

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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## **Liberians in Ghana: living without humanitarian assistance**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Being a refugee doesn't mean that I am helpless and in need of assistance. I want UNHCR to know that yes, I am a refugee as long as I am living in exile as one who had to flee persecution and problems in my country, but I don't want one dollar of their help. Don't give me material assistance. Give me economic opportunity so that I can help myself. That's all I ask. (Wilfred Brown, a Liberian refugee in Accra, Ghana)

A long brewing crisis in Liberia broke out on 24 December 1989 in Nimba County, plunging the country into seven years of intermittent anarchy and bloodshed. As a result, Liberians fleeing the violence scattered throughout the West African region and beyond. Liberians who escaped to Ghana began arriving there around May 1990 on evacuation flights meant for Ghanaian nationals leaving Liberia. By August 1990 the Ghanaian government set up an ad hoc Committee on Refugees in response to the arrival of an increasing number of Liberian refugees by land and sea. This committee decided to use the abandoned church premises of Gomoa Buduburam, located about 45 minutes drive East of Accra, as a reception centre for accommodating this influx.

By the end of September 1990 there were about 7,000 Liberians at Buduburam, the refugee camp, with an estimated 2,000 settled on their own in Accra (Essuman-Johnson, 1992:37). While Ghanaian churches and generous individuals were the first to come to the aid of the refugees, the Ghanaian government called upon the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide assistance. Under the care of the humanitarian aid regime, a flood of relief aid descended upon the refugees making food, blankets, medicine, water and other necessities available (Karnaga, 1997).

My aim in this paper is to use data that I collected in Ghana during the summer of 2000 to provide further evidence to refute what Gaim Kibreab (1993) has called 'the myth of dependency' among refugees. This myth is based on the assumption that living on handouts fosters a lack of motivation and willingness to work and take initiatives in order to earn an income and become self-sufficient. If this were true one would expect that Liberian refugees would be unable to survive in Ghana without humanitarian assistance, but this has not been the case. Although the gradual process of reducing aid to Liberians began in 1997, as of 30 June 2000 UNHCR officially withdrew all assistance to Liberian refugees in Ghana and the West Africa region in general with the hope that this would encourage Liberians to repatriate. However, Liberians remained in Ghana for reasons that will be explained.

On the basis of the data collected, I will argue that Liberian refugees are capable, enterprising and industrious, adapting survival strategies and adjusting to changing circumstances in order to maximise opportunities available to them in exile. These findings have general implications for understanding how refugees anywhere are able to live without humanitarian assistance and why they may choose to remain as refugees even when the aid regime considers repatriation the preferable solution.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a thesis submitted for a Master's degree at Oxford University, 2001.

## Literature review

An overview of the literature on the humanitarian aid regime is a necessary starting point since Liberians in Ghana have been under the regime's umbrella until recently, at least officially if not actually. A commonly held perception among humanitarian aid workers is that the reluctance or refusal of refugees to give up entitlements to food rations, to leave the camps and to repatriate is an indication of alleged dependency (Kibreab, 1993:329). In contrast to these assumptions, recent research has shown that rather than being passive recipients of aid refugees are in fact capable of making the aid regime work for them in ways they deem appropriate for facilitating their own rehabilitation and development while in exile. In addition, refugees may not consider returning home their best option for a variety of reasons.

To begin with, it is necessary to determine what is meant by the humanitarian aid regime and to specify what it does. The key actors of the regime are the UNHCR, host governments, and various non-government organizations (NGOs), or private organisations.<sup>2</sup> In a refugee crisis, it has become standard practice for host governments to place refugees into settlements or camps. Typically because the cost of assisting refugees is high, the host government calls upon the UNHCR, which annually raises funds to assist refugees. The UNHCR usually takes on the role of coordinating and funding the various NGOs, called implementing partners that provide direct assistance to the refugees.

There are several perceived advantages for utilising the refugee camp assistance strategy (Black, 1998). First, it is argued that host governments can better enhance the security of refugees in camps as well as protect their own population from insurgents. Second, refugee health care can supposedly be more effectively monitored in a camp situation. Third, in camps, refugees are highly visible making it easier for the aid regime to raise funds to finance their operations. Fourth and perhaps most important, aid can be delivered efficiently to a central location and distributed to those who need it. In an apt summary, the refugee camp tradition has been described as "the most efficient method of distributing aid to a constituency that [has] been labeled as requiring it" (Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995:210).

Each of these purported justifications for camps has been taken to task by academics in the field of refugee studies. As to security issues, camps can become a base for military operations, and the safety of civilians can be jeopardised as a result as was the case in camps set up for Rwandan refugees in Zaire and Tanzania from 1994 to 1996 (Black, 1998:5). Health concerns also arise in situations where camps are crowded and refugees have insufficient access to curative care (Harrell-Bond, 1983:214-229). In some cases camps may in fact exacerbate the marginalisation of refugees onto the poorest quality, least accessible land (Black, 1998:5). In other situations, the privileged position of refugees who have access to international assistance may create tensions between the poorer host population and the refugees

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<sup>2</sup> These actors are identified in the *Statute of the Office of the UNHCR* (1950) which stipulates that "The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, acting under the authority of the General Assembly, shall assume the function of providing international protection, under the auspices of the United Nations, to refugees who fall within the scope of the present Statute and of seeking permanent solution for the problem of refugees by assisting *Governments* and, subject to the approval of the Governments concerned, *private organisations* to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of such refugees, or their assimilation within new national communities" (emphasis added).

(Chambers, 1986:245). In general, camps are characterised by “segregation from the host population, the need to share facilities, a lack of privacy, plus overcrowding and a limited, restricted area within which the whole compass of daily life is to be conducted” (Stein, 1981:324).

However, the more general, all encompassing critique of camps concerns matters of power, patronage and control. Barbara Harrell-Bond’s analysis of the humanitarian aid regime in *Imposing Aid* (1986) offers a stinging critique of the way in which humanitarian aid fosters dependency and cripples the dignity of refugees by treating them as helpless and in need of outsiders to plan for them and to take care of them. According to the aid regime the condition for the free gift of aid “is construed in terms of absolute destitution on the part of the recipient” (Harrell-Bond *et al.*, 1992:207).

The media perpetuates these images and NGOs often find them useful for the purpose of fundraising based on the assumption that compassion is what governs humanitarian assistance. However, western notions of compassion tend to be inherently ethnocentric, paternalistic and unprofessional. ‘Proper refugees’, that is, refugees of concern to NGOs and the ‘compassionate’ public, are those who conform to the image of an ‘exemplary victim’. Liisa Malkki (1996) argues that rather than helping the situation, portraying refugees in this way in effect serves to silence them. Refugees stop being specific persons and are relegated to the status of pure victim. As a generic category, they are viewed “no longer as a woman, a man or a child in need of protection, but rather as a unit of flight, a unit of displacement, to be contained and thereafter channeled down whatever humanitarian corridor leads to whatever political end” (Goodwin-Gill, 1999:246).

In order to maintain access to aid entitlements, refugees under the aid umbrella often change their behaviour to match the expectations and requirements of the aid regime. Under the care of UNHCR, they feel obligated to assume the role of dependent children. Harrell-Bond (1986:91) points out that Sudanese refugees often referred to UNHCR as their ‘mother’ or ‘father’, highlighting the type of relationship that exists between the benefactors and beneficiaries of aid. As UNHCR’s ‘children’, refugees have little choice but to surrender autonomy and freedom of action. However, her argument is not that refugees are in essence dependent, but rather that the humanitarian aid regime requires camp refugees to act as though they are dependent even if they have the desire to become self-sufficient.

