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## **Democratic Republic of Congo/Rwanda: Governments should ensure safety of refugees as hundreds are forcibly repatriated**

The Governments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda should issue immediate orders to their soldiers not to violate the rights of thousands of Rwandese and Burundian refugees in the DRC, Amnesty International said today amidst reports that several hundred refugees were forcibly returned to Rwanda from Kisangani yesterday.

The DRC authorities have repeatedly threatened to forcibly repatriate any refugees remaining in the DRC by 15 September 1997. Soldiers have also been deployed where refugees have gathered in other parts of the country, for example around Shabunda, and there are fears that many more refugees could yet be forced back to Rwanda or Burundi.

“We are concerned that thousands of refugees are at risk of being forcibly returned to an unsafe situation. It is imperative that world governments and intergovernmental organizations hold the governments of DRC and Rwanda accountable for any harm done to refugees,” the human rights organization said.

In the last few days soldiers, described by sources as Rwandese, surrounded a transit centre at Kisangani inhabited by around 450 Rwandese and around 345 Burundian refugees. It is unclear whether members of the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo* (AFDL), the new Congolese national army, were directly involved.

The soldiers prevented humanitarian agencies, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), from entering the transit centre. The soldiers also cordoned off Kisangani airport. On 5 September it was reported that at least 524 Rwandese and Burundian refugees, including many children, had arrived in the Rwandese capital Kigali after being made to board three aeroplanes in Kisangani.

It is not yet clear what has happened to the remaining refugees at the transit centre. This is deeply worrying because of reports that in August soldiers entered the transit centre on several occasions and led away an unknown number of refugees. The refugees did not return and it is believed that they may have been killed.

“These soldiers cannot be entrusted with the safety of refugees,” Amnesty International said, pointing out that reports abound of massacres of Rwandese and Burundian refugees in camps and forests of the DRC since October 1996. Several hundred thousand refugees still remain unaccounted for.

“The latest situation is especially alarming as humanitarian agencies have been prevented from having access to the refugees. This is a frightening reminder of April and May 1997 when hundreds of refugees south of Kisangani were reportedly massacred by members of the AFDL and their allies.”

Returning Rwandese and Burundian refugees are at risk of grave human rights abuses in their home country. Many of the Rwandese refugees may be returning to areas in the northwest of Rwanda where thousands of civilians have been killed or “disappeared” in recent months. These areas are largely inaccessible to humanitarian agencies due to widespread violence, and it is virtually impossible to monitor the safety of returnees. Burundian refugees also risk being deliberately and arbitrarily killed by Burundi government forces or armed opposition groups as widespread insecurity persists in many parts of Burundi.

“While no explanation is known to have been given for the timing of these forcible expulsions, we fear that the arbitrary deadline of 15 September could be linked to the presence of a UN human rights team currently in the DRC to investigate reports of massacres of refugees. It may be an attempt to remove witnesses to the massacres who could be interviewed by the investigators,” Amnesty International said.

“Once back in Rwanda, these refugees will be difficult to find. The DRC authorities are still obstructing the UN investigations, amidst reports that evidence of the massacres is being destroyed or concealed.”  
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