

Great Lakes region A NEVER-ENDING NIGHTMARE



Photoreels Ferry/Lalison

Rwandans are herded back home from Zaire: the weakest pay with their lives in the struggle to survive the journey

Zaire became known as the Congo once Laurent Kabila took power in mid-May, but the change of name brought no change for hundreds of thousands of refugees stranded there. For these people on the move, the entire Great Lakes region is a disaster area. The sudden return of over a million people to Rwanda caused chaos, Tanzania has had to absorb a new wave of refugees from Zaire, and Burundi is sliding ever further into collapse, with few witnesses, let alone television cameras. In all of these countries, civilians are the main victims.

CONGO (EX-ZAIRE)

ROAD TO NOWHERE FOR RWANDAN AND BURUNDIAN REFUGEES

Instead of returning home at the start of the offensive launched by the Zairean Tutsi Rebels (October 1996), about 400,000 Rwandan Hutus decided to flee into Zaire. They stayed behind after over 600,000 of them returned to Rwanda last year, in the wake of attacks on refugee camps in the Goma region (see ECHOnews N° 13). Now they are spread all over eastern Zaire and beyond, hiding deep in the jungle to escape being massacred

by the soldiers chasing them. Those who are still alive are virtually exhausted from being on the run, completely destitute, after living in dire conditions for two years in the camps.

Humanitarian organisations are under great pressure, trying to provide relief to refugees spread over such a wide area. The logistical problems sometimes feel insurmountable, and they are constantly thwarted by soldiers preventing humanitarian organisations from getting access to those in need. The situation sometimes changes completely within a matter of hours: a group of refugees that humanitarian workers locate in one area may have disappeared the next day. By the time aid workers put together a convoy and return to the spot, they may find no-one in sight. Camps in the process of being set up may empty completely overnight, with their tens of thousands of inhabitants disappearing

"We do not know if they are dead or alive"

Emma Bonino

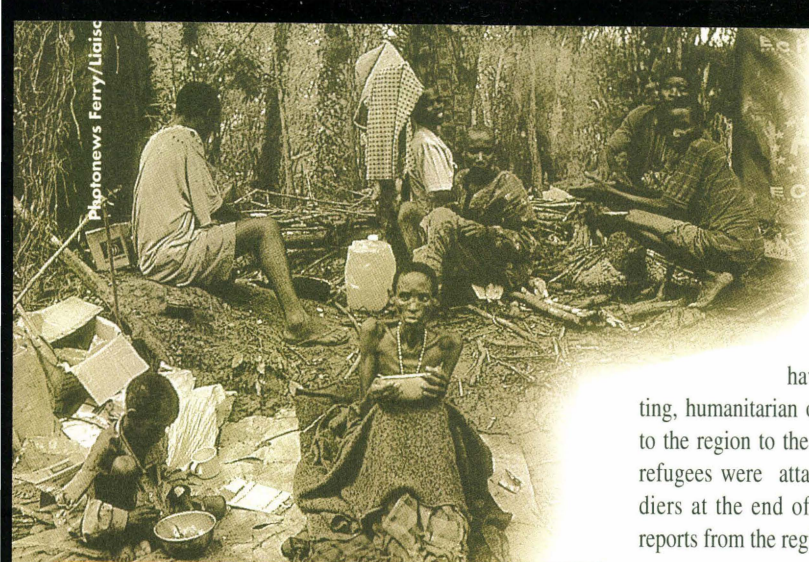
There are now 300,000 Rwandan refugees in Congo (Zaire), as well as 40,000 Burundians, according to the latest estimates available. That was what Emma Bonino, European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid, told the European Parliament on May 20. "As we have no access to them, we do not know if they are dead or alive", she said, adding that the new government in Zaire must be put under pressure to allow the UN human rights mission to gain access to the eastern part of the country.

without trace. The UN human rights mission has not been allowed to go into areas where several witnesses claim soldiers have carried out massacres.

