

Voluntary Repatriation to Liberia

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The Liberian civil war, which triggered the refugee crisis, began in December 1989 when the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor crossed the border from Côte d'Ivoire and attacked the government forces in the Nimba area, which is inhabited mostly by Gio and Mano tribes. The Liberian army of Samuel Doe's government retaliated against the civilian population of Nimba by burning and looting villages, and killing at will. The barbaric actions of the government forces encouraged more Gio and Mano civilians to join the rebel forces. The NPFL in turn attacked civilians from the president's Krahn tribe and the Mandingoes who appeared to support the Doe regime. In no time, the campaign to overthrow the Doe government became a brutal tribal-based civil war.

As the war spread to other countries, thousands of Liberians fled to the neighbouring West African countries of Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria. Those refugees were welcomed by their hosts in an unprecedented way. In many villages bordering Liberia, the refugees and indigenous people are of the same ethnic group and speak the same language. Many are relatives or acquaintances. The locals took in refugees and shared their land and food with them. Although there was no need to establish refugee camps, external assistance was required. However, the international community failed to respond immediately, and it was to be many months before relief was to reach the host village communities in the neighbouring countries, most of whom were already impoverished before the refugee influx.

Voluntary Repatriation

The military and political conflict in Liberia is not yet resolved. Liberia is cur-

rently divided into three parts. The Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), installed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and protected by the Economic Community Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), controls only the capital of Monrovia. The United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), which consists mainly of what is left of the Doe's army, has recently captured the Bomi and Cape Mount areas from the NPFL, who rule the rest of the country. Efforts to settle the disputes are hampered by the NPFL, which rejects the ECOWAS-brokered peace agreements that call for all warring factions to disarm and encamp their fighters before holding free and fair elections.

In the two years since ECOMOG installed the interim government in Monrovia, approximately 80,000 Liberian refugees have returned home to Monrovia. The number of spontaneous returnees in NPFL-held territory is not known, but is believed to be low because refugees want their security guaranteed before repatriating. Currently, the security in Liberia is precarious, particularly in areas outside of Monrovia. In early October 1992, Charles Taylor formally declared war on ECOMOG, threatened to attack Monrovia, and NPFL forces and ECOMOG forces are currently fighting on the outskirts of the capital.

Alternative Approaches to Repatriation

In addition to spontaneous return, other forms of repatriation are being considered in Liberia. However, there are some bureaucratic prerequisites before the UNHCR-assisted organized repatriation can take place. For example, a general amnesty should be given for all combatants. A triparty agreement between the UNHCR, the countries of asylum and Liberia that ensures the protection of returnees should be effected. Organized repatriation cannot

take place with the current conflict and lack of a recognized government in Liberia.

As an alternative, a less bureaucratic semiorganized repatriation is being considered. Under this form of repatriation, returning refugees are given information, a transport allowance and a reintegration package at the final destination. Prospective returnees find their own way to their villages. The semiorganized repatriation provides some material assistance, but does not guarantee the protection of the returnees, which is particularly crucial in times of conflict. How can protection of returnees be assured in such cases? Issues related to the protection of returning Liberian refugees was not discussed during the series of talks between the warring factions. UNHCR and the United Nations did not participate in these talks where a cease-fire between the warring factions was negotiated by ECOWAS.

Returnees and Liberia's Internal Politics

The Liberian refugees in neighbouring countries constitute almost one-third of Liberia's total population. Thus, their vote would have a major impact on the outcome of future elections. Because most of the refugees fled from areas captured by Charles Taylor's NPFL and many of them were mistreated by the rebel forces, some politicians in Monrovia would like the election to be held after refugees are repatriated to capitalize on this fact. The Interim Government of National Unity has an active repatriation commission that advocates repatriation of refugees despite the stalemate in the political settlement. The commission vigorously pursues its objectives of returning as many refugees as possible to Monrovia before elections are held. It raises funds through soccer games and collects donations from various charities in order to facilitate the transportation of

