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**Testimony of Jeff Drumtra, Policy Analyst
U.S. Committee for Refugees
on
Hunger and Humanitarian Issues in Rwanda
before the
House Agriculture Committee
Subcommittee on Foreign Agriculture and Hunger**

June 10, 1993

I. INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the U.S. Committee for Refugees, I would like to thank you and your Subcommittee colleagues for holding these two days of hearings on international hunger issues, and for devoting this morning's panel to an examination of hunger and other emergency humanitarian needs facing internally displaced persons in the central African country of Rwanda.

I am Jeff Drumtra, Africa policy analyst for the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR). USCR is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that regularly monitors and assesses the situations of refugees and internally displaced people around the world. As you might expect, hunger is usually a deadly companion of displaced populations. I have recently returned from Rwanda, where some 900,000 Rwandese who fled their homes before and during February now live in temporary, squalid camps that are short on food and other necessities of life. I appreciate your invitation to testify on this emergency today, which is one of the most underreported humanitarian crises on a continent filled with underreported emergencies.

As my testimony will discuss below, an effective humanitarian response to Rwanda by the U.S. should help Rwandese to:

- overcome transportation and logistical difficulties hampering food relief distributions;
- distribute critical non-food assistance such as plastic sheeting, blankets, and health care;
- station larger numbers of neutral military observers in Rwanda's demilitarized zone; and
- reach a political settlement to Rwanda's underlying conflict.

Before I delve more deeply into Rwanda, Mr. Chairman, I would first like to thank you for recently enlarging the scope of your Subcommittee to address international hunger issues. Your Subcommittee's expanded oversight can help partially to fill the large gap left by the unfortunate termination of the House Select Committee on Hunger earlier this year.

You have indicated, Mr. Chairman, that your Subcommittee's two days of hearings will serve at least two purposes: to examine general mechanisms that can enable U.S. and UN humanitarian assistance agencies to respond more quickly and effectively to emergencies worldwide; and to help Congress better understand the humanitarian conditions and needs that currently exist in specific countries such as Rwanda. Therefore, I will try to address both levels of concern. My testimony begins with a brief review of the political and historical roots of this latest

humanitarian crisis in Rwanda. Surely one of the recurring themes in your two-day hearing is that emergency food shortages are often the result of politics rather than acts of Mother Nature. This is the case in Rwanda. Secondly, I will describe the current humanitarian needs in Rwanda based on my site visit there last month. Thirdly, I will offer several concrete policy recommendations for your consideration. Finally, my testimony points to some general lessons from the Rwanda emergency that the Subcommittee can apply to other humanitarian crises around the world.

II. BACKGROUND OF RWANDA'S CURRENT HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY

Pre-1990 Roots of Ethnic Conflict

Today's humanitarian emergency in Rwanda is rooted in the country's history. Rwanda's estimated 7.6 million people are divided into two principal ethnic groups: about 87 percent of Rwandese are ethnic-Hutu; most of the remaining 13 percent are ethnic-Tutsi. These two ethnic groups have endured a sordid history of mutual slaughter since independence in 1962.

This ethnic animosity is largely the legacy of Belgian colonialists and, later, Rwandan demagogues, who have used divide-and-rule tactics to retain their own power and privilege. Belgian colonialists, for example, allowed only Tutsis to attend school until the late 1940s, installed Tutsi chiefs over Hutu regions, and pressed Hutu men into forced labor gangs under Tutsi overseers who were themselves often forced to work against their will.

Prior to independence, therefore, the Tutsi were politically dominant despite their minority status. In the pre-independence turmoil of 1959-62, representatives of the majority Hutu took control from the Tutsi. More than 20,000 Tutsi were butchered in the power struggle, and several thousand persons fled to surrounding countries, where they became--and remain--refugees. By some estimates, 40-70 percent of Rwandese Tutsis fled their country during 1959-64.

Deadly ethnic upheaval has continued sporadically inside and around Rwanda into the 1990s, in large part because the government did not lead all Rwandans toward a way of living together that would have enabled a half-million Rwandese refugees who are outside the country to return home.

