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Site Visit Notes

Rwandan Refugees: Updated Findings and Recommendations

October 25, 1995

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U.S. Committee for Refugees
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Following are selected findings and policy recommendations by the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) pertaining to the Rwandan refugee situation. These are based on USCR's two-week site visit to Rwanda and eastern Zaire between September 18 and October 2, 1995. USCR has conducted ten site visits to the region since April 1994 and monitors the region on an ongoing basis.

USCR's most recent site visit examined three general issues in Goma, Zaire:

- the seriousness of Zaire's threat to expel all refugees by year's end;
- conditions and changing dynamics in the refugee camps;
- levels of intimidation, propaganda, and information in the camps.

USCR assessed four general issues inside Rwanda:

- current settlement patterns inside Rwanda;
- security in Rwanda, especially for returnees;
- Rwanda's capacity for refugee repatriation and resettlement;
- permanent resettlement of "old caseload" Tutsi refugees.

These *USCR Site Visit Notes* are organized around these seven issues. This summary assumes that readers possess a working knowledge of the Rwanda refugee situation. It is hoped that policymakers and NGO officials will find the format of this summary useful for decision-making and analysis.

Part 1 – Goma Refugee Camps

- **Zaire gives mixed signals about the seriousness of its threat to expel all refugees by year's end.**

Zaire expelled 13,000 refugees in August and insists that its December 31 deadline is serious. During USCR's site visit, Zairean officials were verbally pressuring the refugee population by announcing restrictions on refugee employment and housing outside the camps. By all accounts, average Zaireans in the area are increasingly discontented with the refugees' presence. At its recent Tripartite Meeting with Rwanda and UNHCR, Zaire indicated its readiness to arrest former Rwandan leaders who are impeding repatriation.

During USCR's site visit, the governor of North Kivu addressed refugees in Mugunga camp and firmly insisted that they return home. The governor threatened to arrest persons spreading propaganda in the camps and chided the refugees for their steadfast loyalty to discredited leaders who lost the civil war last year.

On the other hand, Zaire has rarely implemented similar threats. Zairean officials have previously announced restrictions on refugees' housing and employment without taking action. Zaire's forcible expulsion in August conspicuously did not target the former Rwandan military (FAR), militia members, or other leaders who impede refugee repatriation. Many Zairean officials presumably retain close ties to Rwanda's exiled former leaders, who resist repatriation of the refugees. Zaire's forcible expulsion exercise in August appeared to be intentionally limited in scope, according to many observers in Goma interviewed by USCR.

Important individuals in Zaire's government, armed services, and economy benefit from the refugees' presence. Many observers suspect Zaire's expulsion threat is little more than an attempt by Mobutu to extract political and financial concessions from the international community on other matters.

Zaire's ultimate actions toward the refugees will depend on internal Zairean politics and the complicated power struggles among the country's civilian authorities as well as among competing branches of the police and military. Zaire's government is far from monolithic, and outsiders have difficulty deciphering the competing interests.

< Recommendation #1 > Take seriously the Zaire government's threat to forcibly expel all refugees by the end of 1995.

Given the chaos and probable violence that massive forcible repatriation would trigger inside Rwanda, the world cannot afford to shrug off Zaire's expulsion threat, despite uncertainty about the threat's validity. Relief agencies and international diplomats would be wise to assume that forcible expulsion is likely to occur and should pursue strategies to avert it or alleviate its destabilizing impact inside Rwanda. Massive forced repatriation would be violent; significant voluntary repatriation is necessary.

< Recommendation #2 > UNHCR should encourage larger voluntary repatriation in an effort to preempt precipitous action by Zairean authorities.

UNHCR officials in Goma and Rwanda believe that a steady, organized flow of about

< Recommendation #4 > UNHCR/Goma should clearly explain its aggressive repatriation strategy to NGOs working in Goma refugee camps. NGOs should cooperate with UNHCR's strategy.

Many NGOs operating in Goma appear to be confused about UNHCR's aggressive repatriation strategy. Some who understand the strategy apparently oppose it.

