



Nothing To Fear in Rwanda

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

For the past few years, Rwanda has come to be characterised more and more as a society defined by rule of law, order and respect for human rights. It is only ten years since the genocide but much has been done to restore the unity and the reconciliation of Rwandans.

"Rwandans are one people, with the same language and culture and there is no reason they should go on hating each other, killing each other or revenging against each other," said Sheik Abdul Karim Harelimana who is the head of the Rwandan refugee council. In this spirit, the government of Rwanda has encouraged all Rwandans that fled the country and are refugees in Africa, and indeed the rest of the World to come back home.

The return of the refugees is facilitated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) which works with countries that host refugees, and their (refugees) country of origin. Before refugees return to their country of origin everything is done to ensure their safety up to when they reach their home areas.

The UNHCR as well as the government are committed not only to the returnee refugees' safety and dignity, but to safe re-integration into their societies.

Many have returned and re-integrated and accepted back into their communities. In 1994, there were over 3 million refugees scattered across the region. Of these, only 80,000 remain in exile. All the others have returned.

Other developments are very encouraging, as they show that Rwanda will not take the path of revenge or persecution. The Gacaca courts have been revived and part of their duty is to see justice carried out fairly. Anyone that is innocent need not fear, or stay in refugee camps because the participatory Gacacas - which are carried out by Rwandans who know each other in the communities - will establish their innocence.

Thousands of suspects have also been released on grounds of compassion (the old and frail) or those that were young during the genocide. A presidential decree in January 2003 granted provisional release to 19,556 prisoners. These were prisoners

who were between the ages of 14 and 18 at the time they allegedly committed acts of genocide, persons accused of 'ordinary crimes', prisoners who had confessed prior to the Gacaca law, those that were in prison for periods longer than the penalty provided by the law and the sick, old and frail.

These, and others are signs that indeed there is no reason for any Rwandan to fear coming back to their mother country.



A small returnee finds something to eat at the Byumba transit camp.

HOME NEWS

Former Rebels Complete Course

Over six hundred former rebels have completed a rehabilitation course at Mutobo Demobilisation Centre in Ruhengeri. A number of top government officials, UN officials and ambassadors attended the ceremony. The Prefet of Ruhengeri, Boniface Rucagu thanked the former rebels for the brave decision to come out of the bushes and disengage from rebel activities as well as disowning rebel groups in the DR Congo. Said Rucagu: "this is a step towards achieving tolerance, unity and reconciliation all which will lead to a better nation."

The Minister of Finance and Economic Planning, Donald Kaberuka who also was in attendance said his ministry would support the former rebels in their self-help projects and make

funds available for them (projects). The group comprised of men and women that came out of the Congo late last year. The group is the ninth to leave the jungles of the DRC, and they comprised of ex FAR, FDLR, FAC and some that had joined the Mayi Mayi.

Government to Release 4000 prisoners

At least 4,000 prisoners were temporarily released from prison in accordance with a presidential decree to pardon some prisoners. These are the old, the sick, petty criminals and those with no charge sheets. A council that comprises of officials from the Prosecutor's Office, the Police, the Director of Prisons and a prison doctor has cleared the release of the prisoners. When these prisoners are released, they will attend re-education camps in different provinces in the country. After that they will go back to their respective homes, pending Gacaca trials. The prisoners

were released late last month. Another group is to be released this month (April 2004).

Prisoners Confess

More than half of detainees suspected of genocide across the country have confessed to their role in the genocide so far, says Hannington Tayebwa, head of judicial services in the Ministry of Justice. Confessing to crimes of genocide is a mitigating factor in the sentencing of suspects to those crimes. "The confessions have been massive because of the lenient sentences that are given those who confess," said Tayebwa.

In February 2003, close to 25,000 prisoners that had pleaded guilty to participating in genocide were provisionally released following a presidential decree of the 1st of January that year. Since September 1996, a total of 60,238 prisoners have confessed to taking part in genocide.

No place like home!



