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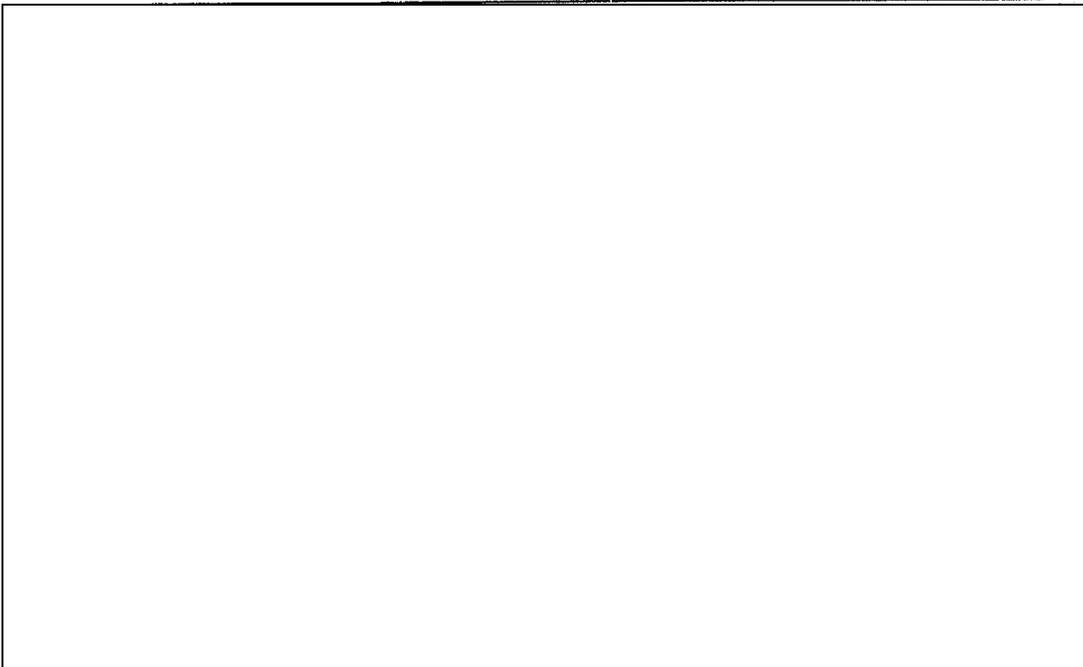


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Rwanda: Little Progress on Tutsi Refugees

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Rwanda: Little Progress on Tutsi Refugees

The invasion of Rwanda last October by Tutsi rebels—many of them former Rwandan refugees in Uganda—has highlighted the plight of some 500,000 Tutsi refugees in the region. The conflicting interests of Rwanda and its neighbors, however, and continued fighting in northern Rwanda probably preclude an agreement on refugees any time soon. The rebel invasion undermined implementation of a bilateral agreement brokered last year by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to repatriate refugees from Uganda, shifting attention instead to negotiation of a comprehensive regional solution. Neither diplomatic initiatives by governments in the region and the West nor efforts by the UNHCR, however, have made much progress, despite a French offer in November to finance refugee resettlement.

Two regional conferences during 17-20 January failed to produce agreement on a framework for either repatriating refugees to Rwanda or integrating them in current countries of asylum—Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Zaire, and Uganda. Participants also could not convince Kigali to grant amnesty to those Tutsis who have joined the rebels. Although Rwanda accepts the principle of refugee repatriation, the UNHCR representative in Kinshasa feels that neighboring countries are making unrealistic demands on Kigali, largely because each sees an accord as a means to resolve longstanding domestic problems with Rwandan refugees, while political and economic constraints limit Kigali's options.

The UNHCR supports repatriation to Rwanda as a legitimate right of the refugee population, but is critical of Rwanda's neighbors for resisting alternatives such as resettlement or integration of refugees in asylum countries. It also anticipates that the neighboring countries will dispute estimates of their refugee populations and the costs of integration. For example, Zaire claims to have some 154,000 Rwandan refugees

compared to UNHCR's current count of 22,000. The UNHCR representative in Kinshasa says many of the Rwandans that Zaire claims are refugees have been in the country more than 10 years and have Zairian citizenship. UNHCR estimates, on the basis of limited surveys in Ugandan refugee camps, that most Rwandan refugees will want to integrate in the asylum country, reserving the right to visit Rwanda without fear of persecution. Asylum countries, however, say the number of those wishing to repatriate is high. UNHCR is concerned that some countries will expect all refugees to leave and use force if voluntary repatriation is not universal, grasping at the chance to rid their countries of competitive and economically successful foreigners.

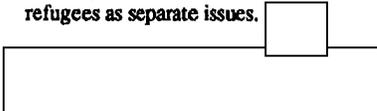
A regional summit for heads of state tentatively scheduled for mid-February in Tanzania may be postponed in favor of more working-level discussions and perhaps renewed efforts to end the fighting in Rwanda, which Kigali blames on Ugandan complicity with the rebels. Rwanda has argued that it cannot afford to absorb a large returning refugee population because of its already severe overpopulation, scarcity of land, worsening agricultural production, and lack of alternative employment opportunities.

Kigali also has opposed including Tutsi rebels in a general amnesty for fear that such an action will erode domestic support, especially in the military. Rwanda's neighbors have conceded that the rebels have given up their refugee status by taking up arms, but they believe that an amnesty is necessary for a durable solution. Rwanda's Hutu majority, however, already is worried that the government's political and ethnic reform program—accelerated recently in a bid to preempt a political role for the rebels—goes too far and would give returning Tutsi refugees disproportionate access to

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positions of political and economic power. Kigali is likely to continue to resist making any concessions on amnesty for rebels and to insist on treating them and the refugees as separate issues.



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