

Zambia closes border, following Arenavirus deaths in SA

LUSAKA: The Zambian government has closed its border to any refugees arriving from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) amid health concerns about the haemorrhagic fever which has claimed the lives of four people in South Africa.

"I have already ordered the immigration officers to be on extra alert at the Kasumbalesa [border post]," said Susan Sikaneta, permanent secretary in the Interior Ministry, adding that they were not allowing any refugees to cross into Zambia because of the incidence of the mysterious disease.

Last month four people died in Johannesburg, South Africa after a Zambian tourism operator arrived in the country from Zambia with a previously unknown strain of haemorrhagic fever. It has now been identified as a rare strain of the Arenavirus which is transferred to humans from rats.

There is sensitivity in Zambia over the origin of the new strain of the Arenavirus.

"If they [refugees] come in, we are immediately sending them back, because their entering the country could be a recipe for these fears of mysterious diseases becoming real," Sikaneta said.

The DRC is believed to be the source of the Ebola virus, a highly virulent hemorrhagic fever.

Zambia has been home to thousands of Congolese refugees over the years of conflict in the Great Lakes region. Between May and December 2007, a total of 7,325 Congolese were voluntarily repatriated.

The exercise has continued in 2008, with a total of 8,038 returning home since May, and is expected to run into 2009, according to Fernando Protti-Alvarado, the deputy country representative of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in Zambia.

"The voluntary repatriation of refugees from Zambia to the Democratic Republic of Congo has not been affected by the recent reported fighting in the Kivus [North and South Kivu provinces in eastern DRC].

"This is because most of the Congolese refugees repatriating from Zambia have been returning to the southern fringes of the DRC, namely, Katanga Province," Protti-Alvarado said.

"In view of the long distance from Zambia to where fighting is reported to be occurring in DRC, no significant influxes of refugees have been reported. UNHCR is always prepared; however, we don't expect any major influx into Zambia at this particular time."

Government forces and UN peacekeepers have been battling to halt an advance by rebel troops on the eastern DRC town

of Goma, which has triggered an exodus of civilians.

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