Kibreab’s (1993) analysis of Somali refugees reinforces this distinction between actual and perceived dependence. He points out the seemingly paradoxical combination of the willingness of refugees in the camps to work “often for infinitesimal returns, whenever opportunities existed” (p. 332) and their unwillingness to give up their assistance entitlements. He argues that even though Somali refugees exhibited simulated traits of poverty or dependency, this was not a reflection of actual dependency but rather representative of the low levels of income they earned from the activities in which they were engaged. Holding onto their food rations was a completely rational strategy for facilitating their livelihood in exile, even for those whose lives would not have been immediately at risk if they relinquished their rations.

So rather than viewing refugees as dependent on the aid regime, it would seem that the aid regime has become dependent on the dependency of refugees. Emanuel Marx (1990:198) argues that:

The competent authorities rarely concede that the helpless refugees they met on arrival gradually acquire some power of their own, and that they integrate into society. The organisations try to hold onto their powers, and to treat their wards for as long as they can as ‘refugees’, thus denying them such basic rights of mobility, work, education and housing.

Perhaps a clearer rendering of the concept should read “aid workers treat refugees for as long as they can as ‘their wards’”. Many refugees recognise that “as the visible signs of one’s social refugeeness fade, one’s worthiness as a recipient of material assistance [is] likely to decrease” (Malkki, 1996:385). Ironically, in the very act of trying to make needy victims into self-sufficient people, the aid regime runs the risk of requiring self-sufficient people to act like needy victims.

For aid agencies to remain in business, they need to provide goods and services that refugees are thought to be unable to provide for themselves, otherwise there is no reason for them to exist. From the perspective of the aid regime, the gift of aid should be gratefully received by the recipients and used for pure consumption. However, it is very common for refugees to “transform material assistance into currency to acquire the other essentials [and non-essentials] of life” (Harrell-Bond *et al.*, 1992:210).

When this happens aid workers and donors often try to enforce ‘correct usage’ of aid, namely direct consumption, reasoning that the recipients of aid have no right to sell that gift in order to buy items such as other types of food or new clothes.<sup>3</sup> As a result, refugees who take aid when it appears that they no longer need it or use it in ways not prescribed by the aid regime are considered ‘illegal’. They pose a threat to the legitimacy of the aid regime that exists only to provide for the basic needs of desperately poor and needy people.

Contrary to the aid regime’s typical perception of camp refugees<sup>4</sup> as “broken men accepting charity”, a more useful metaphor for understanding the actual workings of the refugee community is that of “a set of chessmen deployed across the board” (Harrell-Bond, 1986:118-152). Refugees strategically switch roles and divide themselves up so as to maximise whatever opportunities come along. If refugees can find better ways to sustain themselves than what the aid regime can offer, they will pursue those opportunities even if it means that their entitlement to aid may be jeopardised.

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<sup>3</sup> Harrell-Bond *et al.* (1992:210) argue that “the humanitarian regime behaves as though through the act of receiving, the refugee has accepted a contractual obligation to consume whatever has been given, regardless of the adequacy or appropriateness of the gift. To ensure such compliance requires the regime to control refugee populations and it has assumed the right to introduce (extra-judicial) sanctions for their failure to comply”.

<sup>4</sup> Harrell-Bond (1986:119-120) also mentions the tendency for outsiders to assume that self-settled refugees are “brave individualists maintaining their freedom in the face of adversity”. However, the distinction between camp refugees and self-settled refugees may not be so clear cut when one considers the variety of coping mechanisms refugees typically employ in order to maximise every possible economic option available.

As a result refugees tend to be highly mobile. Some family members may stay in the camps to claim food rations while others are employed in whatever day labour is available in urban areas, and still others may be sent to rural areas to look after family livestock (Harrell-Bond, *et al.*, 1992:211). Refugees are often considered as a monolithic, homogeneous category, but the reality is that they represent a diversity of experiences, skills and abilities that facilitate varying levels of economic success. The population in camps typically becomes considerably stratified and various standards of living emerge among the refugees ranging from abysmal poverty to comparative comfort (Kibreab, 1993:341).

From the perspective of UNHCR, the question that must constantly be considered is ‘how long is a refugee a refugee’. In other words ‘for how long is this person eligible to receive assistance’. The basis of confusion over who is and who is not a refugee seems to stem from UNHCR’s broadened view of the definition of what is ‘protection’ and who is a ‘refugee’. The official mandate of the UNHCR is to provide international protection for refugees and, together with governments, to seek permanent solutions to their problems.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, UNHCR’s protection mandate referred to the organisation’s diplomatic and legal efforts on behalf of refugees, but in recent years it has been interpreted to mean the provision of material assistance to refugees in places where the host government is unable or unwilling to provide for them (Goodwin-Gill, 1999:222). As a result of this shift, a refugee is often defined, if not explicitly than implicitly, in terms of whether or not he or she needs aid.

From an international law perspective, the definitions of ‘protection’ and ‘refugee’ are defined more narrowly. Rather than defining ‘protection’ in terms of material assistance, the concept is based on the principle of non-refoulement which “[obliges] states, even now non-parties, not to return a refugee to a territory where his or her life or freedom may be endangered” (Goodwin-Gill, 1999:221). A person eligible for this protection is a refugee, defined as someone who has “a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, outside the country of his or her nationality” (*UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 1951, Article 1).

The political reality is “that those who prove entitlement to non-refoulement wind up also with an entitlement to asylum [in the host country] in the stronger sense” (Martin, 1991:33). So while the provision of aid may be interpreted to be a part of protection, whether or not a refugee needs aid is not the defining criteria for maintaining one’s status as a refugee and the right to seek asylum. The point is a refugee remains a refugee until he or she no longer has “a well-founded fear of persecution” in his or her country of origin or until he or she naturalises in a host country.

Issues of legal status can become complicated when peace and security are restored in the refugees’ country of origin, especially when that peace is tenuous at best and a cover for ongoing turmoil at worst. In Africa, refugee status is often granted on a prima facie, or collective, basis when large numbers cross international borders at the same time.<sup>6</sup> When conditions at home improve prima facie refugees may still feel they

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 2 for UNHCR’s mandate.

<sup>6</sup> According to the *OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa* (1974, Article 1), the term refugee also applies “to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part of or the

have a legitimate claim to asylum while the host government may disagree as is the case for Liberians in Ghana. However, it is very difficult for host governments to remove refugee status on a prima facie basis. Instead usually each person's claim for remaining as a refugee must be assessed individually. This process is typically time-consuming and requires a great deal of bureaucratic organisation. In developing countries such as Ghana that have limited resources to fund such a bureaucracy, the government often gives low priority to the process of individual status determination.<sup>7</sup> In the mean time whether or not the population is in fact de jure refugees, there are often benefits to maintaining the bureaucratic label on a de facto basis.

Zetter's analysis (1991) of the housing policy for Greek-Cypriot refugees in Cyprus is instructive for understanding these benefits. First, for the Greek-Cypriot refugees, even when housing was no longer a specific need they continued to use it as a negotiating device since dependency on the government for housing meant that the providers would be obligated to adopt new responsibilities and widen existing provisions generation by generation. Second, by sustaining an image of being in transition the Greek-Cypriots maintained their status as a special interest group with room to maneuver and manipulate opportunities.

The refugees were better able to avert the marginalisation of their interests by failing to assimilate into the host community. In turn the government of Cyprus was willing to play the dependency game in order "to sustain an international identity of an unresolved international issue" (p. 56). Corresponding to the Greek-Cypriot situation, in section four of this paper the ways in which Liberians benefit from maintaining the refugee label will become evident. Even though Liberians have resisted the humanitarian aid regime's control over their lives, they find it in their best interest to avoid integration into the host community and to hold on to their de facto refugee status in order to pursue their own interests.

