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Refugees and IDPs in West Africa

Clustered together on Africa's west coast, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia represent refugee issues in all their complexity.



Vulnerable Liberian returnees in Perrytown IDP Camp, Liberia

Liberia's long civil war has created approximately 500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and sent 350,000 refugees into neighboring countries. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had hoped that up to 100,000 Liberians would be repatriated with UNHCR assistance in 2004. However, up to 90% of Liberian refugees in Guinea and Sierra Leone come from Lofa, a county not yet declared safe for return. An ongoing process of disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) is essential to create lasting peace, stability, and prosperity in Liberia. Free and fair conduct of elections scheduled for October 2005 is another prerequisite. Until a better environment is created, with adequate infrastructure and the

provision of essential sanitation and health services, neither IDPs nor refugees will have the confidence to return to their communities of origin in large numbers.

Liberia hosts roughly 2,700 refugees from Sierra Leone, and up to 19,000 refugees from current upheavals in Cote d'Ivoire. The Sierra Leoneans have shown little interest in repatriating, although conditions in Sierra Leone allow for returns. UNHCR is considering local integration as a durable solution for this group. The future of the Ivoirian refugees depends on an end to the current conflict in their homeland.



Liberia and surrounding countries (CIA)

Guinea is host to 75,000 refugees from Liberia, 1,700 refugees from Sierra Leone, and 4,000 from Cote d'Ivoire. Several thousand Sierra Leoneans have successfully repatriated in recent years; the remaining group may eventually repatriate or integrate into Guinea.

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*Executive Committee Meeting of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva, October 4-8, 2004.
Photo USCR/M. Smith.*

**55th UNHCR Executive Committee
(ExCom) Meeting:
Reflections from an NGO Participant
Mark Franken, USCCB**

Between October 4 and 8, 2004, I joined the U.S. delegation to the UNHCR Executive Committee meeting as one of two NGO members. ExCom is currently comprised of 66 member countries that meet every autumn in Geneva to review and approve the UNHCR's programs and budget and to advise on its protection mandate and activities. In attendance at this most recent ExCom meeting were representatives from 64 member states, 75 states with observer status, 30 organizations related to the UN, and more than 50 NGOs.

From my observation, this week-long meeting provides an opportunity for the governments, UNHCR, related international organizations, and the NGOs to have wide-ranging discussions, both formal and informal, multilateral and bilateral, that may not occur or would be difficult otherwise. In fact, in addition to the formal ExCom sessions,

which occurred each day for nearly the entire day, I counted no fewer than 45 additional meetings in which the U.S. delegation participated during the week.

Although I came away from the experience with perhaps too much insight into the bureaucratic nature of the UNHCR, I also am renewed in my appreciation for the important role the U.S. government plays in influencing and shaping the world's protection regime for refugees.

U.S. Impact

A central theme that ran throughout the conference was the UNHCR's protection mandate and how it is applied in various refugee crises. Just prior to the ExCom meeting a delegation comprised of the UNHCR, Assistant Secretary of State Gene Dewey, and other governments' officials visited the Dafur region of Sudan and refugee camps in Chad. Consequently, often during the ExCom meeting when the question of how the UNHCR ensures the protection of refugees was raised, it was seen through the prism of the crisis of the Sudanese

refugees and displaced persons. All seemed to agree that a number of lessons needed to be learned in order for the UNHCR to fulfill its protection responsibilities adequately.

At one point during the ExCom meeting, the U.S. delegation presented a formal statement on protection that was both compelling and constructively critical. Using the Dafur/Chad situation as an example, the statement called for UNHCR to ensure an adequate protection presence in refugee crises, with the deployment of experienced protection officers. The statement called for protection of all refugees and asylum seekers and highlighted the fact that resettlement to a third country is often a viable tool of protection. It called for comprehensive registration efforts, so that all refugees in need of protection and durable solutions are identified. Finally, the U.S. delegation called on the UNHCR to communicate effectively to its own staff, to governments, implementing partners, and the refugees themselves about its protection mandate and how this can best be achieved.

One of the more significant outcomes, which resulted from U.S. leadership and encouragement, was a call by many governments for the protection portfolio to be elevated in stature within the UNHCR structure. This was viewed as necessary to ensure that within the UNHCR, protection is clearly seen as a top priority of the agency.

Representing a coalition of organizations (Refugee Council USA) whose mission is advocacy for the protection of refugees and the pursuit of durable solutions for them, I was gratified by the level of U.S. leadership on the protection

mandate during the ExCom meeting and the apparent influence the delegation exerts. It was also gratifying to see U.S. leadership in calling for expanded opportunities for resettlement and other durable solutions. I got the impression that at many levels within the UNHCR, people were being positively influenced by the U.S. interventions and that as a result, the protection regime is being strengthened and a different approach to resettlement as a tool of protection is emerging.

Observation

Before I arrived at the ExCom meeting, I asked a number of my colleagues in the NGO community from different parts of the world what their impressions were of the U.S. in the context of the ExCom meeting. Having been exposed to some rather harsh criticism of the U.S. government's foreign affairs in recent years from these same colleagues, I was expecting to get a frank critique. What I heard were expressions of appreciation for the U.S. leadership on behalf of refugees. A common response was that the U.S. plays an important and progressive role in encouraging the international community to strengthen its response to refugees.

Having spent a week in countless meetings with the U.S. government delegation during ExCom, during which the delegation actively engaged individual governments and the UNHCR in efforts to bring about better responses on behalf of refugees, I have a renewed appreciation for the important role the United States plays in this area and the quality and commitment of the many people in our government who are committed to refugees.

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In Sierra Leone, 40,000 Liberians have arrived since 2002. They too wait for an improved security situation and services so that they can return home. An additional 7,000 Liberians have been in Sierra Leone for a longer period, mostly in urban areas. This group may include some for whom resettlement is the best durable solution, but some are also successfully integrating into Sierra Leonean society.

While ongoing violence in Cote d'Ivoire has caused refugees to flee into Liberia, 65,000 Liberians are still sheltering in Cote d'Ivoire. UNHCR has, however, facilitated the return of approximately 5,000 Liberians in the last year. Within the Liberian population in Cote d'Ivoire are at-risk children who may be

appropriate for third country resettlement.

On the diplomatic front, the United States is cooperating with the UN and other partners to bring to Liberia the stability necessary to allow large-scale returns of refugees and IDPs. U.S. humanitarian assistance to victims of the Liberian civil war and other conflicts takes many forms, from funding to UNHCR and the World Food Program to meet the daily needs of refugees, to anti-malarial programs and grants focused on women's health. Resettlement in the United States was deemed the best solution for approximately 7,000 Liberians in fiscal year 2004, and an additional 1,700 refugees deemed to be vulnerable (mostly single female heads of households) are now being screened for possible resettlement.

Fiscal Year 2005 Admissions Statistics			
Region	FY 2005 Regional Ceiling	November 2004 Arrivals	Arrivals in FY 2005 Year to Date
Africa	20,000	1,741	3,303
East Asia	13,000	1,923	2,592
Europe & Central Asia	9,500	554	974
Latin America & Caribbean	5,000	519	707
Near East & South Asia	2,500	98	259
Unallocated	20,000		
TOTAL	70,000	4,835	7,835
President Bush has authorized the admission of up to 70,000 refugees for fiscal year 2005, 50,000 regionally allocated and an additional 20,000 unallocated.			

This chart provides an overview of expenses associated with the refugee admissions program in fiscal year 2004, with comparison to fiscal year 2001. The total cost to the Department of State per refugee in FY-04 was \$3,507; in FY-01, the cost was \$2,159. The most significant increases, in percentage terms, have been in the categories of pipeline development, staff and office transport, and overseas processing. The 500% increase in pipeline development costs represents contributions to UNHCR for the Resettlement Initiative, and other factors. Overseas processing costs have more than doubled because of the need for increased security for refugees and processing staff. Transportation costs have risen with fuel prices.

**Cost per Refugee in the Admissions Program
Comparison of FY 2004 and FY 2001**

