

Death threats, harrassment prevent U.N. agency from delivering relief food to thousands in isolated towns in eastern Congo

Bryan Mealer, *Associated Press Worldstream*, 08/14/03

Death threats by airport officials and harassment by local militia are preventing much-needed food aid from reaching thousands of people in eastern Congo cut off by years of conflict, the World Food Program said Thursday. The U.N. agency has been trying to airlift 1,200 tons of food to Kongolo and Nyunzu, towns short distances west of Kalemie that have been cut off from the outside world by fighting and attacks by rebels, local militia and tribal fighters. But food flights to Kongolo - 250 kilometers (155 miles) to the northwest where 25,000 malnourished people have been living in isolation for about two years - have been grounded all week after former rebels running the airport threatened WFP pilots with death, said Dominique Ferretti, head of the WFP office in this small port town on Lake Tanganyika.

On Monday when WFP's Kenyan pilots were delivering cornmeal, beans and vegetable oil to Kongolo airport, members of the Congolese Rally for Democracy, or RCD, one of two former rebel movements now represented in Congo's new transitional government, demanded that the pilots carry some of their relatives back to Kalemie. "We told them no," said pilot Ernest Njenga. "So they told us whenever the plane flies back to Kongolo, whoever is aboard will be shot." Because of the fighting and banditry spawned by a civil war that broke out in August 1998, no commercial flights have been operating in this part of eastern Congo for several years.

Njenga said WFP planes had been flying in and out of Kongolo several times a day for the past two weeks. Each time, dozens of people were on the runway, hoping - and sometimes demanding - to get a free lift out. Roads were rundown and impracticable even before the war broke out; since then road travel has simply become too dangerous. Kongolo had been in the hands of Rwandan troops, and after they pulled out more than a year ago, in the hands of the Rwandan-backed RCD rebels. Rwanda and Uganda backed rebels trying to oust then-President Laurent Kabila. Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia rushed troops in to support him. They have also since pulled out.

Following a series of peace agreements based on a 1999 cease-fire, the government - now headed by Kabila's son, Joseph - and rebels agreed to share power in a transitional system that was inaugurated last month; it includes integrating rebel forces into a new national army. But the status of the hodge-podge of local militia and tribal fighters whose ranks include hundreds of boy soldiers is unclear. They have continued to fight each other, trapping thousands of civilians who are unable to leave towns or even go out to work in their fields. Irregular militia harassed the WFP pilots Thursday when they landed in Nyunzu, 120 kilometers (75 miles) west of Kalemie, and stole part of the relief food.

Ferretti said he has asked MONUC, the U.N. force that is monitoring the cease-fire in Congo, to secure the two airstrips to permit food delivery. Five unarmed U.N. military observers are based in each town. There are 233 armed Uruguayan U.N. troops guarding MONUC installations in Kalemie. "These people in these areas have nothing," said Ferretti. "If there is no humanitarian assistance, none of these people will have food. But it's not worth risking the lives of our pilots."

Last week WFP warned that as many as half a million people in eastern Congo faced serious hunger because their June appeal to donors for \$38 million had gone largely unanswered. According to WFP records, when food delivery from Kalemie is in full swing, fuel for the planes costs US\$5,500 a day.