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refugees who want to return to Monrovia. After several requests from the UNHCR, Charles Taylor has formed a one-man repatriation commission that has no facilities to operate. Despite IGNU's efforts to repatriate all refugees before elections are held, it is unlikely that a mass repatriation will take place before a political settlement is achieved. However, there can be no settlement until fair and free elections are held.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As with most refugee situations, the Liberian refugee crisis can best be solved through voluntary repatriation. The longer the refugees stay in asylum countries, the more difficult the process of repatriation and reintegration will be. The absence of a recognized government should not undermine repatriation efforts. International organizations should adapt to unusual situations and negoti-

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ate with de facto governments to resolve refugee crises. The protection of refugees/returnees should be discussed in all peace talks, and organizations responsible for the protection of refugees should advocate that cause. In a situation where the political conflict is unresolved but where there is no military confrontation—as is the case in many counties in Liberia—repatriation is possible. The system, however, has to be flexible enough to allow for assistance in such circumstances and to organize mass repatriation to areas of relative tranquillity without formal agreement by governments. The most important factor is to guarantee the protection of returnees. This can be achieved through negotiations with the ruling factions of the areas to which the refugees wish to return. ■

Confronting the Future: The Effects of the Repatriation Program on a New Generation of Burundi Refugees

Marc Sommers

The goals of this paper are threefold: to provide context for the voluntary repatriation program for Burundi refugees in Tanzania; to consider some assumptions inherent within it; and to describe some of the effects of the plan on refugees, particularly on members of the younger generation. The views are based upon preliminary data analysis and should be considered as such.

An Overview of the Voluntary Repatriation Program

Burundi nationals have now lived as refugees for twenty years in Tanzania. Their population now numbers 155,000 officially, but is probably far more than that in reality. They have lived for two decades in Tanzania without the rights of citizenship and represent the survivors of the 1972 conflict in Burundi, which has been variously described as "ethnic genocide" (Lemarchand and Martin 1974) and "the Hutu slaughter" (Chretien 1990) of up to 200,000 ethnic Hutu (Weinstein and Schrire 1976). Significantly, the majority of the refugee population are either too young to remember 1972 or were born afterwards in a Tanzanian refugee settlement.

Late in 1991, a series of earlier meetings in Tanzania, Burundi and Switzerland produced a repatriation plan for these refugees. The governments of Burundi and Tanzania joined with UNHCR to announce a coordinated plan for offering refugees three options regarding their future. They can either return to Burundi, elect Tanzanian citizenship or maintain their refugee status in Tanzania.

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The initiative is underway. Delegates from the three Burundi refugee settlements went to observe conditions in Burundi and Tanzanian officials, led by Augustine Mrema, the minister for Home Affairs, have also toured there. UNHCR should have already completed a census of Burundi refugees and will now try to accommodate each refugee's choice.

The information refugees have received about each option seems contradictory. The Tanzanian and Burundi governments have tried to persuade refugees that conditions in Burundi are stable and peaceful, and that they are welcome to return. Approximately 20,000 refugees have already quietly returned on their own. Yet opposition parties with a presence in the settlements suspect trouble and provide stories to support their claims. Palipehutu, the largest opposition party, has declared multiparty elections in Burundi a prerequisite for repatriation. The Burundi government considers it an outlaw organization.

Both sides are vigorously trying to influence the refugees' decision. While the Burundi government attempts to induce refugees to return, Palipehutu and other opposition party members hope they remain in Tanzania. The environment surrounding the refugees' decision is fluid and charged.

Two Divisions among Burundi Refugees in Tanzania

Much of the literature on Burundi nationals divide the population into two predominant groups: the Tutsi and the Hutu and evaluates conflicts between them. This implies that Burundi society can be understood by examining the interplay between ethnic Tutsi and Hutu. The accepted cause of the extraordinary violence of 1972 is ethnic conflict; that the