



West Africa

Major developments

In August 2003, 14 years after starting a rebellion against President Samuel Doe, and six years after his election as Head of State, President Charles Taylor of Liberia stepped down and left the country (heading for Nigeria, where he has been granted asylum). From its beginnings in 1989, the Liberian war was a poisonous source of regional destabilisation, spreading into Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. Soon there was a flood of small arms into the region, feeding criminal organisations and rebel movements alike. Now there are high hopes that the situation in Liberia, and the rest of West Africa, can at last improve in the wake of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the deployment of the West African peace-keeping force (ECOMIL), the cessation of fighting in and around Monrovia, the installation of a National Transitional Government of Liberia, and the deployment of a 15,000-strong United Nations peace-keeping force (scheduled for October 2003). There are high hopes in particular for the return, over the next few years, of the 320,000 Liberian refugees currently in exile. There are concerns however that in the absence of effective regional Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reinsertion and Rehabilitation (DDRR) programmes, fighters will simply drift into neighbouring countries in search of employment.

Benin
Burkina Faso
Cameroon
Cape Verde
Côte d'Ivoire
Gambia
Ghana
Guinea
Guinea-Bissau
Liberia
Mali
Niger
Nigeria
Senegal
Sierra Leone
Togo



The Sierra Leone peace process has stayed on track, allowing the return of more than 244,000 refugees since 2000. In the context of the 4Rs approach, UNHCR has been working closely with development organisations to ensure continuity between humanitarian assistance provided to returnees upon arrival and long term development assistance.

In contrast, the situation in Côte d'Ivoire remains fragile, with the country still partitioned, slow implementation of the peace agreement signed in January 2003, delays in the commencement of the DDRR process and continuous tensions between the various political actors.

Although the military *coup d'état* that took place in Guinea Bissau in September 2003 has not had an impact on the refugee situation in the region, the future will largely depend on the ability of the new authorities to address major issues and challenges, such as the organisation of free and fair elections in 2004 and the consolidation of state authority.

Strategic objectives

Strategies for repatriating the two countries' respective refugee populations in 2004 are underpinned by the

prospects of continued stability in Sierra Leone and peace in Liberia. Furthermore, it is hoped that conditions in Côte d'Ivoire will improve sufficiently for Ivorian refugees in neighbouring countries to return home. The ongoing voluntary repatriation operations for Sierra Leonean refugees will continue until June 2004. Thereafter those who opt not to return will undergo refugee status determination aimed at offering each individual an appropriate durable solution.

As UNHCR offices in West Africa begin to lay the groundwork for the voluntary repatriation of Liberian refugees, support will be provided for enhancing the participation of refugee women in the peace process and in reintegration programmes. The office in Liberia will be involved in establishing benchmark conditions that must be met in areas of return before UNHCR can begin to promote voluntary repatriation. At the sub-regional level, UNHCR will collaborate with governments to develop and conclude Tripartite Agreements in order to ensure that return is safe and dignified. This collaboration will focus on legal aspects of repatriation, protection (including screening and registration), mass information, and convoy operations. In the interim, it is expected that some Liberian refugees will repatriate spontaneously and that others may request UNHCR's assistance to return at an earlier stage. UNHCR will facilitate the return of

these populations and, if security is adequate, implement community-based assistance programmes.

Due to the volatile political and security climate in the region, UNHCR will continue to work closely with other agencies to develop and harmonise contingency plans. At the political level, UNHCR will endeavour to ensure that refugee and returnee protection issues are taken into account in the elaboration of peace agreements. The institution of asylum is seriously undermined by the exploitation of refugee settlements for the purposes of military recruitment by conflicting parties. The Office will continue to remind governments of their responsibility to maintain the civilian character of refugee camps, and advocate greater support for them in that endeavour.

Addressing gender-based violence and, more importantly, its root causes, continues to be an objective for UNHCR in the region. Attention is being focused on building the capacity of groups to address the individual needs of affected persons. UNHCR will facilitate the increased involvement of men in addressing sexual and gender-based violence issues. The Office will also enhance women's participation in decision-making within refugee camps and areas of return in Sierra Leone. Sanitary materials are now supplied routinely to refugee women. There will be continued efforts to improve standards of assistance and reduce possible exposure to all forms of exploitation.