Another consideration for why refugees may wish to remain refugees and resist repatriation rests not on the feasibility of actually getting home, but the difficulties associated with securing a livelihood and resuming daily life once they actually are home (Green, 2000). If refugees stay on in exile at least they can maintain the status quo, but returning home requires amassing working-capital to re-establish their households and their businesses, a task that is beyond the reach of many refugees who struggle to provide their daily needs. As a result the process of returning home is often gradual as refugees consider the costs and benefits of shifting from the camp to home. For example, a household may send one or two family members home first to scout out conditions and make initial preparations. The perceived opportunities or lack of opportunities at home play a significant role in determining who goes home and when.

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whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality". In expanding the parameters of the UN definition, the OAU makes provisions for recognising large groups of refugees often displaced by wars in Africa.

<sup>7</sup> In Ghana, the government has begun an individual status determination process, but as of September 2000, it was not widely or strictly implemented.

In considering the refugee experience as a whole, it is often assumed that the experience of war causes social norms to disintegrate. An alternative perspective more

in keeping with the realities of a changing world holds that pain and suffering, rather than being anomalies, are part of ordinary social experience (Davis, 1992). People place catastrophes such as war into their collective social memory and incorporate it within their accumulated culture. A study of an urban Greek refugee settlement in Turkey (Hirschon, 2000) provides empirical evidence to support this claim. Although the community faced material deprivation, economic disadvantage and marginalisation, the refugees maintained their cultural practices and values and were able to create a well-functioning neighbourhood life. Similarly Liberian refugees in Ghana have not been incapacitated by their war experiences but instead they move forward constantly adapting to meet present challenges in familiar ways.

In summary, the ‘myth of dependency’ erroneously perpetuated by the media and by the humanitarian aid regime assumes that refugees function in a historical vacuum devoid of assisting social networks and previously gained skills and experiences, thus severely underestimating the capabilities of refugees. More accurately even though refugees may make adaptational changes to profit from the aid regime that rewards dependency, this does not mean that refugees relinquish their former culture and values and their desire for independence from outside control. Instead the history and culture of refugees contribute to the ways in which they are able to sustain themselves in exile. It has been argued that “the majority of coping mechanisms are based on precedents” (Bennet, 1976:849 in Kibreab, 1993:338). Such has been the case for Liberian refugees in Ghana as will be demonstrated.

## **Methodology**

Before beginning, the analysis a description of my research methodology is in order. Information obtained from secondary sources is supplemented by the following. First, dissertations on related topics written by Liberian undergraduate students in Ghana provided useful background material for this study (Appendix 1). Second, a survey of churches at the camp, referenced in chapter three, highlights the prominence of church activity at the camp and supplements the analysis of the important role Christianity plays in the lives of Liberian refugees (Appendix 2).

The basis of the analysis of the current situation Liberians face in Ghana, contained in the following sections, comes from primary source data collected from aid workers, government representatives and various individuals knowledgeable about Liberians in Ghana (Appendix 3) and from Liberian refugees themselves (Appendix 4).<sup>8</sup> I conducted field research in Ghana between 31 July and 10 September 2000, and the majority of that time I lived among Liberian refugees at the Buduburam Refugee Settlement, ‘the camp’, but I also spoke with several Liberians living in Accra and

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<sup>8</sup> To distinguish information given by refugees in informal discussions from information that was given by non-refugees in formal interviews, refugees are referenced as “(The refugee’s first name, the date on which the information was shared)” and non-refugees are referenced as “(Interview with (the interviewee’s surname), the date on which the interview was conducted)”. I felt it appropriate to credit refugees for information given by using their first names only. I withheld their surnames in order to provide a degree of anonymity. In some cases in the discussion I withheld the first name of a person when I considered the information he or she provided to be of a sensitive nature.



Kumasi. My primary method of research was informal interviewing. In conversations I took on the role of learner and asked refugees about their daily activities, about life in Ghana, about their plans for the future and followed up with questions on the topics that seemed important to them. I decided against having a formal interview schedule to prevent the possibility of refugees feeling obligated to tailor their responses to my perceived expectations. Relying on qualitative approaches to data collection such as participant observation and informal focus group discussions seemed a more appropriate way to collect reliable data.

Data from my field research comes primarily from thirty-five Liberian refugees although I had opportunities to interact with many more refugees whose comments have informed my research as well. It should be made clear that my sample is purposive, not random. I lived with a Liberian pastor and his wife in the camp and spent a lot of time with them and their friends and acquaintances. Generally one acquaintance would lead me to others, and thus my sample was derived from a snowballing technique. In discussions having a pen and paper seemed to distract people, so I usually wrote up my field notes after each conversation, or whenever convenient. My recollections may not be exact, but I trust that they accurately reflect what was said.

I have compiled a chart (Appendix 4) that provides some basic information about the Liberian refugees who participated in this study showing what economic activities they were involved in, how frequently they receive remittances from the US, their level of church involvement and their future plans. These categories were formed after the research was conducted in order to provide a cursory overview of issues that came up over and over again in conversations with Liberians. Because I did not have a set interview schedule, I did not always obtain complete information from every individual in each of the categories. In some cases, especially in regards to money and religious involvement, I did not think it appropriate to ask for information unless the person brought up the subject first. My analysis of the data will highlight the significance of the information represented.

In the analysis, I distinguish between camp refugees and town refugees, the town being Accra. However, these categories are not rigid since there is considerable movement back and forth between the town and camp. For example, town refugees often come to the camp for social visits and the population of the camp is said to swell whenever resettlement interviews are being conducted. In turn, camp refugees may go to town to engage in various economic activities or to go to school. Although precise figures are not available with estimations of the number of Liberians in Ghana ranging from 8,000 to 20,000, it is generally assumed that significantly fewer Liberians live in Accra than at the camp.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> No one really knows precisely how many refugees there are in any of the countries that host refugees (in Harrell-Bond *et al.*, 1992:212). However, for purposes of fund-raising it is necessary for UNHCR to produce 'official' statistics. UNHCR usually depends on host governments to provide statistical information, but often host governments in developing countries do not have the resources to adequately conduct such a survey. In addition, political reasons may influence either the over-estimation or the under-estimation of the number of refugees in a host country. According to the most recent statistics published by the Ghana Refugee Board and UNHCR-Ghana (*Help Refugees Help Themselves*, p. 18), the number of Liberian refugees in Ghana peaked at 20,000 in December 1996. But as of June 1998 numbers were down to 13,474. However, according to the Ghanaian Camp Manager at Buduburam (Interview with Akyempong, 15/8/00), appointed by National Mobilisation Programme which is the government organisation responsible for dealing with crises in Ghana, there

Therefore, even though almost a third of the refugees in the study were town refugees, this does not accurately reflect the distribution of Liberian refugees. Rather it is indicative of my original intention to do a comparative study between camp refugees and town refugees.<sup>10</sup> My research assistant who lived at the camp took me to visit several of his friends in town, and other refugees at the camp introduced me to some of their Liberian friends in town as well. So while the chart divides refugees on the basis of where they live, this does not indicate that the refugees in a particular category confine themselves to the town or to the camp.

