

Christians Assist Victims of Congo Violence

Churches and Christian aid organizations are responding to what is being called a humanitarian catastrophe in the war-torn African nation.



[] As violence between government and rebel troops escalates in the Democratic Republic of Congo, churches and Christian organizations are rushing humanitarian aid into the east African nation to assist victims.

"We're in the midst of assessing suitable temporary settlement sites for people who are in urgent need of food and non-food items, shelter, water and sanitation," said World Vision aid worker Michelle Rice.

Since August, when a peacekeeping deal between Congo's government and rebel forces failed, reports of widespread rapes and murders have increased in and around the eastern city of Goma, on the Rwandan border. "We learned of one shocking case in which armed men raped three women from the same family—an elderly grandmother, her daughter and her granddaughter," Rice said.

At least 250,000 people have been displaced, with some estimating that more than 1 million people have fled their homes and villages. Last week alone, thousands of people escaped to Tanzania and other neighboring nations, reported World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals.

"It is like the Bible says ... the people are harassed and scattered, like sheep without a shepherd," said Maurice Omollo, director of World Relief's programs in the Congo. "We are working in a very unstable environment in which many of the people have been uprooted by war and the infrastructure has been destroyed."

Many of the displaced wander in search of safety while others gather in makeshift refugee camps, some without food or water, reported missionary Steven Todd, who was in the Congo during the recent outbreak of violence.

Todd, who trains pastors inside refugee camps through Alabama-based Africa Ministries Network, said in the midst of the turmoil, Congolese Christians have planted more than 1,000 churches in three of the massive U.N. refugee camps in nearby Tanzania. "It would seem time for the Western church to arise and find effective and creative ways to come alongside these courageous brothers and sisters in their time of need," he said.

At least 1,000 cases of cholera have been reported since October, the Associated Press reported, and the World Health Organization has warned that a cholera epidemic could break out if people continue to live in makeshift camps without adequate sanitation.

World leaders have unilaterally called for a cease-fire so humanitarian aid can reach those in need, including at least 100,000 people trapped Tuesday by rebel fighters.

Many of the churches in the eastern part of the nation are taking in as many refugees as they can manage, despite their meager resources. "Due to this violence, my people have no source of income, therefore they cannot tithe, and the churches have no money to help these refugees," an independent charismatic pastor from Goma, a few miles from the recent attacks, told Todd. "We are trusting God, but have little else we can do."

The fighting stems from longstanding ethnic tension left over from the 1994 slaughter of at least 500,000 Tutsis in neighboring Rwanda. Professing to be a born-again Christian, rebel leader Laurent Nkunda claims to be on a mission to protect the Tutsi minority from Rwandan Hutu militants who participated in the slaughter of 500,000 Tutsis before escaping to Congo.

The U.N. has been urged to increase the number of peacekeepers in eastern Congo from 17,000 to roughly 20,000 to help protect civilians.

World Relief expected to work with local churches to assist 3,000 displaced families in Goma, while World Vision hoped to expand its aid distribution if the situation were stable enough. "Without some semblance of stability, relief efforts are extremely difficult," Rice said. **-Adrienne S. Gaines**