1990 Invasion by Exiles

The half-million Rwandese exiles forced to live outside their country were largely forgotten by the outside world until they forced their way into the world's consciousness by forcibly re-entering Rwanda in October 1990. An armed force of Rwandese exiles composed mostly--but not exclusively--of Tutsi invaded Rwanda from neighboring Uganda on October 1, 1990. A vicious civil war ensued which initially uprooted some 300,000 persons and left the rebels in control of much of northern Rwanda. President Juvenal Habyarimana and his ruling party, which is largely composed of select northern Hutu clans, have survived militarily only because of substantial French military assistance. The invading exiles and the government declared a cease fire in July 1992.

The 1990 invasion triggered important social reforms. The country's apartheid-like identity card system was eliminated, and the ruling party was pushed closer to multiparty democracy. Human rights abuses continued, however, including large-scale massacres of Tutsi civilians by the President's supporters. In January 1993, a distinguished international team of human rights experts announced its findings that soldiers and agents of the Rwandan government have conducted systematic murder, rape, and other violations against civilians, mostly against ethnic Tutsis. Human rights investigators also discovered widespread evidence of genocide and other war crimes. The human rights team concluded that the perpetrators "were following superiors' orders" and that "the failure and/or refusal of the authorities, at the highest levels, to investigate all these massacres and punish those responsible indicates complicity in this." The human rights investigators criticized government and rebel forces and concluded that "a climate of terror pervades Rwandan life."

Despite these atrocities against civilians, the July 1992 cease fire between government and rebel armies remained in effect, and multiparty talks on power sharing reached a tentative accord in January 1993. The power sharing agreement raised expectations that multiparty elections were imminent. The European Community hailed the political pact as a "dynamic quest...for a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict."

1993 Resumption of War

The January 1993 power-sharing accord appeared to bring all Rwandans tantalizingly close to peace after decades of bloodletting. Within days of the accord, however, cause for optimism vanished. Violence erupted. Terrified Rwandese fled their homes. This rapid chain of events led to the current humanitarian emergency in Rwanda which, thanks to you, Mr. Chairman, is receiving much-needed attention at today's hearing.

The violence erupted in late January when youthful supporters of Rwanda's ruling party, the National Movement for Democracy and Development (MRND), went on a rampage clearly intended to scuttle the peace agreement that had been reached days earlier. President Habyarimana and his hardline supporters protested that the accord negotiated by duly appointed officials did not adequately protect the MRND's hold on power. President Habyarimana fired the negotiator who had been a chief architect of the peace plan. Party zealots, fueled by the President's action, initiated violence in Kigali, the capital city, which then spread to the countryside. Rwanda's President, in effect, invited a relapse into bloody chaos.

Hundreds of Tutsi civilians were then murdered. Houses were systematically destroyed. In reaction, the rebel Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), which had agreed to the negotiated accord, but whose record is also blemished, scrapped the cease fire and attacked on February 8, advancing within a few miles of the capital, Kigali. Some 600,000 Rwandese fled the renewed fighting, adding to the 300,000 persons who had fled warfare in previous years. The massive population displacement left empty the most fertile farm land in an overcrowded country which struggles to feed itself even in normal times.

A new cease fire took effect on March 9, and the RPF agreed to withdraw its troops to positions held before the February 8 attack, thereby creating a demilitarized but highly dangerous buffer zone some 20 miles wide and approximately 40 miles long between the two armies. Today, an estimated 600,000 Rwandese remain internally displaced at some 30 camps south of the buffer zone, while another 300,000 or more have returned to live in the dangerous no-man's land between the two armies.