Some NGOs, for example, continue camp improvement projects and resist UNHCR pressure to curtail the hiring of refugee employees. Many NGOs are likely to resist publicly any restrictions placed on camp refugees. Curtailment of refugee services runs counter to NGOs' usual humanitarian impulse. In addition, NGO/Goma workers--like the refugees themselves--suffer from a severe lack of accurate information about conditions inside Rwanda.

The level of distrust between UNHCR/Goma and many NGOs could potentially undermine UNHCR's repatriation strategy by sending contradictory messages to the refugee community. UNHCR/Goma should more effectively communicate its strategy and tactics to NGOs. NGOs should commit to supporting the strategy of aggressive voluntary repatriation if it is implemented properly.

< Recommendation #5 > More NGOs in Goma should make a concerted effort to eliminate suspected murderers from their payrolls.

Some relief agencies make a good-faith effort to screen their refugee employees to eliminate undesirables. Too many international NGOs in Goma, however, continue to employ Rwandan individuals who are strongly suspected of participating in last year's mass murder. This is ethically unacceptable. Relief agencies should make a good-faith effort to screen their camp employees in order to ensure that the employees are drawn from the hundreds of thousands of innocent Rwandan refugees. New hires as well as existing employees should be properly screened.

Such screening admittedly takes time, places an added burden on relief directors, complicates the hiring process, and exposes NGOs to potential retaliation. More NGOs should screen their workers despite these difficulties. In many instances, the genocide participants are well-known and easily identified. Relief agencies should regard employee screening as a required financial and logistical cost of operating in the Goma camps.

< Recommendation #6 > NGOs should provide a proper historical orientation to new expatriate staff working in the Rwanda region. NGOs should oblige all expatriate staff to read the African Rights report, *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance*, as a prerequisite for working in the region.

Given the short-term contracts and rapid staff rotations common in overseas relief work, many NGO staff in Goma and in Rwanda are new to the region and lack a full understanding of the historical and political context in which they are working. The genocide, and its lingering repercussions, make the situation in this region unique. Agencies and their workers have a special responsibility to understand it.

USCR recommends the African Rights report, *Rwanda: Death, Despair and Defiance*, as obligatory reading for any individual or organization attempting to play a constructive role in the Rwanda region. The report can be purchased from African Rights in London. Phone 011-171-717-1224; fax 011-171-717-1240.

Sixthly, *status quo negligible repatriation*. Perhaps UNHCR's aggressive voluntary repatriation strategy will fail. Perhaps Zairean authorities will ignore their own repatriation ultimatum to the refugees. Perhaps international donors will continue to fund camps in Zaire at a cost of \$1 million per day. This scenario would prolong the overall crisis with no sign of progress, maintain the power base of a genocidal regime, and sustain regional instability.

< Recommendation #7 > Organized voluntary repatriation is the preferred option. It can only be stimulated by aggressive tactics.

It should be acknowledged that this option has drawbacks. Many humanitarians are uncomfortable with the notion of "getting tough" with refugees. The "get tough" strategy pushes the line between voluntary and involuntary repatriation. If the strategy successfully stimulates repatriation, it will likely provoke new problems inside Rwanda as a traumatized Rwandan society absorbs large numbers of returnees.

These concerns, however, are more acceptable than other, more dangerous options outlined above. Nudging the Rwandan refugee situation toward a difficult but constructive resolution will require patience and determination by the international community. In post-genocide Rwanda, nothing is easy.

- **Many Rwandan refugees in Zaire now openly consider the prospects for repatriation. This is a significant change.**

Zaire's forcible expulsion exercise in August and its threat to expel all refugees in the near future have changed camp dynamics. More refugees now discuss openly the pros and cons of returning to Rwanda, and are more openly inquisitive about conditions there. The camp taboo against discussing repatriation has been broken, at least for the time being.

This change in mindset, however, has not yet produced more voluntary repatriation.

- **The refugee population is not monolithic. At least four mindsets exist about repatriation.**

The refugees fled to Zaire together last year and have remained in Zaire together for more than a year. It is therefore easy for outsiders to mistakenly assume that the refugee population is monolithic in thought as well as in deed. It is not, particularly in recent months.

One group in the camps are criminals, guilty of participating in last year's genocide. As criminals, they are not bona-fide refugees under international law and should not be treated as such. Given their own guilt, they will probably choose never to participate in any repatriation program. A reasonable estimate is that 250,000 to 500,000 Rwandans in Zaire and Tanzania may never repatriate, due to their guilt or their family ties to a guilty individual.