In addition, I include information given by Liberians living in Kumasi, which is located three hours North of Accra by bus. These three refugees reported that there is a very small population of Liberians in Kumasi, and they have very little, if any, interaction with Liberians at the camp or in Accra. Although they did not benefit from the aid distributed at Buduburam, Liberians in Kumasi are utilising survival strategies similar to those used by the other refugees interviewed. It should be noted that I knew the Liberians in Kumasi previous to my visit with them.<sup>11</sup>

The refugees in the study are usually represented as individuals (in a few cases as siblings or as a couple) although some are related to each other so the information they provided may overlap. For instance, two refugees may benefit from remittances received from the same family member in the US, or a person may be a student with no reported economic activities when in fact another family member engaged in some income generating activity is providing for him or her. Unfortunately, this makes it difficult to draw concrete conclusions about the relative importance of remittances and/or economic activities in people's survival strategies.

In some ways singling out individuals instead of focusing on households has skewed my data, but gathering more precise information was constrained by the following factors. First, because I was in Ghana for only six weeks, I did not have sufficient time to come to a clear understanding of how family networks and acquaintances are linked together and benefit one another. Second, many Liberian families were split up during the war, so individuals within a household may each have very different stories to tell, and it is difficult to piece together when and where they were together and how they assisted one another. In addition, the number of people in the household may fluctuate often. For example, in the house where I stayed, we had anywhere from three to seven people sleeping under one roof depending on who was visiting and who was travelling. Finally, Liberians tend to call friends and acquaintances 'auntie,' 'uncle,' 'sister' and 'brother' regardless of biological relationship so it is not always immediately obvious who is part of the household and who is just visiting. Recognising these limitations I trust that the data accurately reflects the issues most important to Liberian refugees.

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are about 8,000 'official' Liberian refugees at the camp and about 8,000 'illegal' residents. He defined 'illegal' residents as people not recognised or registered as refugees by the Ghanaian government or UNHCR. He explained that because there are many ways to enter the camp, it is impossible to regulate who comes and goes.

<sup>10</sup> When I began my research I assumed that the distinction between town and camp refugees would be clear. Upon discovering that town and camp refugees have more similarities than differences in regards to coping mechanisms used for surviving without aid, it proved more relevant to assess the similarities rather than to make distinctions.

<sup>11</sup> I lived in Liberia from 1980-1989, and the Liberians in Kumasi are friends from that time.

## **The history that shapes Liberian refugees**

Refugees are often portrayed in the media as a mass of desperate humanity pouring across international borders in search of a safe haven. While there is some truth in this perception, it tends to dehistoricise refugees making them a generic category, universally defined (Malkii, 1996). But each refugee crisis is a product of a long history culminating in the conflict that causes people to flee their homes. And once refugees reach a place of safety, social norms and cultural practices are not necessarily discarded. On the contrary, the conditions of exile require displaced populations to adapt and adjust, but refugees continue to utilise old patterns of survival employed in new ways given the changed circumstances. All refugees may have similar basic needs for food, shelter and water, but to understand how a refugee community re-establishes themselves in a foreign land, refugees must be understood within their historical context.

In this section, I will focus on three broad aspects of Liberian history that have influenced and continue to influence the lives of Liberians in exile. First, the historical significance of Liberia's origins in the US must be established since the US continues to be of great importance for the way Liberian culture evolves, for social networks Liberians maintain, and for the opportunities they are able to pursue. Second, an outline of Liberia's subsequent history traces the unraveling of the nation, leading up to the civil war that caused hundreds of thousands of Liberians to flee their country. Third, while a consideration for material explanations of the war is of primary importance, spiritual explanations will also be considered as an essential parallel to understanding political and social transformations taking place. In highlighting the significant aspects of Liberia's history the groundwork for understanding Liberians in exile will be shown.

### **Liberia: America's solution to slavery**

The founding of the nation of Liberia has been described as the "privatisation of a public responsibility," the public responsibility being the problem of slavery in the US (Sanneh, 1999:203). In search of a solution to this evil, the white founders of the American Colonisation Society (ACS), established in 1787, advocated the establishment of a colony in Africa. The benefits of such a colony appeared obvious (in Liebenow, 1969:2-7; Sanneh, 1999:187-192; Sawyer, 1992:13-41). First, sending freed slaves back to Africa would rid America of a social and moral problem. Second, it would allow Africa to receive what were considered to be partially civilised and Christianised blacks. And third, the blacks themselves would achieve freedom and opportunity by going to Africa. The idea was not to build a material empire, but the colony was justified on grounds that it would extend American ideals to Africa.

Certainly the history of the region that is now Liberia long predates American interests in the area. In 1817 when two members of the ACS, Mills and Burgess, came to stake out land for the new American colony, they met a sub region in which systems of political and social organisation were already well defined. Well-

established patterns of trade with routes, coastal ports and inland posts and a profitable commerce in slaves and commodities had existed for at least two centuries, and relations with Europeans were entrenched (Sawyer, 1992:69).

Fearing that an American colony would grow strong and rule their people, the coastal chiefs ruling the land that is now part of Liberia flatly refused to co-operate with Mill and Burgess by signing a deed to the land. However, the ACS was not dissuaded and took a successful report to Congress, which subsequently delegated responsibility for the colony to President Monroe.

In 1821 the ACS acting in a private capacity forcibly seized Liberia ushering in the beginning of American influence upon the population (in Liebenow, 1969:4; Sanneh, 1999:203-210). President Monroe gave Lieutenant Stockton unlimited power to purchase land and sent him to negotiate with King Peter, the most powerful of the coastal chiefs. After the King refused to meet with Stockton and his colleague Ayres, they pursued him to his village and threatened him at gunpoint. Understandably, on 15 December 1821 King Peter and five of his subordinate chiefs arrived promptly at a designated meeting place to cede Cape Mesurado, not surprisingly to Stockton and Ayres personally. As payment for their land, the chiefs received muskets, beads, tobacco, gunpowder, clothing, a looking glass, food, rum and other items valued at \$300. Since it was a private settlement scheme, and not federal, the new colony was not entitled to US government financial subsidy or military protection.<sup>12</sup> Here in lay the seeds of a relationship between the US and Liberia that connected Liberia to the US but allowed the US the convenience of having no real responsibility in the affairs of the state.

The settler community arrived a “beleaguered huddle of unwanted blacks who left America where their race conflicted with their freedom to find refuge in Africa where their freedom conflicted with their security” (Sanneh, 1999:210). The primary problem behind the successful implementation of the colonisation plan was that the formers of the plan and the freed slaves themselves completely lacked any understanding of the situation to which the emigrants were going (Sawyer, 1992:38). The ACS assumed that freed slaves would prefer deportation to remaining in the United States, but many African American groups criticised the colony as a way “to take away America’s black rejects to the remote continent of their origin” (Sanneh, 1999:215). In addition, given the great cost of repatriation and the rapid birth rate of the black population in the US,<sup>13</sup> the resettlement plan was destined to be an ineffective strategy for erasing America’s ‘moral problem’.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the enthusiasm of the white founders of the ACS, the efforts at emigration or repatriation had affected only a small number of the free

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<sup>12</sup> When President Monroe introduced the prospect of an African colony to his cabinet, they vetoed the idea. As a result, Monroe’s role in the Liberia project was not officially authorised. In addition, when King Peter signed the deed to the land that would become Liberia, the documents were written up in the name of Lieutenant Stockton, Monroe’s representative and not in the name of the US government thus making Liberia a private enterprise and not a US federal responsibility (Sanneh, 1999:203-210). However, because of Monroe’s initial involvement in the ACS scheme, the capital city of Liberia was named Monrovia in his honour.

<sup>13</sup> In the twelve years of ACS’s activities, some 2,500 blacks were transported to Liberia while in the same period 700,000 blacks were born in the US (Sanneh, 1999:218).

<sup>14</sup> Ironically, some of the settlers of Liberia became perpetrators of the ‘moral problem’ of slavery by becoming slave traders themselves (Sanneh, 1999:220).

