

Thousands flee violence in eastern DR Congo, seek shelter in nearby countries – UN refugee agency

30 January 2018 – Surging violence in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is driving thousands of Congolese into neighbouring Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda, the United Nations refugee agency said Tuesday.

“Thousands of children, women and men have [abandoned their homes](#), in the midst of intensified military operations against Mai Mai armed groups in South Kivu province,” Babar Baloch, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)) told press at the regular briefing in Geneva.

“Since last week almost 7,000 people have crossed to neighbouring Burundi and an additional 1,200 to Tanzania,” he added, noting that many more may be displaced inside South Kivu without shelter or food.

While some refugees have told UNHCR that they fled forced recruitment, direct violence and other abuses by armed groups, others say they left in anticipation of military operations and out of fear.

“It is imperative that people fleeing the violence are allowed safe passage, and that humanitarian access to the internally displaced is facilitated,” Mr. Baloch stressed.

Most refugees heading to Burundi are crossing Lake Tanganyika on small fishing boats, arriving to extremely limited shelter, sanitary facilities, drinking water and food in Nyanza Lac and Rumonge.

“Together with the authorities and other partners, UNHCR is transferring the refugees to transit centres and camps – already overcrowded – in Burundi’s north and east,” the spokesperson explained.

In addition to the Congolese citizens, UNHCR is also concerned about the situation for over 43,000 Burundian refugees just across the lake in South Kivu, mainly at Lusenda and Mulongwe.

“Although these locations have not been directly affected by the fighting, it is vital that all parties to the conflict respect the humanitarian character of the sites where refugees are and refrain from activities that could hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance,” underscored Mr. Baloch.

Congolese heading to Tanzania are also crossing Lake Tanganyika from South Kivu to locations in and around the city of Kigoma – many exhausted and unwell.

“The influx is placing enormous pressure on existing shelter, water and sanitation facilities, and many people have no choice but to sleep in the

open,” asserted Mr. Baloch, adding that UNHCR was mobilizing relief aid for the reception areas and preparing to transfer the new arrivals to the country’s north-west Nyarugusu refugee camp.

Conflicts in the north DRC – including inter-communal violence in Ituri province and military offensives in North Kivu – have also driven more Congolese to Uganda.

Since December, more than 15,000 people have entered Uganda either on foot or by crossing Lake Albert in fishing boats or canoes. January arrivals, at around 330 people per day, are four times what they were in December.

The DRC is one of the world’s most complex crises – deteriorating as local conflicts escalate.

As 2018 began, some five million Congolese were displaced, about 674,879 of them in other African countries, and about 4.35 million internally.

“This places DRC among the world’s biggest displacement crises,” concluded Mr. Baloch.