III. RWANDA'S HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY & ASSISTANCE NEEDS

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and a handful of other agencies and officials have closely monitored humanitarian conditions in Rwanda affecting the 900,000 Rwandese who have fled their homes in the past 30 months. In early February this year, USCR notified newspapers across the U.S. that Rwanda was undergoing a crisis that "almost no one is watching adequately." On February 18, U.S. officials in Rwanda cabled their superiors in Washington that "a disaster exists" in Rwanda and warned that "the food situation is grim." On February 23, U.S. officials cabled a warning about "a catastrophe in the making" and noted that "more displaced are arriving every hour." On April 13, the ICRC announced that "900,000 displaced people in Rwanda face a

major humanitarian catastrophe." Throughout March and April, we at USCR continued our efforts to bring Rwanda's emergency to the attention of the American press, which has nonetheless remained willfully oblivious to the Rwandan crisis. In May, as the misery of Rwanda's internally uprooted people entered its fourth month, I went to Rwanda to assess the conditions of the war-displaced people first-hand.

Needing the Basics of Life -- Food, Shelter, Clothing

Remember that Rwanda is small, extremely mountainous, and ranks as the most densely populated country in Africa. This means that the 900,000 people who were forced to flee their homes had almost nowhere to go. I saw the desperation that has led them to construct crowded, makeshift camps that cling precariously to the steep slopes of denuded hills north of the capital, Kigali. This is the rainy season, and I fear that mud slides could easily sweep the huts--and the families within them--down the steep hillsides.

Mr. Chairman, the most basic requirements of human life are food, shelter, and clothing--none of which exists in adequate supply for Rwanda's uprooted people. Many of them told me they fled their homes wearing only the clothes on their back in the frantic nighttime hours of February 8 when the war suddenly erupted anew. The small huts used for shelter provide scant protection from Rwanda's rainy season and the chilly night air in the mountains. Two of the most urgent--and simple--needs are plastic sheeting so that families can protect their huts from the rain, and more blankets for warmth against the cold. I saw that much of the plastic sheeting donated by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which local relief officials distributed in February, is beginning to tear and wear out, and entire families are trying to stay warm by sharing a single small blanket. In addition, these hastily constructed camps lack sanitation systems, water wells, regular health care, or education systems.

Food distributions in the camps are irregular, and some Rwandese families in the camps must make their 10-day food rations stretch for 20-25 days. The result, according to Red Cross field workers with whom I spoke, is that some persons receive less than 1,000 calories per day--half the minimum caloric intake humans require. Malnutrition is climbing and affects about 100,000 displaced Rwandese, according to a recent study. Red Cross doctors told me that dysentery, malaria, and other infectious illnesses associated with malnutrition and weakened immune systems are on the rise. One series of camps near Kigali, where food distributions are somewhat more frequent, nonetheless suffers 28 deaths per week among its population of 25,000, according to the Red Cross.

Rwandese families are going hungry even though, by all accounts, international donors have contributed enough relief food to meet the immediate need of 12,000 tons per month. The problem is transportation. Rwanda is a landlocked country and must rely on shipments by air or by truck. When I visited Rwanda in early May, three daily airlifts of food had been reduced to one plane per day due to a shortage of aviation fuel. Relief workers told me they have encountered a shortage of large trucks as they try to ship 20 truck loads of food per day into Rwanda, and road closures have blocked food deliveries from Uganda.

Delivering relief assistance to needy Rwandese is further complicated by the fact that as many as 300,000 Rwandese have begun leaving the camps and are returning to their war-damaged homes in the still-dangerous demilitarized zone, where food is scarce and general insecurity has hampered relief efforts. I visited this buffer zone and found a total absence of medicines and basic services. On March 12, the UN Security Council had passed Resolution #812 urging the RPF rebels and the government forces to grant safe passage for relief supplies and Rwandese wanting to return home to the demilitarized zone. On March 17, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) asked the two sides to hasten negotiations so that displaced persons could go home. On May 5, NGOs operating in Rwanda, including Oxfam, Caritas, the Belgian Red Cross, and Medecins Sans Frontieres, publicly urged the Rwandan president and the RPF to reach a security agreement "without the least delay" so that NGOs could begin providing desperately needed humanitarian assistance in the dangerous buffer zone.