Negroes and mulattoes [in the US], whose numbers had risen to a quarter of a million by 1867...Less than twenty thousand persons were settled in Liberia, and close to six thousand of these had never been to America, for they were Africans rescued or 'recaptured' from slaving vessels on the high seas (Liebenow, 1969:8).

It was these settlers, called Americo-Liberians (referred to as Americos in the discussion), and not the ACS enthusiasts who were left to face the consequences of the ACS 'solution'. The next one hundred or so years of Liberia's history were defined by their efforts to grasp and maintain control of the country.

### **The unraveling of a nation**

Noting that the nation of Liberia was founded on the basis of the forced migration of freed slaves *to* Liberia, an outline of Liberia's subsequent history will bring the discussion to 1989 when many Americos and a large portion of the indigenous population fled *out* of their country. In 1846, the settlers signed their declaration of independence, marking Liberia as the oldest republic in Africa. However, this did not mean that all people in the republic enjoyed the same rights and privileges. On the contrary, it was the Americos<sup>15</sup> who comprised less than 1% of Liberia's population that ruled the nation as *quasi*-imperial masters until 1980. In order to gain and reinforce their own control of Liberia's land, resources and people, the Americos selectively and conveniently manipulated the customs and traditions of the indigenous people (Sawyer, 1992:7-10). However, Liberia would inevitably unravel as Americo-Liberian hegemony became increasingly difficult to maintain and structures of Liberian governance based on clientelism would eventually disintegrate into brute force (Sawyer, 1992; Clapham, 1982).

With the rise of colonialism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, western imperial powers eyeing Liberia as a potential addition to their colonial empires posed a threat to the Americo elite who recognised that they were in danger of losing control of their sovereign state (Sawyer, 1992:139-149). The settlers responded by instituting indirect rule over the indigenes, which proved to be a useful strategy not only for holding imperial powers at bay, but also for expanding Americo influence into the hinterland and for maintaining law and order among the 'tribal' people. The Americos allowed the indigenous community to choose their own chiefs, but they ensured that their 'approved' man was placed in power. The role of the chief was to maintain peace and order, to encourage farming among his people, to resolve conflicts according to custom and to ensure that taxes were collected as well as responding to all the requirements of the Liberian government. The chief received a ten-percent commission of all taxes collected thus increasing his incentive to co-operate with the Americo government (Sawyer, 1992:155-156). Indirect rule could be successful as

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<sup>15</sup> The settler community was not homogenous. Cleavages existed between dominating Americo-Liberians who were freed American slaves, and the Congos who were Nigerian, Congolese and other African 'recaptives' brought to Liberia from slaving ships making them less important on the social scale. And light skinned settlers had political and social advantages over dark skinned settlers. With assimilation and intermarriage, these distinctions became less perceptible over time, and the term 'Americo-Liberian' began to refer to an elite political and economic class rather than to a strictly hereditary one (Liebenow, 1969:62; Sawyer, 1992:102).

long as indigenous leaders perpetuated the system of clientelism and patronage that the Americos employed.

The political system of settler community was built upon closely interlocked family networks that were channels to power and to wealth (in Clapham, 1982:78; Sawyer, 1992:116-117; Liebenow, 1969:131-147). These institutions ensured social cohesion and solidarity in the settler society, but the primary advantage (or disadvantage depending on a person's circumstance) of these networks was that they were flexible and easily manipulated and expanded to include or exclude various individuals. Family included external liaisons with indigenous women, fostering, adoption and incorporating a restricted number of indigenous people usually through a system of taking on wards. In addition, birth and marriage were political events and divorce and remarriage were instruments of political alignment. This flexibility in defining family ties existed among indigenous populations and continues to be a feature of Liberian social life, but in the context of Americo rule, family linkages had distinct political implications. Knowledge of family ties helped to maintain the supremacy of the non-tribal over the tribal community.

The patrimonial leadership of Liberia's elite families was reinforced by Christianity and church membership. The church in Liberia is as old as Liberia itself, and many of the founders of the nation were in fact ministers. The churches, which included a variety of Protestant denominations such as the Episcopalians, Methodists and Baptists, "served to differentiate the westernised and civilised from the up-country masses" (Clapham, 1982:78). In effect, the church legitimated the political agenda of the Americos because Christianity provided the basic justification for connecting Liberia's leaders with the directives of God (Gifford, 1993:57-59). The cumulative effect of this was that the upper class settlers became the custodians of basic values and orientations that came to guide much of Liberian culture (Sawyer, 1992:117-119). Within this milieu, the 'tribal person,' or 'country boy or girl' as the Americos condescendingly referred to them, had to accept the religion and the lifestyle of the Americo-Liberians as the legitimate ideal in order to access economic and political opportunity (Liebenow, 1969:26).

While the Americos were necessarily in Africa, they were preferably not of it. Connected to America by bonds of history, language and values, the consciousness of Liberia was profoundly marked by America, although Liberia were a castaway colony on the shores of West Africa (Sanneh, 1999:236). However, the Americo elite who could afford it reportedly owned houses in the US, sent their children there for school, and as air travel became more common, some even commuted to Liberia to work during the week, but flew to their homes in the US on the weekends.<sup>16</sup> As time went on and the Americos mingled more with the indigenous community around them, they were certainly affected by the indigenous culture and adopted many 'tribal' ways. However, the pull of America has always been a significant feature of Americo-Liberian social and cultural life. Even among the indigenous community, all things *qui* (or western) came to be respected and those things considered tribal, indigenous or African were looked down upon.

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<sup>16</sup> While there is little documented proof to show how wide spread this extravagant lifestyle actually was, the consensus of Liberian refugees interviewed in Ghana seemed to be that Americos basically lived between the US and Liberia, and they had sufficient wealth to finance this lifestyle.

The lifestyle of Americos in many ways reflected the lifestyle of urban African-Americans who stereotypically valued big, expensive cars, flashy clothes, and grandiose displays of wealth. Even if a person did not have excessive wealth, it was important to look as if one did. Rather than save and invest wisely, Americo culture typically required extravagance and opulence as a way to prove oneself. For example, membership in clubs, the Masonic Lodge being of primary importance, became a significant arena for political networking and allowed Americos and assertive indigenous Liberians the opportunity to boost their social and political standing (Liebenow, 1969:99-100). These organisations devoted enormous attention to public display and ceremonies that were considered essential for proving solidarity and success (Sawyer, 1992:122). Membership emitted an aura of secrecy, power, and even magic that reinforced the authority of the elite (Clapham, 1982:78).

The presidency of V.S. Tubman beginning in 1943 marked a significant shift in Liberian politics from the control of ruling elites to the personalisation of authority in the office of the presidency (Sawyer, 1992:278-286; Clapham, 1982:79-82; Liebenow, 1969:148-170). As long as government was in the hands of the True Whig Party, the single party that ensured Americo supremacy, there was some semblance of political accountability with checks and balances in place. However, Tubman made a series of amendments to the constitution that strengthened his own power. He also appointed well-placed individuals as 'Public Relations Officers' to act as a network of informers furnishing him with political gossip and comments on local administrators. In addition, all executive posts were dispensed as presidential gifts to individuals Tubman chose to reward.

Wielding the benefits of office appointments and money in exchange for loyalty and information, Tubman had the bargaining advantage. Under Tubman, democracy became increasingly more a charade to give the government the appearance of legitimacy and effectiveness. However, by placating and seducing his political opponents with rewards of position and access to wealth and by using his charm and political prowess to build a network of clients, Tubman was able to pull power away from others.

