

Congo's river refugees' fears

An estimated 108,000 refugees have fled across the River Ubangui from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the Republic of Congo. The River, which borders the DRC and the Republic of Congo, now has refugees camped in about 90 different sites along 500 kilometres of its banks. The European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) and other aid agencies are leading the way assisting the refugees.

The Ecole Monzombo, (a local school) in Betou in the far north of the Republic of Congo may be a pretty basic place in which to set up home, but for eight year old Yobo Zamaki, it offers a safe and secure refuge from a traumatic past. In October last year, Yobo was separated from his family as they fled inter-ethnic violence in the Equateur province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); distraught and confused, he was then kidnapped by a rebel group.



Photo: Daniel Dickinson/European Commission

Myapezeze Florence fled her village in November 2009. Her husband was shot dead and her son Yobo Zamaki was abducted by a rival ethnic group

'I was scared and reunited with his mother Myapezeze Florence says cried for my mother', he and seven siblings, only to although the future is bleak said. For the next two find out that his father had at the interim refugee months he was held by the been killed by the rebels. camp, it is a better alterna- group as they continued to carry out raids on villages in the province. 'I was people who are now living left at home; my husband forced to do jobs like fetch as refugees at the Ecole is dead and I expect my water. I saw a lot of bad Monzombo, a former gov- house has been burned things.' Although Yobo was ernment school. It is over- down. I will not return, but not treated badly, he did crowded and the facilities will try to make a life here.' witness events that no are rudimentary. Class- Her sentiments are backed eight year old boy should rooms are now acting as up by community leaders, endure, including the tor- dormitories for dozens of who say that it is just too ture and murder of villag- people and families are dangerous to consider re- ers and the torching of forced to cook on small turning now. their homes. stoves in what was once

In December, Yobo the playground. Fortu- mated 108,000 refugees escaped from the rebels nately, the many children who have fled across the and was brought across the living in the school are be- result of what began as an Ubangui River from the ing taught by volunteer refugee teachers. inter-ethnic clash over fish- DRC to the Republic of Yobo's mother, ing rights, but which has Congo. In Betou, he was



In Betou, in the far north of the Republic of Congo, around 580 people are living at a former school

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the potential to grow into another conflict between insurgents and the government. The refugees have settled in up to 90 sites in the Republic of Congo mainly along the riverbank over a distance of around 500 kilometres. The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR and the World Food Programme, are supporting the refugees in what is one of the most logistically challenging humanitarian crises.

The heavily-forested nature of this part of central Africa and the almost complete lack of roads means that supplies and personnel have to travel by river, which is both slow and expensive.

Corinna Kreidler, a regional ECHO expert said that the European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) has contributed €2.25 million, (over US\$3m) to the relief effort and has been monitoring developments closely.

She said, 'our aim is to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of the refugees, but we also want the situation in their countries to be closely monitored in order to assess whether it is safe for them to be repatriated. We want to avoid a protracted refugee situation in the Republic of Congo.'

The last time refugees arrived in Republic of Congo from the DRC, the involvement of humanitarian agencies lasted for ten years. That case load was finally cleared a year ago. For refugees like Myapezeze Florence, the prospect of going home is not one they want to entertain at the present time.

Aid agencies are working hard in Equateur province in the DRC to make sure that it is safe for people to return sometime in the near future. But many fear that building confidence amongst the refugees could take another ten years.