
RI BULLETIN

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Rwanda: World Food Program's ability to operate hampered by break in pipeline

Rwanda is preparing for the long-awaited return of former combatants and refugees who have been living in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for more than 10 years and the support of the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies will be vital to the success of the return process. In this densely populated small country, access to land for food production is essential for stability. Humanitarian agencies have been providing food assistance to those returning to Rwanda. However, due to a break in the food pipeline, the UN World Food Program (WFP) has cut rations to its recipients by 30%, with corn-soy-blend (CSB) rations, which provide supplementary feeding for malnourished individuals, cut from a standard 100 grams to 30 grams. WFP anticipates a complete cut in service in the next few weeks.

In addition to returning Rwandans, Congolese arriving daily fleeing violence and persecution in the DRC are further stressing the system. Further, if the upcoming demobilization, disarmament, and repatriation of former Rwandan combatants and their dependents is successful, there may be additional demands that WFP will be unable to meet, leading to increased vulnerability for the participants and ultimately jeopardizing the delicate peace process.

The difficulty of meeting the needs of returning Rwandans and Congolese refugees is taking place in the context of an overall shortfall of donations for WFP's food distribution programs for refugees worldwide. A WFP press statement issued on May 17 called for urgent donations of U\$315 million to meet the needs of 2.2 million camp-based refugees, with 75 percent of this total required for Africa programs.

Officials from the Rwandan office of WFP told Refugees International, "There have been repeated breaks in the pipeline since 2003. It will be difficult for us to continue at this rate, especially as repatriated Rwandans return at rates higher than expected and refugees from the DRC continue to arrive. We are currently assisting 53,400 people while we had planned for 34,000." According to records obtained from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Goma, DRC, the number of repatriated Rwandan refugees may also continue to rise, further straining the situation in Rwanda. "We have seen the numbers double from month to month," stated an official in Goma. "Word just seems to be reaching the Rwandans who have been living in the forest for the past ten years."

"I heard about peace for us in Rwanda on Radio Okapi [the radio station of the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC]," said Anne, a Rwandan woman that RI interviewed in the refugee transit center in Goma. "I want to go back and see for myself if it is true." Dee, another woman returning to Rwanda with her one-year-old son and eight-year-old daughter, also was curious to see if she would be welcomed home. "One of my cousins called out to all of us living in the forest in Congo to return home. He said that we would be welcomed there." Both women left behind family members, and in Anne's case, older children, as they returned to a country that they fled ten years ago.

Currently, the WFP provides a three-month food ration for returning refugees. "It's not nearly enough for these people," confided an employee at the transit center near the border with DRC where refugees spend 24 hours before being

transported by truck to their place of origin. “There are very few projects available in the community to assist them when they return,” said a staff member of a non-governmental organization. “We are expecting 1,000 Rwandan refugees to be repatriated in May,” stated WFP, “and in June, we will have to cut the rations that we give them to one month’s worth.” The refugees that RI interviewed were already vulnerable to malnutrition and illness. “They are in the same state as the people that live near them in the Congo,” said a nurse who works at the Congolese transit site for UNHCR. “All of these people are vulnerable here in DRC. They are hoping that they will have a better life in Rwanda.”

In addition to the needs of the repatriated Rwandan refugees, UNHCR and WFP are struggling to accommodate the Congolese refugees that have been arriving at a steady rate of approximately 50-100 per day in each of the two transit sites in Gisenyi and Butare in Rwanda. “The slow trickle we initially see has increased,” said UNHCR officials in the Nkamira transit site near the border with DRC. “Since September, there has been a steady influx.” Another official stated, “WFP is facing difficulties in Rwanda; they have had to cut rations here. We are worried about our ability to help these refugees. We can’t handle many more with these conditions. Food is a major problem. These refugees won’t be able to supplement their diets by farming the nearby land as in other countries. They are at the mercy of international food aid.”

While WFP is not mandated to supply food for the combatants that are planning to return to Rwanda, all humanitarian agencies in Rwanda were concerned about the ability of WFP to support the process should they be needed. “We have no idea how many dependents might arrive. We have not received a lot of information on this. Will there be the capacity to assist if called upon?” a staff person of one humanitarian agency in Rwanda asked. With access to land already limited for Rwandans, RI is concerned that Congolese women and children who have been repatriated with their Rwandan ex-combatant partners will be extremely vulnerable without assistance from the international community.

“Everyone sees Rwanda as a country that has transitioned from relief to development,” complained a staff member of one UN agency in Kigali. Rwanda is a classic example of the gap between relief and development that occurs during post-conflict transition, and the need to maintain humanitarian programs while long-term development needs begin to be addressed. With refugees and combatants and their dependents repatriating to the country, and with Rwanda’s neighbor, the DRC, still in crisis, donors must not allow funding shortfalls to hamper the vital work of humanitarian agencies.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- Donor governments immediately provide additional funding to replenish food stocks in Rwanda;
- Upon receipt of these funds, WFP increase distributions to meet the minimum standards of food assistance for Congolese refugees and returning Rwandan refugees in Rwanda;
- WFP, along with UNHCR, monitor the level of vulnerability of those Rwandans who have returned home and ensure that they have not become more vulnerable at the end of the three-month ration period.
- The Government of Rwanda and development-oriented UN agencies like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) be ready to monitor and operate in the areas of return in order to support the livelihood activities of the returning most vulnerable households.

Advocates Andrea Lari and Sarah Martin recently returned from a three-week humanitarian assessment mission to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda.