

Statement

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS BY
THE HONOURABLE CHRISTINE STEWART,
SECRETARY OF STATE (LATIN AMERICA AND AFRICA),
TO THE REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON ASSISTANCE
TO REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND DISPLACED PERSONS
IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION**

**BUJUMBURA, Burundi
February 15, 1995**



Government
of Canada

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du Canada

Canada

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I offer congratulations to the OAU [Organization of African Unity] and the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] for organizing this conference, and my thanks to the Government of Burundi for hosting it. Of all the issues that confront the Great Lakes Region, the situation of the refugees is the one that merits the closest attention and most urgent action by all the governments and organizations represented here. We also view with urgency the situation here in Burundi given the present circumstances, which could provoke another tragedy similar to that which occurred in October 1993. However the scale of the human tragedy in Rwanda dwarfs the many other humanitarian crises that challenge the international community at this time.

It is the Rwandan people who have suffered most grievously from the genocide, but many of those who fomented ethnic hatred preach the same message from the safety of the refugee camps, a message that would prolong the plight of the refugees, destabilize the countries of origin and asylum, and consign the region to a cycle of instability, war and human tragedy. This must be stopped.

We must commend the countries of asylum - Burundi, Tanzania and Zaire - for receiving the massive influx of Rwandan refugees despite their limited resources and the economic, social and environmental consequences they have had to face. We should remember and reaffirm some principles which can guide the deliberations of the conference:

- Voluntary repatriation of displaced persons and refugees - as those are defined by the UN Convention - is universally recognized as the only feasible and durable solution. We all face a huge challenge to implement the principle.
- However, the principle of voluntary repatriation must not become an alibi for the status quo or become an opportunity for criminal extremists to regroup and resume hostilities. The international community will not be able to sustain the status quo indefinitely.
- All states are accountable for upholding universal standards of human rights - above all, to protect the lives and property of their own citizens. The acts of extremists in Rwanda, in flagrant defiance of this principle, fomented the crisis we now face. Other extremists now threaten similar acts in Burundi, the host country of this conference. Obviously, the solution to the refugee crisis requires that these options be renounced. Instead, there must be an engagement towards good governance and the rule of law which will allow displaced persons and refugees to return home without fear for their safety.
- The larger international community should facilitate the process of finding a solution through its support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the UNHCR's efforts in support of voluntary repatriation.

The international community can also facilitate a solution by encouraging the countries of origin and asylum to develop an orderly plan for the repatriation of refugees. We are gratified by the progress that the Government of Rwanda has already made, through its Operation Retour, in returning displaced persons within its territory to their homes.

Likewise we take satisfaction from Tanzania's initiative to inject momentum into the process by deploying a police force to collaborate with the security forces set up by the refugees. Zaire's willingness to conclude an agreement with the UNHCR to enhance the security of Rwandan refugees in its territory is equally welcome. These steps exemplify the spirit that has been shown in this region to cope with the crisis.

Canada believes we must work to provide incentives to the refugees to return. For us, this has involved:

- Supporting the importance of this conference on refugees;
- Assisting the Government of Rwanda, including helping to restore its operational capacity;
- Supporting the creation of an international tribunal to investigate war crimes committed in Rwanda and to rehabilitate Rwanda's judicial system;
- Supporting the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda [UNAMIR], through diplomatic efforts, and the provision of Canadian Forces personnel

We believe, as an additional incentive, that the UNHCR should set up in-transit camps within Rwanda to welcome refugees leaving the camps in the neighbouring countries of asylum. These should be close to the frontier - perhaps 5 to 10 kilometres distant - to facilitate logistics and encourage refugees to embark on the trip. Such camps would facilitate the task of the Rwandan authorities in welcoming the refugees and directing them to their communes and homes. Movement of the refugees to these camps would allow the countries of asylum to begin the process of closing down the camps in their territories.

I have had the opportunity in the last few days to visit victims of this region's conflicts in camps and temporary holding institutions. What we must remember here are the faces of those frightened, innocent victims - women, men, seniors, but especially the children. Our deliberations here in Burundi this week must recognize that nothing takes precedence over assuring these victims and all other citizens of this region that they do have a future here - one of peace, hope and prosperity for all. This focus must hold our attention and inspire our deliberations here in Bujumbura. This conference offers us an excellent point of departure.

Thank you.