UNHCR will step up efforts to help urban refugees and address the difficulties of local integration in poverty stricken environments. A dual-track strategy will be undertaken to support local structures seeking to help refugees attain self-sufficiency, while at the same time seeking partnerships with international development agencies able to draw up long-term plans.

Through training for relevant departments, UNHCR will help governments to enhance their capacity to handle refugee matters.

Finally, UNHCR will provide assistance to HIV/AIDS patients amongst the refugee population, and to carry out sensitisation campaigns in order to reduce the risk of infection; enlarged partnerships will be sought in some countries in order to give these vulnerable refugees the care they need.

In 2004, the Regional Resettlement Hub for West and Central Africa will build upon the solid achievements of 2003 and continue to support, co-ordinate and monitor resettlement activities throughout the region. In addition to support and monitoring missions to country offices in the region, the Hub intends to conduct at least two Co-ordinating Workshops as well as other specialised training

sessions. A primary goal of the Hub will be to assist country offices to adhere to their Standard Operating Procedures. The Hub will support the ongoing large-scale resettlement of refugees from Côte d'Ivoire who are deemed to be at risk, as well as work with country offices and resettlement partners in the identification of additional groups for whom resettlement would be appropriate.

Operations

UNHCR's country programmes in **Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia** and **Sierra Leone** are described in separate chapters.

In 2004, UNHCR's Regional Representative in Benin will support an estimated 21,500 refugees to find durable solutions in their countries of asylum, namely **Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger** and **Togo**. A particular effort will be made to provide the necessary support to those refugees willing and able to return to their country of origin. UNHCR will provide basic assistance and psycho-social support to newly arrived refugees, as well as the most vulnerable cases such as single women with minor children, unaccompanied minors, older refugees, the chronically ill and the handicapped. At the same time, efforts will be made, in co-ordination with Government counterparts, to facilitate employment for refugees with certain professional profiles. A small-scale income generation programme will be offered to refugees with entrepreneurial skills, with priority to refugee women. Refugees needing to acquire specific professional and technical skills will be offered vocational training courses and a small-scale apprenticeship programme. Another priority will be education for all refugee children.

The Office in **Cameroon** was re-opened in 2002 to respond to the influx of Nigerian refugees during the previous year and to address the assistance and protection needs of urban refugees. The Office will focus on providing assistance to some 17,000 Nigerian refugees in the western part of the country. Assistance provided thus far to some 41,000 urban refugees will be modified to respond more effectively to the health, education and vocational training needs of the most needy. A UNHCR antenna unit has been opened in Banyo, a town at the Nigerian border, to monitor the protection and assistance programmes for Nigerian refugees. UNHCR will also explore the possibility of implementing a repatriation programme for the Nigerian refugees in 2004. Cameroon has received about 6,000 asylum-seekers each year during the last two years. Pending the creation of a National Eligibility Committee, UNHCR has been conducting RSD in close collaboration with the Cameroon Red Cross. Discussions will continue with the Government on the adoption of refugee legislation.



Liberia: Insecurity in the sub-region led to thousands being displaced. For several years, Sierra Leonean refugees and Liberian IDPs lived together in VOA camp. UNHCR / B. Heger

UNHCR reopened its office in **Gambia** to respond more effectively to the protection and assistance needs of persons of concern in that country. Following a registration exercise, all refugees were issued identity cards. Currently there are 7,536 refugees living in Gambia of whom 3,100 are benefiting from UNHCR's assistance. A mass information campaign has been conducted to inform Sierra Leonean refugees on conditions prevailing in their home countries, with a view to their voluntary repatriation. Some 3,000 refugees are expected to return to their country before the scheduled conclusion of the repatriation programme in June 2004. The Office will promote vocational training and strengthen agricultural activities implemented in rural areas (in Bambali and Basse camps). However, one of the main constraints faced in assisting refugees in the Gambia remains the high vocational training costs.