A second group are hardliners who are not guilty of genocide. They are, however, vehemently opposed to the RPA and believe all propaganda disseminated by the exiled genocide leaders.

A third group are average refugees who are only now beginning to consider repatriation. They tend to trust--or at least follow--their extremist leaders, but are now less sure. They are

scars—vivid and effective propaganda about the alleged danger of repatriation. Investigation by UNHCR subsequently revealed that the two individuals had never entered Rwanda.

The exiled regime remains a world-class propagandist. Many NGO workers in the camps are susceptible to the propaganda as well, because they often lack alternative channels of information about events in Rwanda.

- **Positive steps inside Rwanda are often interpreted negatively by the refugees, due to camp propaganda and inbred suspicions.**

Many refugees refuse to believe any positive news about developments in Rwanda. This resistance is due to the relentlessly negative propaganda refugees hear in camps, as well as their own inbred suspicions about the RPA after four years of civil war.

In conversations with USCR, some refugees refused to believe that Rwanda was relatively calm at this time. They insisted that positive letters reaching the camps from returnees were forged by the RPA and that the returnees themselves were probably dead. The fact that some returnees are finding relative safety in Rwanda is, according to many refugees, merely a ploy by the RPA to draw Hutu back “little by little” in order to slaughter them all. Some refugees charged that the construction of new prisons in Rwanda to alleviate prison overcrowding was proof that the RPA plans to arrest all Hutu. They insisted that positive feedback from camp residents who have made “go-and-see” visits into Rwanda are not credible because such visits are easily manipulated by Rwanda’s government.

This reaction indicates that continued progress inside Rwanda, while important, probably cannot by itself stimulate large-scale repatriation. An information campaign is required to counteract the sophisticated propaganda of the exiled regime.

- **Refugees do have several valid concerns about returning to Rwanda. Not all fears are due to propaganda misinformation.**

Although many refugees’ worst fears are without basis, some fears are valid. Refugees are well-informed about Rwanda’s overcrowded prisons. They have legitimate concerns that a wrongful arrest could be fatal due to appalling prison conditions. They also have reasonable concerns about how quickly they can reclaim their land if squatters refuse to vacate.

Refugees’ fears regarding land disputes are often greater than their concerns about security, some relief workers told USCR. In other words, widespread fear and confusion about the land adjudication system may be the most significant deterrent to repatriation, in many cases.

< Recommendation #10 > Launch a sophisticated and relentless mass information campaign to give refugees a fuller picture of conditions in Rwanda.

In this refugee situation more than most, information is key. A battle is underway for the hearts and minds of 1.8 million Rwandan Hutu refugees. The battle has been one-sided. The impressive propaganda skills of the exiled regime sparked the murder of up to 1 million persons and helped persuade nearly 2 million refugees to flee Rwanda. Those same propaganda skills are now helping perpetuate a refugee crisis and regional instability. Information versus

< Recommendation #14 > Provide detailed information describing how refugees reclaim their land if it is occupied upon their return.

The government of Rwanda has said repeatedly that refugees retain ownership of their land. To the extent this message has reached refugees, it is still insufficient information. Refugees want to know how the policy is being implemented. They want to know, in detail, exactly where they should file a claim if their land is occupied by squatters upon their return. They want to know how long the process requires them to wait before they can regain possession of their occupied land and homes. They want to know what temporary accommodations and other security are available while they await their land. Refugees interested in repatriating hesitate to make a final decision because they cannot find answers to these detailed questions:

An information campaign on radio and via camp meetings should provide this information repeatedly. In addition, refugees need to hear the first-hand stories of returnees who have regained their land.

< Recommendation #15 > Enable more refugees to conduct “go-and-see” visits to Rwanda to collect first-hand information about conditions.

The governments of Rwanda and Zaire should give higher priority to facilitating so-called “go-and-see” visits that allow refugees to visit temporarily their home areas of Rwanda. Information-collection visits are a basic tool proven effective in facilitating refugee repatriations around the world. Rwandan refugees have been unable to make such scouting trips regularly due to restrictions by Rwandan and Zairean authorities.