A race against death

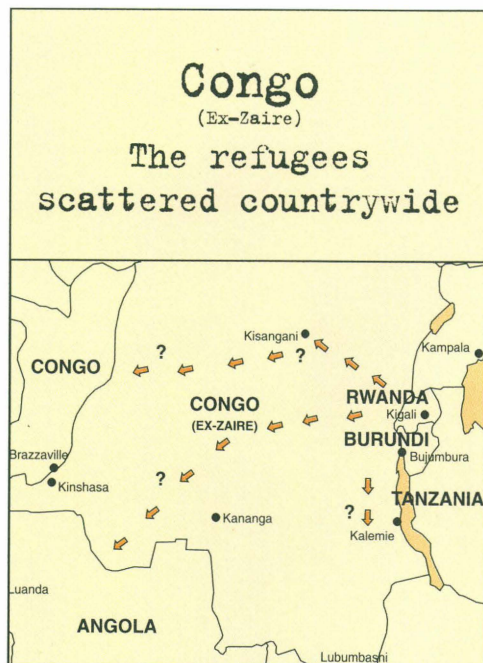
Most of the refugees who have been located are now south of Kisangani. The Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) made it very difficult for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to repatriate all the refugees from this region to Rwanda. The most vulnerable died in the crush of being





Refugees hiding in the jungles of Zaire often move on before aid workers can reach them

shoved out. The rebels have been piling the refugees onto trains like cattle, and the HCR has not been able to monitor conditions, nor to intervene. On May 1, a hundred or so people died of suffocation on a train bound



for Kinsangani. The HCR is only able to take over when refugees arrive at Kinsangani. Then they are led across the River Congo, on to the airport where they are placed on a flight to Kigali. Since April 27, nearly 30,000 refugees

have been evacuated. At time of writing, humanitarian organisations are still barred access to the region to the south of the camp at Biaro, where refugees were attacked by Zairean peasants and soldiers at the end of April, according to unconfirmed reports from the region.

Thousands of refugees have been located in a desperate state on the border between Angola and Congo-Brazzaville.

ECHO's main partners are the HCR for the provision of aid and the repatriation of Rwanda refugees, the International Committee of the Red Cross for the organisation of assistance and repatriation of Zairean displaced people and the International Federation of Red Cross and Crescent Societies and non-governmental organisations providing assistance to Zaireans directly affected by the crisis.

RWANDA

REINTEGRATING 1.2 MILLION PEOPLE

Some 1.2 million people have returned home since the huge movement of people started at the end of last year, swelling the country's population by 25 percent. In addition to refugees, former members of the Rwandan armed forces and Hutu Interhamwe militia are reported to have returned. The security situation has deteriorated badly, and civilians have been exposed to armed attacks. ECHO is providing medical aid, accommodation,

sanitation, help to children separated from their families, and to widows, as well as food aid for desperately overcrowded prisons.