In **Ghana**, UNHCR will focus on strengthening the physical security and legal protection of refugees; increasing the capacity of the authorities to handle refugee matters and asylum applications; and enhancing community-based support for the refugee community pending the identification of durable solutions. According to data from a comprehensive registration and documentation exercise carried out by the authorities and UNHCR in 2003, Ghana hosts nearly 47,700 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from Liberia, Togo and Sierra Leone. In 2003, the refugee population was augmented by the arrival of more than 6,000 Liberians fleeing the conflicts in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. UNHCR will aim at improved standards of assistance in 2004. Efforts will focus on the physical protection of refugees, through: an enhanced police presence in refugee settlements, and refugee watch teams, the provision of adequate sanitation facilities for

the refugees, particularly for refugee women, electricity and improved roads in the settlements, expanded health facilities, education, and waste disposal. A key area will be education for refugee children. In 2003, a survey of the Ghana Education Service revealed extremely poor standards at refugee schools and exposed the existence of a large percentage of children unable to receive primary education. Basic literacy is not only important in itself, but a life-skill that minimises protection needs and supports the attainment of durable solutions. Literate refugees have more self-respect, better access to employment opportunities and a greater ability to contribute to the wider community. This, in turn, helps protect refugees from various forms of exploitation (e.g., forced recruitment, sexual exploitation, child labor), enhances local integration or resettlement prospects, and helps prepare a new generation of leaders and citizens for return to their home countries.

With the prospects of peace in Liberia, UNHCR will systematically step up its work to equip refugees for life after voluntary repatriation. This will include skills training, income-generating activities, post-conflict trauma counselling and peace education. The Office will continue to promote the voluntary repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees through an information campaign as well as the provision of transport-related assistance. The Office will also facilitate resettlement to third countries for refugees who have compelling reasons not to repatriate to their countries of origin.

During 2003, **Nigeria** had an influx of Liberians when fighting escalated in their country. UNHCR dealt with this emergency with the support of local partners. For example, a donor government provided 18 large tents as temporary shelters for the new arrivals. Others are accommodated in schools, churches and mosques in the refugee camp pending the construction of more permanent shelters. This is a precarious situation, which could endanger refugee health and further disrupt education programmes in the camp. UNHCR is negotiating with the authorities to provide additional land in order to enlarge the camp and improve the quality of basic assistance for the refugees. Meanwhile, some 250 Sierra Leonean refugees will be repatriated by December 2003, leaving 10,336 refugees in Nigeria. About 6,592 are in Oru Refugee camp (mainly from Liberia, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan). There are another 3,000 Chadian refugees in the north, while some 744 urban refugees live in Lagos and other large cities.

In the countries covered by UNHCR's regional office in Dakar, Senegal, namely **Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mali** and **Senegal**, the relatively calm third quarter of

2003 was marked by the *coup d'état* in Guinea-Bissau, and events in Côte d'Ivoire, which continue to profoundly affect the economic and social make-up of the sub-region.

The majority of refugees hosted in the countries covered by the office in Dakar are Mauritians (68 per cent) three-quarters of whom are registered in Senegal and live along the border with Mauritania, with the remainder in Mali. The office in Dakar will provide international protection and life-sustaining assistance for this group, while repatriation, as a durable solution, remains a politically sensitive matter. There are more than 7,800 Senegalese refugees from the province of Casamance, most of whom live in Guinea-Bissau. It is hoped that peace talks between the Government and the *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance* will bear fruit and allow the return of this refugee group.

During the period under review, the office in Dakar conducted mass information campaigns for voluntary repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees living in Senegal, Mali and Guinea-Bissau. UNHCR recently finalised a budget proposal with IOM for a repatriation operation to begin before the end of 2003.

The office in Dakar will make all necessary efforts to address the primary needs of refugees on a community basis, with particular attention to vulnerable groups. Efforts will focus on the following sectors: health, education, child protection, security, income generation and vocational training.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Benin	1,082,234
Cameroon	1,607,562
Côte d'Ivoire	12,219,782
Gambia	733,499
Ghana	4,689,305
Guinea	24,719,080
Liberia ¹	7,566,908
Nigeria	1,265,627
Senegal	1,716,967
Sierra Leone	32,759,654
Regional Activities ²	3,905,700
Total ³	92,266,318

¹ At the time of printing, a supplementary programme budget in the amount of USD 36,962,083 had been approved. This brings the total requirements for the country to USD 44,528,991. For further details, please refer to the Liberia country chapter.

² Includes care and maintenance, voluntary repatriation and resettlement assistance for urban refugees, as well as scholarships for refugee students in West African countries.

³ The total budget figure including the recently approved SB for Liberia would be USD 129,228,401.