Two policies guided Tubman's presidency and allowed him to successfully negotiate between the need to maintain international respectability, to regulate internal control and to generate wealth that he could use as leverage for controlling people (Clapham, 1982:80). First, the Unification Policy gave the appearance that he was bridging the gap between indigenous Liberians and the Americos.<sup>17</sup> In tandem, Tubman formulated the Open Door Policy that allowed foreign investors to exploit Liberia's iron ore and other mineral resources with the benefit of generous tax concessions and minimal control of investment by multinational companies.<sup>18</sup> Put simplistically, the

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<sup>17</sup> Newly independent African states severely criticised the Liberian government for its blatant discrimination against the indigenous people. Tubman responded with "almost a frenzied effort to establish ties with new African states and to assume a role of leadership in the United Nations and at the various conference of African states" (Liebenow, 1969:197). Taking on the role of a continental leader and using his talents in international diplomacy to reduce ideological threats close to home and to maintain stability, Tubman was able to neutralise a potentially hostile environment. He also managed to protect himself against internal revolution by providing foreign diplomatic posts to young, educated Liberians thus intentionally ridding Liberia of any potential dissidents.

<sup>18</sup> At this time, "the iron ore concessions – American, German and Swedish – where the largest and most obvious sources of investment, but not the only ones. Logging companies, service industries such as banks and hotels, and a small manufacturing sector were also included. Between them, they

Open Door Policy existed in order to make the money,<sup>19</sup> and the Unification Policy in order to spend it as rewards were meted out in a gesture of ‘unity’.

Under these policies, successful participation in private enterprise was wholly dependent on connections to the presidentially dominated authority structure thus reinforcing the president’s power (Sawyer, 1992:284). Unification was really about unification around the president, not about unification of Americo-Liberians and indigenous peoples. Although the Unification and Open Door Policies provided benefits to the country, “[these policies] had the side effects that relegated Liberia to the status of an oversized tribal village within which the entire citizenry eventually made Tubman an undemocratic but ‘benevolent’ paramount chief” (Horton, 1994:21).

Tubman’s rule of clientelism and patronage and the use of brute force from time to time when his other methods did not work were not sustainable. After 27 years in office, Tubman died of an illness in 1971. Elections were forthcoming, but it was clear that J.R. Tolbert, Tubman’s Vice President, had been groomed to succeed the presidency. Tolbert inherited the highly centralised and corrupt structures of the presidency, and he struggled “to maintain the extravagant prerogatives of the presidency while rejecting Tubman’s paternalistic style and patronage networks” (Sawyer, 1992:287). However, Tolbert “overestimated his powers and ignored the limitations of the office he had inherited” (Clapham, 1982:83). The proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back occurred when Tolbert enraged the urban poor by raising the price of rice, their staple food, in 1979. The fact that Tolbert’s brothers were connected with the production, importation and sale of rice also served to enrage urban Liberians instigating them to riot (Boley, 1983:101-119). By 1980, Samuel K. Doe, an indigenous, uneducated, military sergeant staged a *coup d’etat* and took over the Executive Mansion, the symbol of Liberian political power. The True Whig Party was dismantled and the façade of Liberia’s democracy disintegrated into military rule.

Doe’s rule was characterised by fear, suspicion and opportunism. He ruled with brutality and the machine gun, and his efforts to satisfy his own personal greed led him to raid not only the public treasury but also the people in society (Gifford, 1993:16-22; Sawyer, 1992:293-294).<sup>20</sup> If Liberians hoped that an indigenous leader would provide equal opportunities for all Liberians, those hopes were soon dashed. Repression and brutality were not new to Liberians, but the junta intensified these

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were largely responsible for an increase in Liberian exports from \$9.5 million to \$252 million, [and an increase] in government spending from \$1 million to \$53 million between 1944 and 1971, [the years Tubman was president of Liberia]” (Clapham, 1982:80). It should also be noted that the American Firestone Rubber Company contributed significantly to economic growth at this time as well. Firestone set up the largest rubber plantation in the world in Liberia in 1926 after signing a 99-year lease for a large tract of land paying six cents per acre and providing the Liberian government with a large loan (Gifford, 1993:12).

<sup>19</sup> Between 1952 and 1957, Liberia’s economic growth rate was 15 percent a year, higher than anywhere else in the world except Japan. However, this growth generally benefited foreign firms and not ordinary Liberians (Gifford, 1993:12).

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Ellis (1995:176) quotes Amos Sawyer who writing in 1987 described the first six years of Doe’s regime as “six years of rape and plunder by armed marauders whose ideology is to search for cash and whose ambition is to retain power to accumulate and protect wealth” (Sawyer, A. (1987) *Effective Immediately: Dictatorship in Liberia 1980-1986: A Personal Perspective*, Liberian Working Group Paper No. 5, Liberian Working Group, Bremen, 1987). Ellis adds, “since the state had historically been used as a means of personal enrichment, it was [logical] for Doe to use it for the same purpose. Nevertheless, the speed with which he and his military supporters acquired wealth and the brutality which they employed were of a different order from what had gone before”.



conditions. A Liberian academic who opposed Doe's regime, provides this analysis of the situation.

The collapse of the government as a result of the 1980 military take-over was not the collapse of presidential authority but rather the collapse of the already declining vestiges of settler patrimonial control and the degeneration of presidential autocracy into despotism...The combination of ill-trained military people in search of bounties and ambitious former clients of a decaying patronage system seeking to maintain their privileges had produced the right chemistry for ineptitude, plunder and brutal repression – the trademark of military rule and tragedy in Liberia (Sawyer, 1992:301).

Not only did Doe's regime mark the crumbling of political structures, but the social institutions that had been the bedrock of Americo society were also diminished and demolished further contributing to Liberia's decline. Under Doe's dictatorship, leaders of the mainline churches (those established by Americo-Liberians) were denounced, threatened and subdued. As bastions of Americo supremacy and civilisation, Doe wanted to squelch any potential opposition coming from these churches (Gifford, 1993:47-97).

Liberia's 'special relationship' with the US had remained in tact throughout Americo rule, and even though the US was uncomfortable with Doe's seizure of power, it was politically prudent for the US to support the regime given the Cold War politics of the time (Sesay, 1996a:39). US interests in Liberia included the large military and intelligence apparatus based there, satellite communications installations and a radio relay station. In addition, Liberia's Freeport served strategic purposes for the US Marines and many US commercial vessels were registered in the name of Liberia and flew Liberia's flag, which carried with it certain economic advantages. Liberia was firmly in the US camp, and she was rewarded by becoming the largest per capita recipient of US aid in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1980s receiving an estimated sum of \$500 million in aid between 1980 and 1988 (Sesay, 1996a:39).

Unfortunately, much of the aid was misappropriated and there is little to show for all that was invested in Liberia (Gifford, 1993:35-46).<sup>21</sup> When fighting broke out in December 1989 and the violence spread to the capital city, Liberians expected the US to intervene.<sup>22</sup> However, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the distraction of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, President George Bush declared that "Liberia was not worth the life of a single US Marine" (Ellis, 1995:168). Instead, the US supported the more convenient option of a West African search for a solution to what was generally considered an African problem (Aning, 1999).

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<sup>21</sup> In 1987, Doe, the US State Department and USAID signed an agreement allowing a team of seventeen American financial experts known as OPEX to take over financial control of Liberian government accounts as a precondition for providing more loans. Finding the government more concerned to maintain appearances of fiscal responsibility rather than to actually implement changes and stop corruption, the OPEX project was discontinued after one year. Doe's Liberia "was managed with far greater priority given to short-term political survival and deal making than to any long-term recovery or nation-building efforts" (Huband, 1998:43).

<sup>22</sup> There is widespread agreement that most Liberians, brought up in the shadow of Uncle Sam, would have gladly accepted a US intervention, but this was not to be (Ellis, 1995:168).