TANZANIA

NO END TO THE TIDE OF REFUGEES

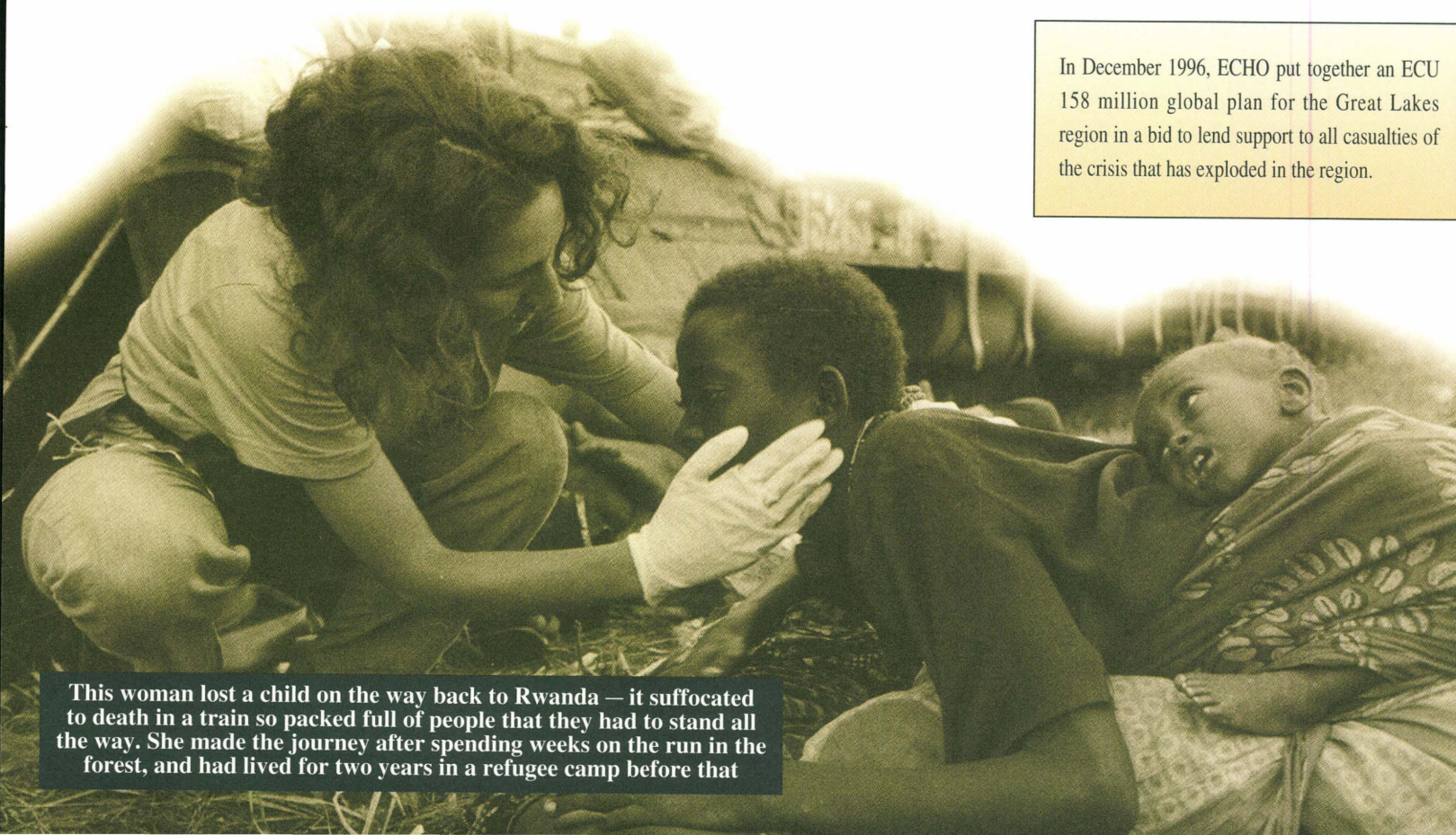
Most Rwandan refugees have returned home, but Tanzania is still offering asylum to hundreds of thousands of Burundians unable to return because of the war there. The rebellion in Zaire sparked off an exodus to Tanzania, where over 95,000 Zairean citizens have sought refuge. The refugee population in the country is put at some 400,000. Though there are many logistical problems -- camps spread out over wide areas, dilapidated roads -- the operation to provide humanitarian assistance to the refugees is on track.

BURUNDI

A GLIMMER OF HOPE...

The country is sliding ever further into chaos and violence, and the civilian population is being squeezed between warring factions. What little information is available suggests that the humanitarian situation in assembly camps is desperate. Humanitarian agencies are thwarted in their attempts to reach regions worst affected by war. ECHO is bolstering short-term, carefully targeted programmes, avoiding investments that could expose projects to pillaging by either side in the conflict. The recent announcement of a ceasefire means there is now at least a glimmer of hope for the future.

In December 1996, ECHO put together an ECU 158 million global plan for the Great Lakes region in a bid to lend support to all casualties of the crisis that has exploded in the region.



