

Great

LAKES UPDATE

DR CONGO (02)



2/9/98

26 August 1998

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65

At a Glance

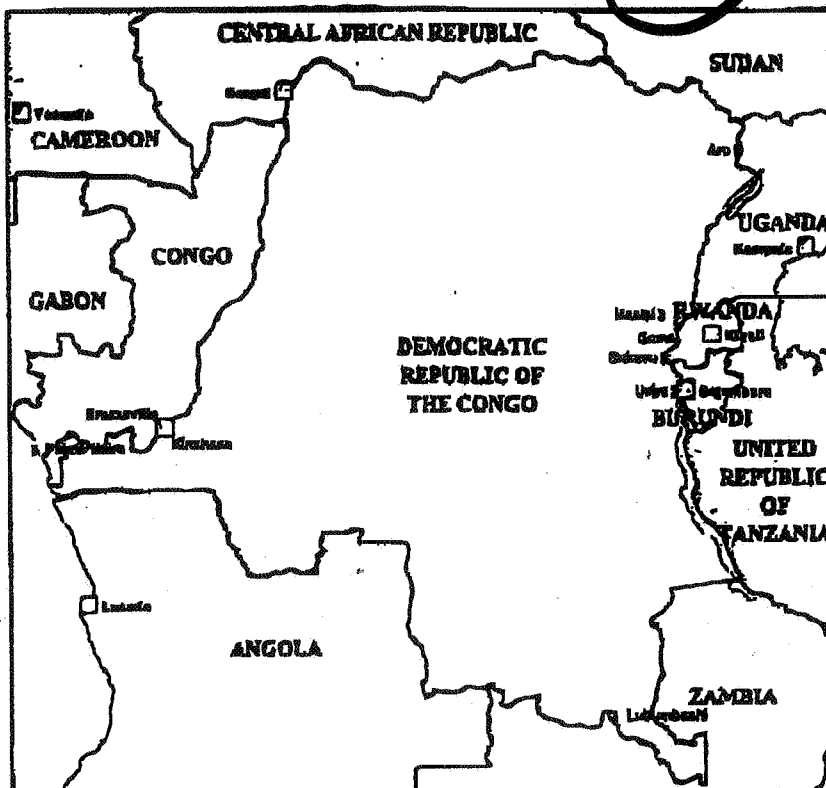
■ UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations evacuate staff from Uvira and Bukavu as war breaks out in eastern Congo, with UNHCR staff later forced to relocate also from Aru, Mbandaka and Lubumbashi.

■ Fighting in the DRC forces the suspension of programs throughout the country, including the repatriation from Tanzania, assistance to newly arrived Angolan refugees and care for Sudanese refugees in the northeast.

■ Congolese refugees arrive in relatively modest numbers in Tanzania, Burundi and Angola.

■ UNHCR prepares contingency plan for refugee influx into Brazzaville and strengthens staff in the capital.

■ Congolese refugees from Masisi thwart registration in Rwandan camps while many take to the road in an effort to repatriate.



MAIN DEVELOPMENTS

After several days of intense fighting in Uvira and Bukavu, UNHCR and other agencies evacuated international personnel from the South Kivu towns on August 7 and 8, respectively. A total of 15 UNHCR staff had been confined to their compounds during five-day battles between rebels and forces loyal to President Kabila. Growing tension and reports of nearby fighting later prompted the UN Security Coordinator in New York to move all provinces outside Kinshasa to phase five, requiring the relocation of staff from Aru, Mbandaka and Lubumbashi.

Refugees from the conflict in the DRC have arrived in Angola, Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville and Tanzania. The most consistent flow has been registered in Kigoma, Tanzania, where through Monday 927 Congolese had arrived by boat. Some 2,700 refugees crossed into northwest Burundi and are being helped by UNHCR and local authorities, but small numbers are already returning to the DRC as fighting and rumors of counter-attacks abate.

UNHCR conducted a mission on 19 August from Luanda to towns along the Angola-DRC border, meeting 126

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Congolese in the town of Noqui and receiving reports that Angolans residing in the neighboring state may also be returning.

To date very few Kinshasa residents have sought refuge in Brazzaville. UNHCR has strengthened its team there, and with the IFRC and local officials has organized registration at four disembarkation points along the river. A transit center with a capacity for 150 people, as well as a larger site, have been selected outside of Brazzaville.

UNHCR is preparing contingency plans for Congo-Brazzaville, as well as Angola, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zambia, and discussions are underway with other agencies on a consolidated approach. No new arrivals have been reported in the Central African Republic or Uganda.

Burundi

In addition to the 2,700 Congolese refugees who fled into northwestern Cibitoke province, around 700 Burundi former refugees left the DRC after fighting broke out on 2 August. UNHCR has registered the returnees and will transfer the volunteers to their home areas after distributing return "kits" in the coming week.

The Congolese have been sheltered in two reception sites in Cibitoke and Rugombo communes. No new arrivals have been recorded in the past week, and small numbers are reported to be returning to the DRC.

DRC

UNHCR has remained in contact with local staff in Bukavu and Uvira. They have communicated that the towns are relatively calm, although six more vehicles have been commandeered by military in Bukavu during the past week. More confrontations are repor-

ted south of Uvira, near Fizi and Baraka.

Refugees who have succeeded in finding passage across Lake Tanganyika have told UNHCR that armed groups in the DRC are attempting to stop fighting-age men from leaving and are actively discouraging boat owners from transporting people.

UNHCR is helping more than 30 people of other nationalities who were either rounded up by the military or who sought safety of their own accord at the agency's office in Kinshasa.

The fighting in the DRC has also forced the suspension of assistance to approximately 25,000 Angolan refugees who had arrived since mid-June, principally in the Kiege area. UNHCR had provided the Angolans one-month's ration and was preparing to ship another three months' food from Lubumbashi.

Rwanda

Approximately 1,000 Congolese refugees spontaneously left Gihamba camp in Byumba on 11 August, declaring their intention to repatriate. After the group was returned, without incident, to the site by gendarmes, UNHCR and authorities agreed to conduct a re-registration in an effort to ensure proper assistance for the estimated 15,000 refugees.

A census operation on 13 August failed after refugees boycotted and hampered the operation, despite having initially pledged their cooperation. In response to the refugees' desire to return to the Masisi area of north Kivu, the Government of Rwanda and UNHCR have said that they cannot encourage repatriation at this time, but that authorities will register those wanting to return and not obstruct them.

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Tanzania

The last repatriation boat from Kigoma to south Kivu sailed on 30 July, bringing the number of Congolese returned to the DRC since last September to 53,971. The operation was suspended at the first reports of conflict.

Through 24 August, 927 Congolese refugees had sought safety from the fighting in Tanzania. The arrivals are predominantly women and children and many have told UNHCR staff that young men are being stopped from crossing by armed groups, including Mai-Mai and loyalist military. On the biggest day of arrivals, 288 refugees who had initially sought safety on the island of Obwari, in DRC waters, came ashore in Kigoma on 23 August.



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