

Cholera taking toll on refugees flooding into Zaire

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The distress of more than 1 million Rwandan refugees massed around the town of Goma and other sites in Zaire was compounded by runaway cholera which was killing thousands and had overwhelmed the ability of aid organizations to help.

At one point, it was estimated refugees were dying at a rate of one per minute. The epidemic, triggered by contaminated water brought on by the sanitation crisis which accompanied the sudden flood of refugees, had killed thousands by July 25.

Pope John Paul II pleaded with international agencies and political leaders to mount a massive rescue operation.

"Do not abandon this fleeing multitude," he urged at a July 20 audience. "Once again, unfortunately, we must beg God for peace and relief for the martyred populations of Rwanda."

Officials of the U.S. Catholic Conference, public policy arm of the U.S. bishops, were also urging the Clinton administration to act.

The United States mobilized military units to assist in bringing medicine, food and equipment for providing clean water.

The United Nations urged fleeing Rwandans to return home where they could find safe water, shelter and food.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front, the mostly Tutsi rebel force now forming the new government of Rwanda, promised that returning Hutu refugees would not be harmed, despite the bloody civil war precipitated by Hutu politicians which cost hundreds of thousands of civilian Tutsi and Hutu lives.

Meanwhile, a less publicized, but nearly as massive refugee crisis was developing in the southern Rwandan town of Gikongoro, where some 880,000 undernourished and exhausted displaced Rwandans were gathered.

Catholic Relief Services was running a 300-ton-per-week emergency feeding program in Gikongoro, which provided part of the nutritional needs of about 100,000 refugees.

On July 25, the spread of disease was



A French soldier cradles an orphaned infant he had rescued from the tens of thousands of ill and exhausted refugees. Hundreds of Hutu refugees are dying daily as agencies struggle to meet the needs of a limited number.

AP/Wide World Photos

declared beyond the capacity of humanitarian resources in Goma.

"It is out of control," Peter Hansen, U.N. undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs and head of U.N. emergency relief coordination.

"It is extremely dangerous. We don't have the capacity on the ground to deal with this," he told reporters.

Aid workers sought a new site for mass graves and thousands more bodies piled up in camps and by the roadside. They estimated that the death toll had risen to about 11,000.

Common graves covering an area the size of a football field had already been filled.

Between the town of Goma and Katala camp, about 40 miles north, several thousand bodies awaited collection. Corpses were so densely packed along

the roadsides that some bore the marks of tires from passing vehicles.

Little bundles of children bound in cloth or reed mats lay next to the bigger forms that had been their parents.

At Munigi camp, aid workers spread disinfectant over the piles of people where they fell. A reporter in Kibumba camp reported seeing a mother giving birth just 10 yards from cholera-ridden corpses.

Refugees who knew the end is coming were climbing under their mats to die so that others can tie them up more easily for burial.

Others headed back into their country.

"We are all dying. It is better to be killed in Rwanda," said one refugee leading his children out of Zaire, retracing their steps of a week before.

Maj. Gen. Romeo Dallaire, head of the U.N. Assistance Mission for Rwanda, told reporters at the border he had seen 30,000 to 40,000 refugees on the road from the frontier town of Gisenyi to Ruhengeri, about 40 miles to the northwest.

"People are crawling through the forest," he said.

Dallaire said he wanted to pour aid into the Rwanda capital, Kigali, so it would act as a magnet to draw refugees back.

Church organizations in Britain and the United States called for increased assistance from governments and private donors for their relief efforts.

In Rwanda, the church program which normally deals with development and relief had been "decapitated" by the civil war, said the director of CRS in neighboring Burundi, Chris Hen-nemeyer.

"Some of our most dynamic church partners are dead or are in parts unknown," he said in a telephone interview from Kigali July 18.

An American CRS worker who was evacuated from Rwanda in April as the massacre of Tutsi civilians was gaining momentum told a Washington newspaper she still has nightmares.

Now working at the agency's offices in Baltimore helping procure emergency equipment for the refugees, Tina Malone was quoted as saying: "it's so depressing, but I just have to keep on trying."

In Washington, USCC officials were urging Catholics to flood the White House and Senate with appeals for U.S. assistance.

A July 21 memo to diocesan social action and resettlement officials from Jesuit Father Drew Christiansen, director of the USCC Office for International Justice and Peace, and John Swenson, associate executive director of Migration and Refugee Services, said Washington should be "flooded with calls" urging President Clinton to "organize the world community to an immediate response" to the refugee crisis.

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