A UNHCR convoy carrying returnees from Nakivale arrives in Byumba

The day was sunny and cheerful at the Gatuna border post when the returnees arrived from Uganda. They were exhausted but happy to be back in Rwanda. The returnees - over two hundred of them - were from the camp of Nakivale where they had lived for a number of years. "The life of a refugee is a very difficult one," said Yohani Gatera who was born in Butare province. "We missed our homes very much.

"We missed our families and we missed our country. I am so happy to be home." Gatera said he first fled to Tanzania in 1994, and then left Tanzania for Uganda in 1996. The reason he spent so many years in exile, he said, was because he feared that if he came back government authorities or security agents would victimise him and send him to jail, or do 'something really bad' to him.

"Now I know that all the things I was told in the camps were not true," a smiling Gatera told journalists at Gatuna. He said what persuaded him to come back home was that fact that government representatives from Rwanda had been visiting them (refugees) in Uganda (and, earlier, in Tanzania) briefing them about how things really were home, and telling them how important it was to come back.

Gatera is not the only one who lived in fear of coming back due to falsehoods

spread in camps. Rwandan refugees have been lied to many times, that the Government of Rwanda will lock up or torture Rwandans that leave exile. "Some people have got their own political interests in spreading such lies," said Sheik Abdul Karim Harelimana, head of the Joint Commission for the Repatriation of Rwandan Refugees (JCRRR). "They tell people who would want to go back home many false things. They tell them that they will be imprisoned and tortured, or killed, but these lies cannot go on forever."

Harelimana said Rwanda is a country that respects human rights and good governance, and democratic principles. "We encourage every Rwandan to come back home, and to contribute to the development of our nation," he said.

The refugees travelled from Uganda in five trucks of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. They were escorted by a number of officials from



The returnees at Byumba transit camp

the UNHCR in Uganda. At the border they were received by representatives of the JCRRR and the UNHCR Field Officer of Byumba. Rwanda government immigration officers too welcomed the returnees back to their country, quickly cleared the paperwork and wished them a good journey to the Byumba transit camp, and back to their communes of origin. Children that had grown up in camps jumped up and down in the trucks, in excitement and joy at seeing their country for the first time.

Police and immigration officers waved as the convoy left Gatuna, headed for Byumba. The returnees waved back, talking excitedly and laughing. Soon the



A mother lined up for her food package

convoy was passing through the Rwandan countryside. The refugees in the trucks mostly peered outside in astonishment as they once again were reminded how beautiful their country is. They were looking at the misty, green, rolling hills in the distance, at the carpets of tea plantations, at the rich, loamy soil and they must have been gladder than ever that they had taken the decision to come back home.

The convoy soon reached the transit camp at Byumba. The transit camp - set up by Rwandan authorities to speedily process the returnees back to national status (within one day) - is a good facility, with good amenities such as water, sanitation and dormitories. It can register more than 500 people per day.

At the transit camp, the refugees descended from the trucks. Among other UNHCR officials to receive them were Mr Tane Bamba, the Deputy Representative, Rwanda branch office and Mr Roger Ebanda, Byumba Head of Office.

"The refugees will spend only one night at the transit centre, then they will go back to their communes," said Mr Bamba. "They will be taken good care of." As if to underscore Mr Bamba's words, one woman that had suffered a miscarriage was immediately taken to hospital.

Despite the warm welcome, many

however were worried about what their lives would be like as they rejoined Rwandan society and as they tried to earn a living. "We don't know exactly what we shall be doing when we get back home," said Veneranda Mukamabano, mother of three, as she nursed her smallest child. "But the refugee life was no good. At least at home I will have hope for the future." Her two other children had got into the spirit of things, running up and down and jostling each other in boisterous play.

"The UNHCR is aware of the difficulties for refugees of re-integrating, and starting afresh," says Ms Shannon Kahnert, UNHCR, Kigali, Senior Program Officer. "Usually, the refugees are given a non-food package - hoes, a basic kitchen set, blankets and so on.

"Then in co-operation with the UNHCR, the World Food Program will provide each family with a food ration to last about three months."

At the transit camp, the food to provide to the returnees was in an

open tent. There was rice and flour and beans and cooking oil. Workers looked prepared for the arduous task of handing each and everyone of the refugees their ration.