## The civil war: considering material and spiritual explanations

The protracted civil war in Liberia starting with Charles Taylor's attack on the town of Butuo in Nimba County on 24 December 1989 (Ellis, 1995:182) and ending with the signing of the fourteenth peace accord in Abuja, Nigeria in August 1996 (Harris, 1999:431) is complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, it could be described as "a sophisticated struggle led by Christianised, American educated<sup>23</sup> and Libyan trained military commandos" (Dick and Boer, 2001:26) to secure the presidency of the country and to take advantage of available resources by selling diamonds, iron ore, rubber, timber and other products on the world market.

On the other hand, the war could be described as "ragtag armies of insurgents dressed in bizarre attire, protecting themselves with various charms" (ibid.) using spiritual powers, symbolised in ritual practices of alleged human sacrifice and cannibalism to capture political power over the nation's people. Rather than viewing these representations of the war, the 'modern' and the 'primitive,' in stark contrast, a combination of the two perspectives helps to explain the essence of the conflict and aspects of Liberian economic, social and cultural life that were manipulated and abused in the war.

Cast in terms of an ethnic conflict, the war in Liberia quickly disintegrated into a blood bath (in Ellis, 1995:176-179). Although Liberia is composed of sixteen ethnic groups (none of which comprises a majority), under Americo rule 'tribalism' was never such a violent and destructive force as it came to be in the civil war. However, Doe's strategy for governance had been to surround himself with people from his tribe, the Krahn. He also co-opted the support of the Mandingo, a rather wealthy commercial and land-owning class in a Gio-Mano enclave of Nimba County where they were viewed as intruders from Guinea.<sup>24</sup> In 1983 and 1985 when Thomas Quiwonkpa staged *coup d'état* attempts to remove Doe from power, his supporters were Gio and Mano soldiers from his home area of Nimba County. Doe retaliated against Quiwonkpa by sending Krahn and Mandingo soldiers to collectively punish the Gio and Mano by looting and killing with exceptional savagery. By 1989 the Gio and Mano were ready and willing to side with Taylor in retaliating against Doe's forces.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, rather than viewing the war in strictly ethnic terms, more accurately it was out of common hatred for Doe that the NPFL, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, was formed.

As the war split off into numerous factions, ethnicity was continually used as a tool for organising troops. However, 'ethnicity' while perhaps based in primordial reality is easily manipulated and re-constructed by those in power to suit their political ends (Berman, 1998). Further debunking the myth of 'ethnic' war, given the numbers involved in each faction, "it is clear that a warring faction that limited its recruitment

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<sup>23</sup> US Ambassador to Liberia, Twaddell, informed the US House of Representative Committee in 1996 that most of Liberia's faction leaders had spent many years in the US, owned property and businesses there, and knew how the US system works and how to make it work for them (Ellis, 1999:138).

<sup>24</sup> The majority of Mandingos are Muslim, thus the term Mandingo is generally applied in Liberia to traders of different ethnic origins who take on the appearance of Muslim culture (Ellis, 1995:179). Mandingo traders are popularly known as 'charlies'.

<sup>25</sup> According to Tom Womeiyu, a long-standing opponent of Doe, the NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) was actually founded by Quiwonkpa. Only in the late 1980s did Charles Taylor come to be regarded as the NPFL leader (Ellis, 1995:180).

to members of a single ethnic group would be inviting defeat at the hands of any less discriminating faction” (Outram, 1997:361). So while ethnic conflict was certainly a factor in the war, ethnic groups appear to be more representative of political alliances and less a matter of biological distinction.

The original aim of the war, to remove Doe from power, was accomplished relatively early on, but more groups became involved and conflicting agendas emerged making the conflict increasingly complex (in Ellis, 1995:169-174). On 9 September 1990, Prince Johnson, Charles Taylor’s training officer who split from the NPFL taking the core of the Libyan-trained rebel soldiers, brutally mutilated, tortured and killed President Doe.<sup>26</sup> The fall out was that a large number of Krahn and Mandingo government soldiers fled to Sierra Leone to escape the revenge massacres that followed. In exile, they began to regroup as ULIMO, the United Liberation Movement for Democracy. In the meantime, the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS)<sup>27</sup> set up the Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU) installing Professor Amos Sawyer as the interim president of Liberia. Sceptical of ECOWAS, which was headed by Nigeria’s President Babangida, a friend and ally of President Doe, Charles Taylor was unwilling to recognise the new government.<sup>28</sup> As a result, ECOWAS and IGNU governed the Monrovia area, while Charles Taylor took control of “Greater Liberia,” or about 90% of the country.

The conflict continued on as various warlords emerged in a scramble for opportunities to control and profit from Liberia’s rich natural resources (Reno, 1995; 1996; Aning, 1999; Ellis, 1995; 1999; Outram, 1997; Richards, 1996; Sesay, 1996a).<sup>29</sup> Charles Taylor, the most powerful of the warlords, had the benefit of international financial and political support from Libya, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast.<sup>30</sup> In Greater Liberia,

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<sup>26</sup> Prince Johnson had the torture and murder of President Doe recorded on videotape, demonstrating that extreme, seemingly ‘primitive’ violence is indeed compatible with modernity. It has been suggested that Prince Johnson used the modern communication technology to strengthen and amplify images reflective of ritualistic killings in symbolic language familiar to Liberians. This video has been widely disseminated and viewed by the public in West Africa (Ellis, 1995:192).

<sup>27</sup> A variety of political motivations led to the deployment of ECOMOG (the ECOWAS Military Observer Group) peacekeepers in Liberia (Aning, 1996; Ellis, 1999:150-188; Sesay, 1996a), but generally speaking other states in the region agreed to intervene because Taylor posed a threat to regional security. This fear was substantiated when Taylor began supporting the rebel activities of Foday Sankoh, with whom he trained in Libya, and the RUF, the Revolutionary United Front, in Sierra Leone (Kamara, 1999:10). It has been suggested that Taylor’s reason for doing so was to punish the Sierra Leonean government for participating in ECOMOG (Ellis, 1995:170).

<sup>28</sup> ECOMOG rearmed the Armed Forces of Liberia, that is Doe’s Krahn and Mandingo soldiers, thus re-legitimizing them as the armed forces of the internationally recognised government, IGNU (Ellis, 1995:170).

<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that ECOMOG soldiers were also involved in looting. Popularly, the acronym ECOMOG came to mean “Every Commodity Or Moveable Object Gone” (Dick and Boer, 2001:26). As the war progressed it became apparent that ECOMOG soldiers and officers developed vested business interests in Liberia. Nigerians were particularly notorious for utilising transport infrastructure and connections in Liberia, Gambia and Sierra Leone for smuggling purposes. Additionally, ECOMOG troops were in a strong position to demand cuts in deals with warlords and to selectively punish uncooperative factions (Ellis, 1999:150-188; Reno, 1996; Sesay, 1996b:404)

<sup>30</sup> This unlikely trio emerged as a result of a variety of political steps and missteps as explained by Ellis (1995:180-182). Taylor, the former Deputy Minister of Commerce under President Doe, had fled to the US in 1983 under investigation for fraud, allegedly having taken \$900,000 from the national coffers. He was arrested by US police under an extradition treaty with the Liberian government, but succeeded in escaping from a maximum-security prison in Massachusetts by paying a bribe, allegedly of \$50,000. He then passed through Mexico, Spain and France before settling in Accra in late 1985 or 1986. During his travels, Taylor acquired a working knowledge of French, which would later prove beneficial in his dealings with francophone African governments. In Ghana, Taylor befriended Memunu Ouattara and Thomas Sankara, the Burkinabe ambassador to Ghana and the president of Burkina Faso respectively, and Jerry Rawlings, the president of Ghana, all of which were close friends

he set up his own ministries, even his own currency and encouraged foreign companies to do business as usual in territories that he controlled, exporting iron ore, diamonds and timber from his zone in return for taxes which were paid to him personally (Ellis, 1995:171; Reno, 1996).<sup>31</sup>

However, upon realising that he could not gain the presidency, his ultimate prize, through brute force, Taylor was willingly to seek a political compromise leading him to co-operate in the Cotonou Peace Accord in July 1993. Unfortunately, the peace talks had the effect of splintering the existing armies resulting in the proliferation of factions headed up by various warlords (Ellis, 1995:172). Although it has been argued that the violence in Liberia signified the unleashing of primordial savagery (Kaplan, 1994), it would seem that the war is better understood as the product of an excluded educated elite who wanted access to diamonds and other natural resources (Richards, 1996).