This woman lost a child on the way back to Rwanda — it suffocated to death in a train so packed full of people that they had to stand all the way. She made the journey after spending weeks on the run in the forest, and had lived for two years in a refugee camp before that



ECHO's global reach

IRAN

Devastating earthquake

ECHO was quick to respond to Iran's appeal to the United Nations after a very serious earthquake (7.1 on the Richter scale) that completely destroyed several villages in Khorasan province May 10. Some 2,400 people were killed and 6,000 injured. "The real killers were poorly-constructed cement buildings. In one village, 100 pupils were killed outright in a building that collapsed," said ECHO representative Esko Kentrschynskyj after a mission to the disaster area.

ECHO released ECU 3 million for a convoy comprising medical supplies from Médecins du Monde (F), food channelled through the Secours Populaire Français (F) and basic necessities, such as tents, clothing, blankets and sanitation equipment, distributed by the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

ALBANIA

Aid for social casualties

The profound crisis and wave of violence that engulfed Albania earlier this year has claimed many victims among those most in need, especially those in care in state institutions in a country where the state has ceased functioning normally. That is why ECHO has concentrated its actions on orphanages, homes for the elderly and disabled, and on hospitals. ECHO responded to the International Committee

of the Red Cross (ICRC) appeal for ECU 2 million to be released to cover healthcare for these vulnerable groups. ECHO has also sent food stocks earmarked for the region to Albania. About 1,000 tonnes of flour and 375 tonnes of tinned meat will be distributed to people living in the shantytowns around Tirana, as well as in

the north of the country which has been hard hit by the crisis and cut off from the rest of the country. ECHO experts in the field have highlighted the need to keep a close eye on the water supply and sanitation situation — supplies and standards could deteriorate rapidly with the onset of hot weather. A further package of aid is being prepared and will be submitted to the Commission for approval shortly.



Photoreads Nusca Antonello

Humanitarian organisations struggle to provide assistance in a country where everyone is armed to the teeth

Field report: Action Nord-Sud in Cambodia

Missing link

By our own correspondent in Battambang

Prey Chik is a community on some of northern Cambodia's most fertile land, but its 25,000 people are among the poorest of the poor — all for want of a road. Once, this farming community on the plains some 45 km from Battambang was part of one of Cambodia's richest granaries, known for both the quality and quantity of its rice and fruit. They used to grow oranges, papaya, coconuts, jackfruit and peanuts here as well as rice. Then came life on the edge of a Khmer Rouge stronghold. Until 1996, the conflict kept Prey Chik's people cut off in a virtual enclave. When peace finally came, they were still going nowhere fast — because they had no road to speak of.

In the dry season, people used a rutted track to Maung Russey, the nearest town on a major highway. It was just about passable on foot or with a motorbike. When the rains came, some 10 villages were completely cut off, for up to six months of the year. Action Nord-Sud (France) has stepped in, with a project that will provide a missing link.

Opening up in both directions

"The road will open up these villages, in both directions. People will be able to reach markets for their produce in Maung Russey — and traders from outside will be able to reach the villagers too," said Frenchman Bernard Merklen, ANS's senior technical adviser on the project. He is working with five Khmer technicians, who keep in close touch with community leaders right along the route. Local leaders organise the workforce each day.

Girls and women are doing most of the labouring work — their men are cutting timber, or working on the rice harvest. On a typical day, there are about 400 labourers.

They start at seven in the morning — in this hot, humid climate, the temperature can climb to 35 degrees in the shade by noon. Each day, each team is assigned a task, excavating, or building up the road with layers of earth, stones and gravel to raise it above danger levels in the rainy season. "It looks like back-breaking work, but it's easy compared to what these women are used to doing in the fields", says Merklen, who has lived and worked in Cambodia for six years. The labourers are paid cash in hand once the job is done.

