

# Death camps are set up in Rwanda

by Linda de Hoyos

Rwanda is now the third country in eastern Africa to have established what can only be described as concentration camps on its territory for its own citizens — the first two being Uganda and Burundi. In each case, the reason for the herding of civilians — mostly women and children — into the camps is insurgencies in the country. But the conditions in the camps are so deadly, that their establishment points to the direct targeting for extermination of the population being “protected.”

According to reports from Human Rights Watch, Rwandan refugees in European capitals who receive slivets of news from home, and other agencies, there are 630,000 to 700,000 people in camps in northern Rwanda in the two districts of Ruhengeri and Gisenyi. The camps lack food, clean water, sanitation, medical services, or educational facilities.

In Rwanda, the ruling Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), a political subsidiary of the British-backed warlord, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, began herding the civilian population of the two northern districts of Rwanda into camps in the late fall of 1998. The two districts are almost 100% Hutu. The ostensible reason was to protect the civilians from the Hutu rebels who have been confronting the RPF military especially in that area. In reality, it is to force the separation of the rebel force from the civilian population, and hence from its ostensible logistical support. Additionally, given the conditions in the camps, the civilians are in effect being held as hostages.

“Most of the people in the camps,” reported one well-informed Rwandan, “are women and children, and the elderly. This is because most of the able-bodied men have either been killed by the army, or have joined the rebel force.” This source also pointed out that many in the camps are precisely those Hutu refugees who had been in eastern Zaire in November 1996, and were driven back toward Rwanda when the RPF and Laurent Kabila’s forces attacked the Muzungu refugee camp, and others along the border. “So, these people have now gone from camps in Zaire to camps in Rwanda, but the camps in Rwanda are worse,” the source said.

The death rate is estimated to be at 50 a day per camp, with approximately 50,000 people in each camp. People are dying mostly of diarrhea, from lack of sanitation and clean water, and from malaria.

The precise location or exact number of camps is unknown. This is because the camps are moved from place to place, and the area is sealed off from most non-governmental organizations, relief agencies, and reporters. Some are known

to be in the mountainous area near the border with Uganda, where it is nearly impossible to travel. According to one letter from Rwanda, “We are not surviving here. We are dying.” The biggest killer in these camps is reportedly cholera.

Some relief is going into the camps, say sources from the World Food Program and other agencies, but it is far short of the amount required to sustain lives. The delivery of relief is carefully guarded by RPF soldiers, and there is no interaction between the camp prisoners and the relief agency workers, so reporting is difficult.

## Some reports in the Western press

There has been scant reporting of the camps in the Western press. However, the London *Economist* did take note of the process which is being euphemistically called “villagization.” “After its army has destroyed most of the houses in the region since the beginning of the anti-guerrilla campaign in 1997, the Rwandan government is asking Western aid donors to pay for it” — by contributing supplies to construct the “villages.” “The people to be put in villages are mainly the rest of the Hutu peasants, a group still uncertain of their place in the new Rwanda and not entirely trusted by the Tutsi-led government.” The *Economist* notes that “the government army responded [to rebel attacks] by launching fierce, sometimes indiscriminate counter-insurgency operations. Houses and crops have been destroyed. Many villagers have been killed, especially those being parents to members of the militia or those whose parents or children are refugees abroad. . . . Meanwhile hundreds of thousands of Hutu survivors have fled their homes and been gathered into a dozen temporary camps. In fact, there was not much voluntary about it, as the army swept cross the hills, killing people and forcing the rest, mainly Hutu widows and children to the valley below.”

This is precisely the *modus operandi*, used since late 1996 by the Burundian Tutsi military, which resulted in the forced resettlement of 850,000 Hutu civilians into such camps, which then spawned in 1997 the biggest typhoid epidemic since World War II. Although Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have published reports on these camps, the camps still exist under a veil of silence from the Western governments.

In northern Uganda, as the *New African* reported in its January issue, the government has set up “protected villages.” The government refuses to negotiate with the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which marauds against the population in the two districts of Kitgum and Gulu, killing, looting, and abducting children. But the government also has never set about to defeat the LRA, leaving the population defenseless in the pointless crossfire. In the camp visited by *New African* reporter David Blair, at Amuru, the largest “protected village,” “most of the children are malnourished. There is much hunger. If people cannot dig, then they have to starve to death.” Blair notes: “No one volunteered to live in Amuru: People had to be forced out of their villages.”