

The Situation in Rwanda and Burundi

The destruction of the Rwandan President's aircraft almost a year ago triggered what may be the worst human tragedy on the continent, with over half a million people killed in the space of a few months, two million people taking flight to the neighbouring countries and nearly as many displaced within the country. United Nations investigation reports now confirm that genocide did occur in Rwanda. Nearly two thirds of the population of this country of seven million people has been massacred or displaced, and for those who remain, the situation has become extremely difficult, since before they were defeated, the former government forces destroyed the infrastructures and then fled with the assets of its central bank.

The situation in neighbouring Burundi is hardly any better. The attempted putsch of October 1993 that took the life of the President resulted in at least 50 000 other victims, and the killings have continued since then. Before the influx of some 284 000 Rwandan refugees, Burundi already had half a million displaced persons within its borders and 184 000 refugees in neighbouring countries.

For some time, the difference in the treatment of refugees as compared to that of displaced persons, who did not enjoy the same advantages, created a good deal of tension. The victory of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) over the former government forces in Rwanda last July confirmed, in the eyes of the partisans, Tutsi power in Burundi and provoked their intransigent stance against the Hutu majority, which won the first truly democratic elections since independence was gained in 1962. The Tutsi of Burundi are also afraid that Hutu extremists will recruit Rwandan refugees to attack them.

It soon became evident that the Rwandan and Burundian crises were threatening the whole region's stability. In addition to exerting tremendous pressure on the environment and on the already poor local people, the refugees in Tanzania and Zaire have caused serious security problems. The leaders of the former government continue to exercise considerable power over the population of the camps. They are preventing refugees from returning to their homes in Rwanda, through the use of terror. They are diverting humanitarian aid to finance an eventual return to power and are organizing harassment campaigns wherever they can against the new regime. Moreover, when humanitarian organizations like CARE and Doctors Without Borders [Médecins sans frontières] refused to co-operate with those responsible for the genocide and sought UN protection, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali was unable to obtain the peacekeeping troops required from UN members to establish order in the camps. Since that time, the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] has taken things in hand by concluding agreements on military co-operation with Zaire and Tanzania.