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Rwanda: Congolese Refugees Need More Protection and Assistance

More than 40,000 Congolese refugees living in established camps in Rwanda receive education, medical and other services, but recently arrived refugees often end up stranded for months in a transit center where they receive drastically reduced services.

There is no formal education for hundreds of children, and there are also security concerns at the transit center, which is close to the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Rwanda, where land is already at a premium, needs to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to make more space for refugees.

When a team of Refugees International (RI) visited the transit centre at Gisenyi last May, over three thousand people were crowded into large tents. Center residents included recently arrived Congolese refugees, Rwandans returning home from refuge in the DRC, and women and children dependents of members of the FDLR (*Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda*), a Rwandan militia accused of participating in the 1994 genocide before fleeing to the eastern DRC. Returning Rwandans were transported to their areas of origin within a maximum of 72 hours, while Congolese refugees said they had been living in the transit center for months. Because of the unexpectedly high number of beneficiaries, standard food rations provided by the World Food Program had to be reduced by 30 percent last spring, creating serious nutritional problems for the refugees.

Six months ago the UNHCR started to relocate the refugees from the Gisenyi transit center to a new camp at Nyabiheke well inside the country, where they have more protection and better living conditions. But in October, RI found that about 1,200 Congolese were still at the Gisenyi transit center; some said they had been there for six months. While crowding had eased, conditions were still harsh. One Congolese refugee said, "We are coming from North Kivu. There is fighting there so we cannot return home now. But it is not easy here. It is freezing and we do not have enough warm clothes and blankets."

Between RI's spring and fall visits, food rations had been restored to standard levels, but camp residents still complained of problems. "We are worried especially for our elderly, who need special food rations with increased calories in order to cope with this cold." However, the biggest concern was the lack of formal schools for children. "I have been here for six months now," one refugee said. "The major problem is that all our children stand idle all day and cannot go to school. They say that because this is a transit centre, there cannot be a school."

RI also visited the newly established camp in Nyabiheke, located on a steep hill in the northern province of Byumba. The camp for 4,600, many of whom came from the transit center, was built quickly by the American agency, ARC International, for UNHCR. Because the camp was built in a small area, families have less space than UNHCR guidelines call for, but the services are good—clean water and sanitation, shelter and medical assistance, including testing and treatment for HIV/AIDS, which often aren't provided in refugee camps. To camp residents the biggest issue is not the overcrowding, it is the lack of schools. "There are more than 1,500 children of primary school age who live here, and they have been doing nothing for months. The school year in Rwanda starts in January, and our children are going to be left out again," said a refugee interviewed in the camp.

Rwandan government officials want the children to attend a school in a nearby village with Rwandan children. The local school would be expanded, presumably with international assistance, to accommodate the Congolese children. The Congolese, by contrast, want the school in the camp, so that their children can be taught the Congolese curriculum. "We are hoping to return to the DRC as soon as the situation

will be calm and safe. The best for our children is to study in our own language and following our system so that upon returning home they will reintegrate in the school more easily," a camp resident explained.

Refugees also worry about the safety of sending their children to local schools. "The school is far away and it would be a problem for the smaller children, especially when returning close to the sundown," a mother in the camp said. "We are also worried about our girls since they can suffer violent attacks, as it has already happened to some of them who went to gather firewood." After months of argument between the government and the UNHCR, which wants the refugee children to attend a Congolese school in the camp, there are signs of a possible agreement to allow a primary school at the camp, but nothing is final.

The authorities also say they want to close the Gihembe camp, a large, decade-old camp also located in Byumba province. The plan is to transfer around 10,000 of the refugees living there to a new, yet to be built camp in Nyabiheke, while the remaining 7,000 are expected to return soon to the DRC. The government wants to build the new camp on a hill that is even steeper and rockier than the recently opened camp in Nyabiheke. The UNHCR, which opposes the plan to close down Gihembe camp, says it does not have the money to build a new camp or to move refugees there from a perfectly good existing facility. Not only would it be costly to move an existing camp, it is unrealistic to close a camp based in part on the assumption that 7,000 Congolese refugees will quickly return home. Closing Gihembe camp would exacerbate the existing shortage of space for refugees.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

The Government of Rwanda

- Identify additional space for a refugee camp which should be made available for those Congolese who are still living in the Gisenyi transit site, dangerously located too close to the Congolese border and currently providing substandard living conditions.
- Refrain from closing down the refugee camp in Gihembe, Byumba province and continue to allow the provision of current services to the Congolese refugees living there.
- Authorize UNHCR to start coordinating education activities at the Nyabiheke camp.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees

- Press the government of Rwanda to identify a new camp area for the remaining 1,200 refugees still living in the Gisenyi transit centre. Once it has identified the area, assist with the preparation of the camp.
- Provide winter clothing, blankets and informal education activities for children at the Gisenyi transit centre. Elderly refugees, who are particularly hard hit by the cold weather, should receive additional food.
- Initiate child protection programs in the camps. Discussions between UNHCR and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which is ready to fund the project, have been dragging for six months now.
- Start planning for education activities for children in Nyabiheke. School facilities should be established within the camp area and teachers recruited within the refugee community.

International Donor Countries

- Provide financial resources to UNHCR in order to support the building of the new refugee camp at an appropriate location and to allow the provision of those services addressing the unmet needs of the refugees.

Refugees International Advocate Andrea Lari surveyed refugee populations in parts of Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi in November.