Finally, on May 30--less than two weeks ago--the government and the RPF signed an agreement allowing resettlement and humanitarian aid in the demilitarized zone. It remains too early, however, to assess the effectiveness of this agreement. The May 30 accord further states that neutral unarmed international military observers will provide security in the demilitarized zone and pledges both armies to identify land mines they have left behind in the war area.

Now Is The Pivotal -- But Expensive -- Moment

Humanitarian conditions in Rwanda have reached a pivotal moment. As the crisis drags into its fifth month, medical workers told me that health conditions will deteriorate at an accelerated pace if food distribution remains sporadic at the camps and large numbers of war-affected Rwandese in the buffer zone remain inaccessible to relief workers. On the other hand, relative normalcy could return within six months if all displaced families are able to return home safely and receive reliable deliveries of food and medicine until the next harvest in December. Rich soil in the war-affected region offers two and sometimes three growing seasons annually.

Rwanda need not be a long-term humanitarian emergency if the appropriate political and assistance steps occur now and over the next six months. Perhaps the requisite political steps are beyond the influence of this Subcommittee, but the humanitarian assistance steps are not. United Nations agencies have issued a consolidated appeal of \$78.5 million to donors for April-December 1993. The UN appeal includes \$38 million for food relief and food production, \$15 million to resolve the logistical problems described above, nearly \$15 million for health and special nutrition programs, and \$3 million for water, sanitation, and other needs. UN agencies are also wisely seeking \$5 million for conservation programs to counteract the alarming deforestation that occurred as 900,000 displaced persons desperately chopped trees to make room for their huts and to find wood for cooking and warmth. I saw recent deforestation and soil erosion that will last for decades, affecting the livelihoods of local residents long after all 900,000 internally displaced persons have finally returned home.

The Belgian Red Cross is devoting some \$4.8 million to Rwanda in the first six months of this year to distribute sorely needed non-food items such as blankets and plastic sheeting. The International Committee of the Red Cross has launched an emergency appeal of \$88 million--nearly one-third of the agency's entire Africa budget--for food and medical aid, sanitation programs, and tracing of separated Rwandese families. ICRC's appeal remains \$22 million unfunded, however. Other organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, Africare, CARE, Oxfam/U.K., and Medecines Sans Frontieres/Belgium are also operative in Rwanda and will attempt to expand their programs.

I am pleased to learn that USAID plans virtually to double its commitment to Rwanda due to the emergency. USAID's 1993 budget will be approximately \$40 million, most of which will go to emergency relief.

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 • Provide funds to improve local transportation/distribution of food relief.

Even if all displaced Rwandese are able to return home in the near future, food relief will remain necessary for at least six months. Although international donors have supplied food, sufficient amounts fail to reach beneficiaries in Rwanda due to transportation difficulties. Expensive airlifts of food from neighboring countries may remain necessary on a limited basis. Most food can reach beneficiaries by less expensive truck transport if adequate funding is available for road repair and fleet maintenance. Funds for improved monitoring of food distributions can reduce food assistance needs by 20 percent.

2 • *Provide funds for critical non-food assistance such as plastic sheeting, blankets, and health services.*

Shelter is a critical problem in the camps for displaced Rwandese. Even if all displaced Rwandese are able to return home in the near future, adequate shelter will remain problematic as Rwandese rebuild their permanent houses that were destroyed by war and pillagers. A simple investment in more blankets will reduce health problems later. It is unacceptable that five or more persons are forced to share a single blanket in Rwanda's chilly night climate. All reports agree that the health status of displaced Rwandese is deteriorating. Even if all displaced Rwandese are able to return home in the near future, they will find local health clinics stripped bare.

3 • *Provide diplomatic assistance to the neutral international military observers who must police the dangerous demilitarized zone to which displaced persons are trying to return.*

Most displaced Rwandese cannot--and should not--return home until it is safe to do so. At last report, fewer than 50 neutral military observers, sponsored by the Organization of African Unity, were in Rwanda. They are too few to provide the security necessary in the demilitarized zone. Their expanded presence is essential to bolster the tentative agreement governing the demilitarized zone.