Merklen's deadline: the rainy season

"The road was very bad before, now things are changing, it's going to be much better," said Chun Nam, a young woman who lives in a village alongside the road and has been working as a labourer for the past month. Like many others, she is glad of the work — there is nothing else to do in the villages at the moment. Merklen's deadline is the start of the rainy season. He and his team have just six months to build the road — when the rains come in July, work will have to slow down drastically. Though the road is far from finished, people are already starting to build houses alongside it.

The road should also open up previously inaccessible land, making it available to people displaced in conflict who have been unable to resettle permanently so far. Not only will it kick-start the economy of the region, it will also give the community better access to healthcare and other services. It's in Merklen's interests to do a good job — after postings with NGOs in Sudan, Uganda, Pakistan, Chad and Sri Lanka, he has settled in Phnom Penh. "I have to deliver. I like my job, I like Cambodia."

There are limits to what can be done in this area at present. This road will stop in Prey Chik. Beyond the village is a grim reminder of the past — a minefield.

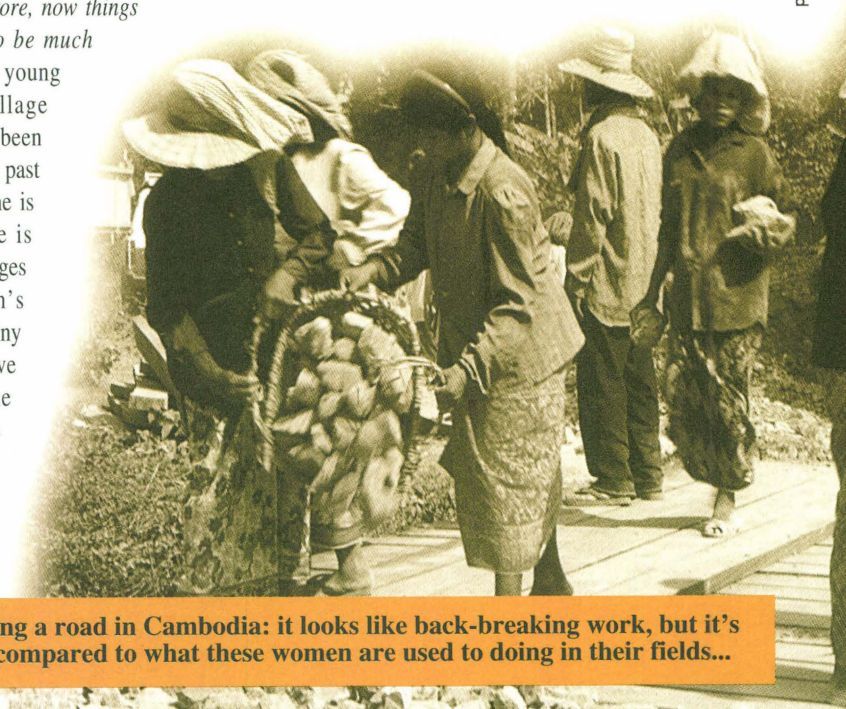


photo Eva Kaluzynska

Building a road in Cambodia: it looks like back-breaking work, but it's easy compared to what these women are used to doing in their fields...



HUMANITARIAN AID: CHALLENGES AND LIMITS

by José María Mendiluce

In recent years we have seen an unprecedented rise in the number and scale of humanitarian crises, which have sorely tested the capacity of the United Nations and non-governmental organizations to cope with them. The complexity and risks involved in helping victims of conflicts have been thrown into sharp relief by the fighting in Bosnia and in the Great Lakes region and Zaire. But there have been many less spectacular conflicts in which a disregard for human beings and the civilian population has given rise to unacceptable carnage. In some cases - far from being the indirect victims of the fighting - civilians have been the primary targets of brutal attacks.

To say that every humanitarian crisis is rooted in politics is stating the obvious. But we must keep doing so, as there is a growing tendency among politicians to hide behind providing aid in a crisis and to use humanitarian organisations as a smokescreen, an excuse to conceal international political responsibilities for conflict prevention, management or resolution.

