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The human exodus from the war-torn Swat valley in northern Pakistan is turning into the world's most dramatic displacement crisis since the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the UN refugee agency warned.

Almost 1.5 million people have registered for assistance since fighting erupted three weeks ago, the UNHCR said, bringing the total number of war displaced in North West Frontier province to more than 2 million, not including 300,000 the provincial government believes have not registered. "It's been a long time since there has been a displacement this big," the UNHCR's spokesman Ron Redmond said in Geneva, trying to recall the last time so many people had been uprooted so quickly. "It could go back to Rwanda." (...)

But that fragile unity could be threatened by heavy civilian casualties or a further deterioration in the conditions of the 2 million displaced. Returning from a three-day trip to Pakistan, the UNHCR head Antnio Guterres termed the displacement crisis as "one of the most dramatic of recent times". Relief workers were "struggling to keep up with the size and speed of the displacement," a statement said.

The main difference with African refugee crises such as Rwanda, however, is that a minority of people are being housed in tented camps. According to the UN just 130,000 people are being accommodated in the sprawling, hot camps in Mardan and Swabi districts, while most are squeezed into the homes of friends or relatives, with as many as 85 people in one house.

Nevertheless aid workers and political analysts warn that if international aid to ease the crisis is not urgently delivered, the strain on the displaced and those helping them could lead to political destabilisation. Acknowledging the scale of the crisis, the prime minister of Pakistan, Yousaf Raza Gilani, said: "The displaced men, women and children should not feel alone. We won't leave any stone unturned in providing them help and protection."

The UN is expected to launch an international appeal for aid running into hundreds of millions of dollars in the coming days.

Source:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/18/swat-valley-pakistan-refugee-crisis>