

Kenya must stop forcing refugees to go home: rights body

The Kenyan government should stop forcing those displaced by violence following last December's disputed election to return home against their will, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Friday.

'Internally displaced people have the right to return voluntarily, when they feel safe, not when it suits the government,' said Georgette Gagnon, Africa director at HRW.

Some 350,000 people fled their homes after the elections, when violent clashes followed opposition leader Raila Odinga's claims that President Mwai Kibaki's Party of National Unity stole the elections from him.

Over 1,000 people died in clashes between rival tribes affiliated to the political parties.

Calm returned after several months and a deal brokered by former United Nations chief Kofi Annan saw a power-sharing government, with Odinga sworn in as prime minister in April.

However, HRW said that refugee camps were being closed with short notice and non-governmental organizations had witnessed the police forcibly emptying camps in the Rift Valley, Western Kenya, where much of the violence took place.

HRW said that many people who had been forced to return home found that they had no food or shelter and also that several returnees had been killed by their neighbours.

'Returning people to unsafe or contested areas in a hurry will only lead to an illusion of peace, and in the long run it may make matters worse,' said Gagnon.

The government is eager to get refugees, particularly farmers, home. Many fields have lain fallow as their owners fled to camps, and this year's harvest is expected to plummet.

A plague of army worms that have devastated maize crops and a fungal infection that has slashed rice production have also cut food production.

Agriculture Minister William Ruto, speaking at an anti-hunger march in Nairobi on Saturday, said there would be major food shortage in August as reserves run low.

A government spokesperson was not available to comment on the HRW report.

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