The unending tragedy in Zaire and the Great Lakes region over the past three years is a striking and tragic example of this process. There has been no shortage of voices calling into question humanitarian assistance and action by NGOs, expecting them in many cases to work miracles while nothing is done at international political level.

This is why I believe that humanitarian action faces crisis point. There is an urgent need for a debate to face the challenges ahead. We have to be modest enough to recognize the limits of humanitarian action while accepting the challenges posed by the outbreak of new crises.

These discussions should start by establishing the limits of humanitarian response if it is not flanked by political action. This will make clear who the players should be, their responsibilities, how they should be supervised and what coordination really means. There should be a debate on the right or the duty to intervene in the fullest sense, but also on the right to intervene on humanitarian grounds and the varied role of the military in such operations.

Need for debate

There is a need for a debate on neutrality or commitment, on silence or condemnation, on the contradiction involved in feeding refugee families in the knowledge that those guilty of genocide are being fed at the same time. A debate is also needed on humanitarian ethics in the face of political considerations, on voluntary or professional action, on the financing and independence of grassroots organizations, on emergencies and development, on means of communication, on the distance between news and information. On image, aesthetics and

ethics. There is also a need for discussion of a whole host of other matters that need to be addressed if we wish to avoid manipulation and opportunism.

Firm condemnation

After 15 years of humanitarian work in seven wars, I feel that defending the balance sheet of humanitarian action in terms of millions of lives saved requires firm condemnation of those who jeopardize such achievements through naivety, lack of preparation, protagonism, routines or a lack of ethics. They are as dangerous as those politicians who seek to convince public opinion that they are doing "what they can", dispensing money to humanitarian workers and organizations to save lives, while on the other hand we continue supporting rogues and dictators, or financial, commercial and aid policies which condemn entire populations to repression and misery.

We have to win the humanitarian battle of ideas, not just the battle to save lives in the field. The lives of potential victims of horror depend on it.

• José María Mendiluce is vice-chairman of the foreign affairs committee at the European Parliament. From 1980 to 1994, he worked for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Angola, in Nicaragua and in former Yugoslavia before becoming UNHCR representative in Benelux and to the European Institutions. Mendiluce's latest book, «Con rabia y esperanzas: restos y límites de la acción humanitaria», was published in March 1997 by Planeta in Spain.

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Guatemala peace has its own pressing needs

Dieter König - Head of EU Delegation in Costa Rica - on a visit to a guerilla camp. ECHO has financed various projects in Guatemala in favor of the internally displaced persons and more recently has been helping in the process of demobilisation and integration of guerillas into civilian life following the Madrid peace accord.

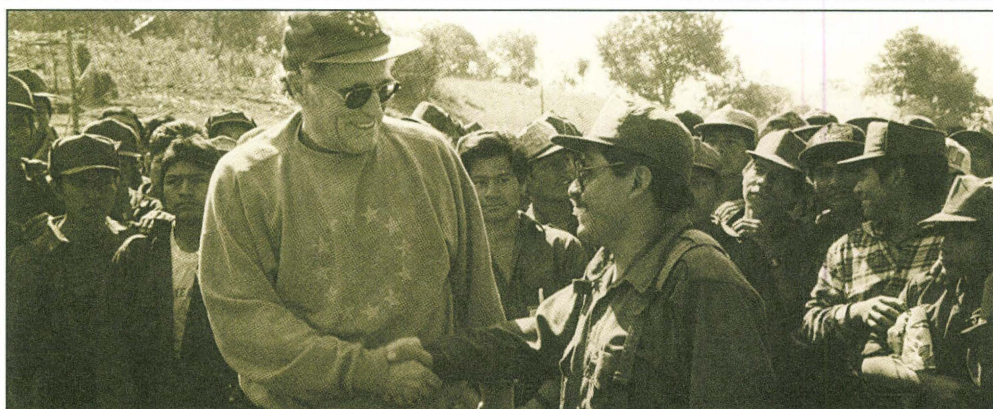


photo Belén Martínez