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600,000 Burundians Placed in Camps

RANGO, Burundi (AP) -- Under the watchful eye of a soldier, a barefoot 22-year-old farmer said he was forced to abandon his home for a camp packed with 14,000 people, many sick with typhus, and no doctors or running water.

The young man, a Hutu, muttered about wanting to go home, then was prodded along by the nervous-looking soldier with a loaded rifle.

He and his family are among 600,000 people -- Hutus and minority Tutsis -- soldiers have rounded up and placed in 200 camps scattered across this troubled central African country. Squalid conditions are the norm in Hutu camps; Wooden huts, food and water, and health services make less-crowded Tutsi camps more comfortable.

The Tutsi-led military says its "regroupment policy" is an attempt to quell violence that has killed at least 150,000 people since 1993. The United States has condemned the camps; the United Nations has tried to discourage Burundi from opening new ones.

To Tutsis, the heavily guarded camps provide protection against attacks by Hutu rebels. Since a Hutu rampage after the 1993 assassination of the first Hutu president, many frightened Tutsis have come to the camps voluntarily.

Hutus come only by force. The army uproots them from their homes -- often burning houses and killing relatives and neighbors in the process. Locking them in camps separates them from the rebels.

Whether the policy has reduced the level of violence since authorities began to implement it in earnest in April 1996 is difficult to assess. It can be dangerous inside the camps as well.

A team from New York-based Human Rights Watch left Burundi on Thursday and said they received credible reports that farmers suspected of supporting Hutu rebels had been killed in the camps. And Hutu rebels often attack Tutsi camps -- about 20 Tutsis died in such an attack last month near Gitega, 40 miles east of Bujumbura, the capital.

The Hutu-Tutsi power struggle has plagued Burundi since its independence from Belgium in July 1962. Hutu uprisings against Tutsi rule meant massacres of Tutsi civilians and fierce military reprisal -- sometimes wiping out entire villages and provinces -- as in 1965, 1972, 1988, 1991 and 1993.

The latest trouble stems from Tutsi paratroopers' October 1993 assassination of Melchior Ndadaye, a Hutu who was Burundi's first freely elected president. Ndadaye's attempts at reforms that would make the government reflect the country's ethnic mix -- 85 percent Hutu and 14 percent Tutsi -- were fiercely opposed in the predominantly Tutsi army circles.

Since Ndadaye's death, his former ministers have organized guerrilla groups that wage hit-and-run attacks on Tutsi villagers, army escorts and Hutus who refuse to cooperate with them. And the army has retaliated.

Destroyed houses and settlements dot the green, rolling hills along Route 1, the main road. In Rango, 40 miles north of Bujumbura, roofless buildings and burnt-out structures are all that is left of what once was a small trading center. Tutsis have abandoned their homes in Rango over the past four years; the army ordered Hutus out in April 1996.

In the Hutu camps in the surrounding hills, long lines of huts built from bamboo, mud, leaves or plastic sheeting house mostly women, young children and older men. Young men rarely are seen -- most hide

in the forest, have taken refuge in neighboring Tanzania or joined the rebels.

The camp commander refused to disclose his name or rank. At first, he barred a journalist and aid worker from entering, then relented and allowed a visit under army escort. Timid and frightened, most people refused to speak.

"I don't know why I'm here. I don't what the problem is," one man said in a typical response.

Farmers are forced to buy vegetables from outside to survive. Others are allowed to work their land during the day and return at night -- but they risk being killed by Hutu rebels who brand them "army collaborators."

Aid workers are worried about illness in the camps. Earlier this year, Doctors Without Borders said malaria, diarrhea and typhus were killing up to 15 people a day.

The United States has demanded the camps be closed and the people sent home. The United Nations didn't explicitly condemn the camps, but responded with only a minimum of relief aid to discourage the opening of new ones.

In May, the Security Council asked the government to allow people to return to their homes.

President Pierre Buyoya, however, says the camps will only be dismantled once security is restored, and he has not committed himself to one day sharing power with the Hutu majority. This week, the president pledged to beef up the 20,000-strong army to fight Hutu rebels.

END QUOTE