< Recommendation #16 > The Rwandan government and RPA should allow personal letters to pass unimpeded between refugee camps and the interior of Rwanda.

The Rwandan government and RPA should allow private letters to pass easily between refugee camps and the interior of Rwanda. Currently such mail is screened and, at times, confiscated by Rwandan authorities. The benefits of allowing information to cross the border outweigh the Rwandan government's security concerns.

Letters between refugees and returnees are potentially a rich source of information for refugees seeking alternative information about conditions in Rwanda. Restrictions on these letters have reduced the flow of information to refugees and leads refugees to conclude that Rwandan authorities are hiding the true conditions in their country.

< Recommendation #17 > Provide intensive information on alternative radio broadcasts into the Goma camps.

Rwandan refugees, as most African refugees, are avid radio listeners. UNHCR/Goma only recently has begun to collaborate with Radio Agatashya, an independent station, to provide information to refugees in Goma. Rwandan government radio is also available. These and any other available radio broadcasts should provide more intensive information to refugees about conditions in Rwanda, daily human rights and security updates region-by-region, news about specific relief and development projects underway in Rwanda, etc. The daily information provided to refugees via these broadcasts should be exhaustive, in an effort to erode gradually the powerful negative propaganda assaulting refugees in the camps.

Such information would address the natural curiosity and concern that expatriate workers have for their former employees, and would provide useful information to refugees contemplating the risks of their own return. Refugees employed by NGOs are often influential in refugee camps, and news about their safe return to Rwanda could influence other refugees.

< Recommendation #21 > Exploit the fact that Goma's refugee camps are organized according to communes and sectors--it is therefore easy to provide commune-specific information directly to refugees from a given commune.

Refugees can benefit from general information about Rwanda, but detailed information about conditions in their home commune or home sector is most influential. The highly organized structure of the refugee camps by home commune should facilitate bringing commune-specific information directly to the appropriate refugees.

Refugees should receive weekly reports about life in their home communes, including information about relief projects, development projects, human rights monitoring, crop production, etc. Collecting and disseminating this information requires proper collaboration between UNHCR/Rwanda and UNHCR/Goma.

• Health conditions among refugees in Goma are excellent. Malnutrition is negligible. Birth rates have returned to 90% of normal Rwandan levels.

UNHCR and relief organizations have accomplished a remarkable logistical and humanitarian feat in the Goma refugee camps despite the unfavorable terrain. Camps that were thought to be "unsustainable" have been sustained. The question is whether international donors will remain willing to support the massive camps without some progress toward resolution.

shape refugees' impressions about tensions and poor security in the rest of Rwanda. The pervasive presence of RPA troops in border areas--posted there for understandable security reasons--aggravates refugees' concerns that they are unwelcome in Rwanda.

< Recommendation #22 > Train RPA troops to receive large numbers of returnees.

The government of Rwanda, with international assistance, should provide special training to RPA soldiers posted in border areas to prepare them to deal properly with large numbers of civilian returnees. Training should range from human rights to proper crowd control techniques.

• Rwanda is a traumatized, post-genocide society that will likely remain traumatized for years or decades into the future.

Rwanda's genocide continues to reverberate through Rwandan society. Fortunately for the world--but unfortunately for Rwanda--the world has only limited experience dealing with the legacy of genocide. As a traumatized society, Rwanda will likely experience revenge killings, violent land disputes, paranoia, and deep mistrust for years to come. Proper policies by the Rwandan government can alleviate the instability, but probably cannot eliminate it altogether.

Similarly, proper repatriation programs can gradually make refugee return and resettlement possible, but ironclad guarantees of safety for absolutely all returnees are impossible.

< Recommendation #23 > The U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance should remain prepared for a possible new round of humanitarian emergency in Rwanda.

The relative calm inside Rwanda, coupled with OFDA's worldwide budget constraints, has virtually ended OFDA operations in the country. Significant repatriation could, however, propel Rwandan society into new stresses warranting quick OFDA reaction. Forcible expulsion of the refugees by Zaire would almost certainly trigger a humanitarian crisis in Rwanda, as would a massive "voluntary" return of refugees under the direction of FAR and the old regime.

< Recommendation #24 > Continue training a national police force that would reduce the RPA's policing responsibilities.

