

UN launches new operation to return displaced Rwandans to homes

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KIGALI, Dec 12 (AFP) - The United Nations on Monday launched a new programme for the voluntary repatriation of some 350,000 Rwandans displaced to the southeast of the country this year by civil war and ethnic carnage.

The new operation follows a first round of repatriations in September and will be conducted by the UN Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR) and other UN agencies with "support and cooperation" from the government, UNAMIR spokesman Sammy Buo said.

The government installed by former rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in July has made it clear that it wants to close all the camps in the region by the end of the year, but UNAMIR stressed that all repatriations will be voluntary.

Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) troops have sometimes used force to compel displaced people to leave the

camps, while UN officials accuse Hutu extremists of killing Tutsis who could bear witness to genocide between April and July.

The Kigali authorities charge that Hutu former government troops and extremist militias massacred between 500,000 and a million people after Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana was killed in a suspicious plane crash on April 6.

The displaced people are living in a region bordering on Zaire and Burundi, where French troops set up a "humanitarian safety zone" between June and August before withdrawing to be replaced by UN troops.

UN special envoy to Rwanda Shaharyar Khan estimates that 350,000 displaced people are still living in the southwest, mainly fearful of reprisals from the minority Tutsis for the genocide. The UN Security Council has voted to set up a war crimes tribunal but also accuses some RPF soldiers of

atrocities.

The launching of the previous Operation Homeward in September coincided with the publication of the first reports of RPA atrocities and met with very limited success.

Buo said human rights monitors would be directly involved in the new operation.

Representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) active in Zaire and Burundi, which host more than a million Rwandan refugees, say that at least 20,000

people have fled across the borders from the southwest since the government started trying to empty the camps.

While the latest refugees have reported atrocities by the APR, UNAMIR charges that Hutu former authorities, troops and extremists have established a reign of terror in the refugee camps, preventing people from leaving and killing Hutu witnesses of the slaying of Tutsis.

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