At another end of the camp, the returnees were lining up for a physical count, the old and the sick helped into place by considerate policemen. After that, people would be lined up according to their communes of origin to make provision of transportation for them easier.

"I look forward to getting back home tomorrow," said Gatera of Butare. "Now I know what it is to be a refugee and can never wish such a fate to anyone!"



The food distribution area

Voluntary repatriation: Rwandan refugees in Malawi - just like in any other country - can voluntarily decide when and where to return to their country. If they wish to be assisted, they can register at the UNHCR office, or in the Dzaleka and Luwani Refugee camps under this exercise. More Rwandan refugees continue to register for voluntary repatriation.

Registration and the VRF: When a refugee registers with the UNHCR, he or she will be issued with a voluntary repatriation form (VRF). This VRF will have the refugee's photograph and will be evidence of his or her decision to return voluntarily. This in effect means once the refugee departs, they are beginning a new life as citizens of their country.

Travel and luggage entitlement: Each refugee is allowed fifty kilograms of personal effects. For example a family of five persons will be entitled to a total of 250 kilograms which will also be exempted from all customs and excise duties and taxes. Refugees will be allowed to sell their personal movable and immovable property and transfer the proceeds of the sale to Rwanda. Travel of refugees will be by air.

Assistance: A standard re-integration package will be provided by the UNHCR upon arrival in Rwanda as follows;

- Kitchen set (one set per family)
- Plastic sheeting (one per family)
- Blankets (three pieces per family)
- Jerrycans (two pieces per family)
- Soap (200g per person per month)
- Three months food ration
- Assorted vegetable seeds (400 grams per family)

Additional assistance: The most vulnerable refugees may get additional assistance upon return as follows,

- Assorted vegetable seeds
- Bean seeds
- Maize seeds
- Hoes
- Contribution to Health Insurance.



UNHCR and government officials receive documents pertaining to the Returnees.

RETURNEES TELL IT

Claude Kayobokye (Nyabugogo):

Almost ten years ago, Claude Kayobokye lived in the camp of Mugunga and thought he would never see Rwanda again. "Mugunga was a terribly crowded place and people were dying of cholera like flies," says Kayobokye, a father of four. Kayobokye says he fled, like hundreds of thousands of Hutus like him, mainly because they "feared to be killed in reprisal massacres" by the RPF. "Many, many people were sure the RPF were out to kill any Hutu they found so they fled."

Three years later, Kayobokye who was fed up with refugee life decided to go back to his country. "I knew I did nothing wrong, so why should I go on living in misery in the Congo?" He made his way back to Kigali where he resumed his life as a shopkeeper at Nyabugogo. It is almost seven years since Kayobokye resettled in Kigali and he has faced no problems other than the difficulties rebuilding a new life with his family.

Dativa Muhimpundu (Gatenga):

"I lived in the camp of Benako in

Tanzania and life was not easy, especially for women. There were reported rapes, and former government officials harassed and intimidated everyone. My husband and I lived in constant fear and we decided to come back, and if we faced problems, then at least it would be at home."

Dativa says that instead of facing 'imprisonment or torture' at the hands of the RPF, they were helped to regain their small adobe brick house in Gatenga. "Life is not easy," says Dativa. "But it is much better than living in a camp."

She is a housekeeper with a family not far from where she lives, and her husband is a casual laborer at MAGERWA.

Sylvestre Kamana (Remera) fled to the DR Congo (former Zaire) at age fifteen. "The Interahamwe ordered me to flee or they would kill me!" Life in Zaire as a refugee was, as many testify, terrible. Kamana contracted the cholera and almost died. One day he decided to walk back to Rwanda, risking his life because if the Interahamwe caught him escaping they would immediately execute him.

"I slipped out of the camp and walked for days until I reached Ruhengeri," says Kamana, now twenty five. He narrates that at Ruhengeri he was arrested by members of security forces who mistook him for an Interahamwe. "After a few days, I convinced them that I wasn't an Interahamwe and they released me."

Since then, Kamana has found a life as a taxi cyclist.

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PO Box 867 Kigali, Rwanda

Tel. (250) 58.50.93 • 58.51.06/7/8

Fax (250) 585104 • Email rwainfo@unhcr.ch