The RPA is trained as an army, not as a police force. Its continued involvement in domestic police work is a prescription for human rights problems and political concerns. International donors are making progress in helping Rwanda establish a police force. This should continue to be a priority in a country where post-genocide disputes over property, restitution, and ethnic tensions will be common for years.

• Rwanda currently is sufficiently safe for refugee repatriation, according to UNHCR/Rwanda.

UNHCR/Rwanda cites several criteria to explain its recent decision to encourage voluntary refugee repatriation to Rwanda. Until recent weeks UNHCR had *facilitated* repatriation to Rwanda

analytical capacity is weak, however, and is therefore less useful than it could be.

Proper computer mapping and staff support would enable human rights officials in the country to analyze whether security incidents occur more frequently in border areas than elsewhere; whether atrocities tend to occur immediately after infiltrations by FAR; whether abuses tend to occur immediately prior to RPA troop rotations; whether security incidents rise when local repatriation reaches a certain threshold; whether atrocities decline when local schools open, etc.

This type of correlative analysis creates opportunities for preventive actions. The Rwandan government, the UN, international donors, and assistance agencies all would benefit from the insights generated by this type of sophisticated, constructive analysis.

< Recommendation #28 > Make safer the new border crossing between the Goma camps and the Gisenyi region, located at Mutovu.

UNHCR and the Rwandan government have attempted to encourage refugee repatriation by opening a new border crossing at Mutovu, six kilometers from Zaire's Kibumbu refugee camp. USCR visited the crossing point. Fewer than 20 refugees had returned via the Mutovu crossing.

One problem was that refugees wishing to cross at Mutovu could arrive there only after walking six kilometers through the bush, where they were vulnerable to potential ambush by Interahamwe, RPA, or bandits. In addition, RPA troops were reportedly threatening to limit the number of returnees to 150 per day and were threatening to shoot any returnees who strayed from the footpath. Roads from the border crossing to a reception center 10 miles away would be almost impassable for large vehicles in rainy season.

UNHCR/Rwanda and UNHCR/Goma should collaborate to provide transportation or escorts for refugees wanting to repatriate via Mutovu crossing. UNHCR/Rwanda should improve the road to the border crossing. Rwandan authorities should ensure that no artificial limits are placed on the number of returnees at Mutovu and should instruct RPA troops that returnees are not targets of war.

- **The permanent resettlement of "old caseload" Tutsi returnees is proceeding slowly.**

The Rwandan government estimates that 750,000 "old caseload" Tutsi have returned to Rwanda. Approximately half of them are believed to inhabit towns, and half are believed to live in rural areas. The exact number of Tutsi returnees who have resettled permanently on their own land is unclear, but appears to be no more than 20 percent. This means that more than a half-million Tutsi returnees remain effectively internally displaced, not yet settled on land they can call their own.

The government is attempting to resettle large numbers of Tutsi returnees in the extreme northeast (including in Akagera Park), in the Kibungo prefecture in southeast Rwanda, and in northwest Rwanda between Gisenyi and Ruhengeri. The government and UNHCR offer different assessments of the sustainable population capacities in these areas. UNHCR and the government also disagree on the proper sequence of assistance: Rwandan officials complain that, in the northeast, UNHCR has not provided water and other services that might attract families to designated resettlement areas that remain empty; UNHCR says that it cannot provide services

< Recommendation #30 > International donors should continue to accelerate their disbursement of pledged monies.

Slow reaction has characterized the international community's response to Rwanda during the past two years. One key to Rwanda's refugee problem is to stabilize the situation inside Rwanda, yet international financial assistance has been painfully slow to arrive. A top official at the U.S. Agency for International Development noted in September that he has "never witnessed a situation whereby the international community, for all intents and purposes, has marginalized a government" to the extent it has in Rwanda.

Only in recent months have donor disbursements accelerated. The current disbursement total is five times larger than in May, three times larger than in July. It is true that an infusion of too much money too quickly can create new problems, but that does not yet appear to be a problem in this case. The government of Rwanda suffers from a "profound lack of capacity" after the genocide and refugee flight, according to Randolph Kent, the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator in Kigali. International donors should honor the financial commitments they have made in a timely manner.

