

Rwandan refugee numbers in Burundi swell by 10,000: UN

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BUJUMBURA, Dec 6 (AFP) - Almost 10,000 more refugees from Rwanda have recently arrived in Burundi and more are coming across the border between the two troubled central African nations, a UN official said Tuesday.

The latest arrivals are virtually all Hutus fearful of the Tutsi-dominated government installed in Kigali in July by the former guerrillas of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) after three months of ethnic carnage.

Between 9,000 and 10,000 people had come in recent weeks from the Gikongoro district of southwest Rwanda and Kibungo in the southeast, a delegate of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Shelly Pitterman, told AFP here.

Gikongoro is one of three districts in the former "humanitarian safety zone" set up in southwest Rwanda between June and August by French troops to protect civilians from ethnic

massacres.

The Rwandan government, which includes moderate Hutu politicians, has begun efforts to empty displaced camps in that zone, causing civilians to free across the border.

The UNHCR at Bukavu, one of the eastern Zairean hub towns for vast refugee settlements, reported similar developments last week when RPF soldiers emptied camps in the other two districts of the zone, Kibuye and Cyangugu.

"Rather than go back to their hills, for one reason or another the displaced people are leaving Rwanda," Pitterman said.

The Rwandan troops have orders not to use force to convince people to return to their homes, but violent clashes have been reported in the southwest, where the authorities say extremist Hutu militias have attacked soldiers.

Burundi's Hutu president,

Syvestre Ntibantunganya, meanwhile left the capital Bujumbura on Tuesday for a day-long official visit to Rwanda and talks with his counterpart Pasteur Bizimungu.

Ntibantunganya, who was also to meet other Rwandan officials, was accompanied by his foreign and defence ministers, Jean-Marie Ngendahayo and Firmin Sinzoyiheba, the president's office announced.

The two central African highland nations both have a Hutu majority and a Tutsi minority population and have been wracked in turns by serious political strife and ethnic bloodletting since independence from Belgium in 1962.

After the Hutu former presidents of both countries were killed in a suspicious plane crash on April 6, Rwanda plunged into a bloodbath in which between 500,000 and a million people were killed.

The RPF, emerging victorious from civil war, and a UN lawyers' factfinding mission have both largely blamed Hutu former government troops and extremist militias for the genocide of Tutsis and opposition Hutus.

Burundi saw a bout of bloodletting in which an estimated 20,000

people died after its first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated in a foiled coup attempt by the Tutsi-dominated army in October last year.

Amid ongoing violence and massacres, rival Burundian parties have formed a coalition, but the Tutsi opposition has threatened to walk quit the government and parliament if the new speaker of the national assembly, Jean Minani, keeps his post.

The opposition accuses him of orchestrating the killing of Hutus last year.

Tutsis who left Rwanda before the RPF seized power have largely returned to the country.

Pitterman said some Burundians were leaving their own country, "sometimes for fear of who knows what," but he added that the "vast majority" of 600,000 people who fled after the foiled coup bid have come home.

On the Zairean border, however, in the Uvira region, Burundian and Rwandan refugee camps alternate. A UNHCR official in Zaire said there were 50,000 Rwandans and 260,000 Burundis in the region.

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