

Schoolkids sit their exams, then flee gunfire for Rwanda refugee camp

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Fri May 18, 2012

CNN.com

Nkamirah Transit Camp, Rwanda (CNN) -- Tumsifu Gilaine was at school when she first heard the gun battles. The teenager said she and her friends were taking their final exams and every day from their classrooms they could hear the army and rebel soldiers battling it out for dominance.

Tumsifu and her family stuck it out until she finished the exams. Then they fled.

They followed thousands of others making their way from their homes in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo into the Nkamirah Transit Camp across the border in Rwanda.

After three years of fragile peace, the government of Joseph Kabila last month announced its intention to capture Bosco Ntaganda, a notorious warlord who calls himself "the terminator" and has been charged by the International Criminal Court with war crimes including the slaughter of civilians.

Ntaganda had agreed to allow forces of his National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP) to be absorbed into the national army -- a deal Kabila called a "linchpin" for restoring stability that quickly fell apart.



Struggling for survival in South Sudan

Thousands of Ntaganda's fighters defected and then began clashing with the army to thwart the hunt for Ntaganda.

Tens of thousands of civilians were forced to leave their homes as their towns became warzones. Some fled to Goma in North Kivu, some to Uganda and some to Nkamirah.

Anouck Bronee, representing several U.N. agencies working on this emergency, said the influx was felt almost instantly.

"It started on April 27. From the Friday evening we went from 50 to 190 to 2,000 within three days."

Aid agencies have tried to make life for the refugees as comfortable as possible but the center is already over capacity.

"The first challenge that we had to contend with was shelter. The transit center could accommodate a maximum of 2,600 individuals. We've had to do a lot of rehabilitation and reconstruction as well as rehabilitation of additional structures that weren't part of the center," Bronee added.

Bronee showed us an old milk factory where some of the new arrivals had been housed. Dusty and soot covered, some families had even set up home inside the rusting machinery.

It's far from ideal but at least it is shelter from the lashing rain.

And the refugees keep coming.

It's not just the violence they are fleeing. Young men here told CNN that Congolese army soldiers had attempted to forcibly recruit them.

Samuel Nsanzamahoro said that when the battles started coming closer to his home town of Gicanja, soldiers began picking up young men and girls at random, accusing them of being army defectors.

"They were taken by force," he said. "Young men and especially young girls."

Samuel is 22, but many others we spoke to were much younger. Out of fear for their security they declined to be identified or directly quoted.

Samuel said he's not afraid of fighting in the government ranks but he does fear the abuses such recruits are subjected to. He did not elaborate.

Congolese military and government officials could not be reached for comment, but in the past have denied accusations of forcibly recruiting civilians.

Bronee said the Rwandan government has identified a site in the south of the country where it hopes to move the refugees as soon as a new camp is readied, but as the violence continues many worry the growing refugee numbers will create a serious burden for Congo's neighbors.

Rwanda already hosts nearly 60,000 refugees, many a legacy of the last time Ntaganda and his forces clashed with government forces.

The 1998-2003 war in Congo is sometimes called Africa's World War as fighting and refugees crossed borders, destabilizing the region.

So it's no wonder this new violence is worrying its neighbors.

More worrying still is the fate of the thousands the U.N. says are trapped inside the Congo, unable to escape the violence.

As difficult as conditions are in the Nkamirah camp, at least they feel safe.

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