4 • *Supply strong diplomatic support to the overall peace process under negotiation between the Rwanda government and the RPF.*

I realize this recommendation stretches the purview of this Subcommittee, but ultimately the humanitarian emergency in Rwanda is rooted in political problems. The U.S. should rally behind Rwanda's ongoing peace process in an unbiased fashion. The peace process is more likely to reach a final resolution if the U.S. provides a much-needed counterweight to the blatantly pro-government position of French diplomats and the French military. The goal must not be for one side to win, but for an accommodation that yields a democratic system that responds to the legitimate needs of all Rwandans.

V. LESSONS FROM RWANDA'S HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY

Mr. Chairman, you have indicated that one of the purposes of these two days of hearings--beyond exploring the dire needs of Rwanda--is to examine mechanisms that can enable U.S. and UN humanitarian assistance agencies to respond more quickly and effectively to emergencies

worldwide. Surely many of the operational relief agencies testifying at this hearing can offer you excellent, specific recommendations that would improve their operational abilities in the field.

Although the U.S. Committee for Refugees does not operate relief programs in the field, USCR regularly makes assessment visits to emergencies around the world. Our experience has caused us to note repeatedly that effective humanitarian response requires at least five components: **early warnings** from the field about the emergency (which we at USCR attempt to provide); **rapid response** and **sustained response** from donors and relief organizations; **close coordination** among relief organizations in the field and at headquarters; and **political resolution** of the underlying conflict that caused the humanitarian crisis.

Early Warning

One absolutely essential mechanism is that relief workers and other officials in the field must supply quick, early warnings of an unfolding emergency to their headquarters in Washington, New York, or Geneva. Reports from the field must credibly assess humanitarian needs and must not shy away from prescriptions for bold action, where appropriate. As I detailed in Part III, the record clearly demonstrates that NGOs and U.S. officials in the field in Rwanda provided ample warning of the emergency to any donors and others who were willing to listen.

Rapid Response

Several nongovernmental relief organizations (NGOs) in Rwanda complain that slow responses from international donors have hindered the ability of NGOs to respond rapidly to the emergency needs of Rwanda's internally displaced population. It seems clear to me that a shortage of such basics as blankets and plastic sheeting five months into the emergency is unacceptable. We at USCR see this systemic problem repeated around the world. The UN system--and the nations that fund it--must devise a better staffed and better financed emergency response capability. NGOs must have immediate access to a larger pool of emergency funds so that time-consuming fundraising appeals do not slow their operations.

Sustained Response

Whether the world will mount the sustained response required to alleviate Rwanda's crisis remains to be seen. UN agencies and NGOs in Rwanda have explained the financial needs of their emergency response programs in Rwanda through December, but it is too early to know if their appeals will receive funding.

Close Coordination

The international community must devise a stronger international mechanism to decide which relief agencies are best equipped to respond to an emergency in a given corner of the world. Currently the international relief community addresses humanitarian emergencies in an ad hoc manner, and precious response time is lost. The UN formed its Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) last year to improve coordination within the UN, and DHA has issued a consolidated funding appeal for Rwanda on behalf of other UN agencies, but DHA must cultivate closer links with NGOs in order to coordinate effectively during humanitarian emergencies. In Rwanda, NGO workers told me that they lack adequate coordination with the Rwanda government, primarily due to some government officials' unresponsiveness at crucial moments in the crisis.

Political Resolution

These emergencies are political as well as humanitarian. Rather than wait for conflict to erupt before we respond, the world community, led by the U.S., should engage in preventive diplomacy which could nip political disputes in the bud before they produce humanitarian tragedies. The UN Security Council, for example, should operate a permanent mediation office. If conflict erupts nonetheless, the UN should ensure that aggressive diplomatic efforts accompany--and complement--relief programs. In Rwanda, for example, final peace can occur only when repatriation occurs for refugees currently forced to live outside the country. The slow peace process in Rwanda would, I am convinced, respond favorably to international diplomatic pressure.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to testify.