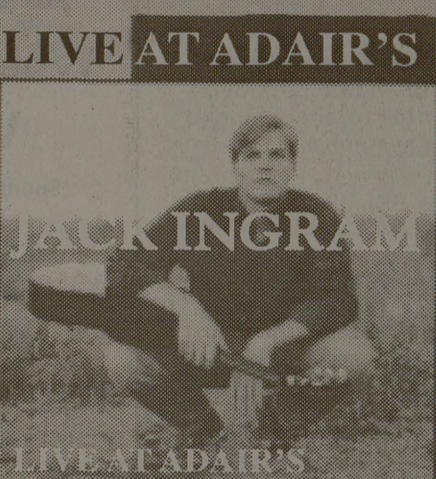
Documents left by the Hutu militants included plans to blow up key installations in Rwanda as well as reports on old attacks and the formation of Hutu guerrilla groups in refugee camps in Tanzania.

Also found were documents



Refugee camps
Ugandan troops met stiff resistance Saturday from the Zairian army at Bwera. The fighting forced about 40,000 Ugandans to flee their homes and about 25,000 had arrived in Kasese.
Area of detail
AFRICA
800 miles
800 km
Mugunga refugee camp
Routes of the refugees
Goma
Airport
Gisenyi
LAKU KIVU
Zaire
Bukavu
Cyangugu
An estimated 500,000 refugees near Bukavu and Uvira may still be under the control of Rwandan Hutu militias.
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