

Children of Hope in the Valley of Despair - Rwanda

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The Times, July 26, 1994

By Sam Kiley in Goma and Our Foreign Staff.

IN THE midst of the desperation, despair and death of the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire, these children occupy an oasis of hope.

They are among 4,000 youngsters being cared for in the SOS children's centre near Goma, where they are being kept alive by a clutch of charities armed with the almost unheard of luxuries of food, clean water and for the sick intravenous drips. As cholera claims the lives of some 3,000 refugees in the area every day, the main threat to the children is posed by the tens of thousands of defeated Rwandan soldiers surrounding the SOS village.

Aid workers fear that they may turn on the small number of Tutsi children hidden in the compound or try to steal food from the youngsters as their own supplies run low.

Suzannah Swan, of the International Committee of the Red Cross, is trying to reunite toddlers with their families and to care for orphans found beside their parents' bodies. "Security is our greatest concern, aside from the medical problems," she said. "Yesterday they (the militiamen) went on the rampage outside the gates and injured several of the Zairean guards."

Fear of intimidation by the Hutu Rwandan soldiers in and around Goma is just one of the problems facing aid workers struggling to deal with a humanitarian crisis almost beyond comprehension. With cholera running rampant through the camps, they are desperate for experts to dig latrines and for supplies of fresh water.

The vaunted American aid effort has been widely derided while still in its infancy, and yesterday airdrops were suspended to allow US officials and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to take stock.

While they talk, the cholera death toll continues to soar; it is said to have reached 13,000 or 14,000 in the past six days. A mass grave the size of a football pitch is full, and yesterday workers on the ground were given approval to start burning corpses.

There was some relief, however, in the knowledge that thousands of refugees have started to return to Rwanda, where clean water is plentiful and crops are ready to be harvested. Hutus who fled after being bombarded with radio propaganda warning them of reprisals for the massacres of the past three months are beginning to believe the promises from the UN and the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patri-

otic Front that it is safe to return home. take a chance on survival in Rwanda rather than risk their lives in cholera-infested camps in Zaire.

Or at least, they are deciding to