

Turning point in Rwanda Children flee to Burundi camps

Lindsey Hilsum

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Six hundred Rwandan children are camping in a huge warehouse in the Burundi capital, Bujumbura, after fleeing the southern Rwandan town of Butare.

'We left Butare on Sunday at the very last minute, during heavy shelling,' Alexis Briquet of the Swiss charity, Terre des Hommes, said. He persuaded French troops in Butare to organise the evacuation and escort the convoy to the Burundi border.

The children - both Hutu and Tutsi - were at a Terre des Hommes centre for orphans and children separated from their families. 'On Saturday and Sunday, many people were leaving, bringing to us kids they were hiding, protecting, Tutsi kids they could not take with them,' Mr Briquet said.

The extremist Hutu radio station, Radio Libre Mille Collines, has encouraged the Interahamwe militia to kill Tutsi children. 'To destroy the big rats (The Rwanda Patriotic Front), you must kill the little rats,' it says.

The older children are aware of the danger. One Tutsi girl, Diane Irababuta, aged 13, said her mother had sent her away from Kigali after the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana, which sparked the massacres. 'My mother said the Interahamwe were going to kill her, so I should leave. I walked to Butare, sleeping in the forest. Then a neighbour told me my mother, father and little sisters had all been killed.'

The Burundi government, concerned about ethnic friction within its own borders, wants to limit the refugees it accepts. Most of the children will probably be sent to a camp in Zaire.

Aid agencies insist they be registered to ensure they are not spirited overseas for adoption. When a similar convoy arrived last month, several families took children without any formalities. 'It was like a supermarket,' one aid worker said.

Lindsey Hilsum in Bujumbura