Rebel leaders were able to recruit fighters on the basis of purported ethnic affiliations promising rebel soldiers opportunities for personal enrichment through looting. It would seem that looting appealed especially to frustrated young people wanting the chance to seize their just desserts that they could not get legitimately in a system so long corrupted by patronage and clientelism (Ellis, 1999:120-125). The United Nations estimated that there were 60,000 combatants in the civil war of whom few had received any formal military training and none of whom was paid (Kamara, 1999:2). The fighters were mostly not soldiers at all but armed civilians, sometimes very young,<sup>32</sup> who lived by the gun stealing what they needed or wanted. As the war progressed, vengeance, hatred, self-defense and survival undoubtedly motivated the rebel fighters as well (Outram, 1997:367; Ellis, 1999:125-132).

However, material explanations for the war do not seem to go quite far enough. On a superficial level the brutal violence so prevalent in the civil war, which included alleged cannibalism, the dismembering of body parts, and the drinking of blood, appears grotesque and bizarre, but when looking at the war from a perspective of Liberian spirituality these heinous acts become explainable. It appears that the perpetrators of the violence were utilising a lexicon of well-known symbols from Liberian 'traditional' religion in order to increase their own power and to intimidate their victims (Ellis, 1995; 1999). Violent killings such as those witnessed in the war were nothing new to Liberians though certainly in the war these acts were much more wide spread.

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and had quite close relations with Libya. Since Taylor was running from the US law, he had nothing to lose in upsetting America by siding with Libya. He persuaded Colonel Gaddafi that he was a revolutionary and arranged for a small group of Liberians to receive military training in Libya. However, because Taylor dabbled in revolutionary politics he began to pose a threat to Rawlings and was twice detained in Accra. Taylor's Burkinabe connections helped him when the new president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaore prevailed upon the Ghanaian authorities to release Taylor into his own custody. In addition, President Houphouet-Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire was ready to assist Taylor to spite Doe whom he never forgave for executing A. B. Tolbert, a son of President Tolbert who had married his adopted daughter.

<sup>31</sup> Within only six months of the outbreak of war in 1989, Taylor was able to amass over \$3.6 million from timber exports to the European community (Sesay, 1996a: 48). In return for NPFL iron ore and co-operation, consortium participants allegedly paid Taylor \$10 million a month (Reno, 1995:212).

<sup>32</sup> According to UN statistics, 21 percent of ex-combatants in Liberia were children, but many social workers thought the true figure was closer to 15 percent (Ellis, 1999:132).

Stephen Ellis (1995; 1999) argues that many Liberians attribute anarchy in the material world to a reflection of anarchy in the spiritual world brought about by religious change in Liberia and the changing distribution of power. From times long preceding the arrival of the Americos, the social life of indigenous Liberians was organised around the Poro (for the men) and Sande (for the women) secret societies, and ritual killings were a regular part of organisational activities. But under the rule of the Americos, who incorporated themselves into the societies as a way to increase their power over the indigenous people,<sup>33</sup> ritual killings were increasingly used for settling personal vendettas rather than for community purification as was traditionally intended.

Under the directives of many of Liberia's presidents, most poignantly President Doe, human sacrifice became privatised, and political elites hired freelance heartmen to kill victims as a way to gain spiritual power over their enemies. And finally during the war, the proliferation of ritual killings at the hands of ordinary rebel soldiers, the desecration of Sande and Poro places of worship and the exposing of the secrets of the ritual masks symbolised the final descent into a spirit world gone out of control.

But if the conflict is perceived by many to be spiritual and not just political or economic, how can peace be restored in Liberia? Recognising that treaties and democratic elections do not seem sufficient to address the spiritual undercurrents of the conflict, it has been suggested that "by putting the Poro genie back in the bottle," peace could return to Liberia (Harris, 1999:451). In other words, by restoring traditional leaders to their former roles in the secret societies, they would again be able to regulate ritual practice for the good of the community. However, this is not a likely scenario given that history is not easily rewound, and arguing that human sacrifice is 'good' for maintaining order in society is certainly contestable.

In addition, focusing entirely on 'traditional religion' seems to sideline the prominence of Christianity among Liberians that expands the spiritual explanation to include a Christian interpretation of why the war occurred and how peace can be regained.<sup>34</sup> As one Liberian refugee in Ghana explained,

God holds the whole nation responsible for its leaders. Throughout Liberia's history our leaders have been members of secret societies yet they were also leaders in the church too. They pretended to be Christians but they had other things going on the side. All the presidents made human sacrifices before coming to power. The blood of those innocent lives cries out for revenge. God hates the hands that shed innocent blood. Liberians need to repent and turn back to God (Leroy, 30/8/00; quoted in Dick and Boer, 2001:27).

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<sup>33</sup> Ellis (1995; 1999) argues that these societies functioned as the traditional guarantor of order, regulating social transformation and keeping people in their proper place. However, rather than being a stagnate code of beliefs and norms, the 'traditional religion' easily accommodated change. When the Americos arrived and established indirect rule, rather than abolishing the societies, they brought them under their control and set themselves up as *zoes*, or medicine men. Ironically the Americos who portrayed themselves as western and far more 'civilised' and Christianised than 'native' Liberians, were willing to co-opt elements of traditional society to enhance their own power (Dick and Boer, 2001:27).

<sup>34</sup> It should be recognised that other 'religious' or 'spiritual' perspectives of the war may exist, including an Islamic point of view that is a minority religion in Liberia. However, because Christianity is so predominate, this will be the focus of discussion.

Instead of blaming the abuse of the traditional practices of the secret societies for the anarchy in Liberia, Liberian Christians interviewed in Ghana hold that anarchy could have been avoided if Liberians had abandoned 'traditional' ritual killings entirely in order to serve God. Consequently, the only way forward is to seek reconciliation and peace by abandoning, not reinstating, those practices in order to follow the Christian God.

There is some debate among academics as to how the spread of Christianity among Liberians has affected and could potentially affect Liberian politics. Paul Gifford (1993) asserts that because the majority of churches, which experienced tremendous growth among the indigenous population in Liberia in the 1980s,<sup>35</sup> disclaimed all involvement in politics, they effectively legitimated Doe's brutal rule by sitting on their hands and hoping for peace and security in the world to come. This perspective views Liberian Christianity as a desperate irrelevance at best and a contributing factor in the oppression, impoverishment and destruction of the entire nation at worst. In light of this argument, it would seem that Christianity would have little to contribute to the restoration of peace in Liberia. However, Ellis (1995:196) provides an alternative perspective that corresponds more readily with comments made by Liberians in Ghana. He argues that precisely because churches focus on the invisible, they have the potential to offer the only realistic solution to Liberia's crisis. Given Liberia's religious and cultural framework, "healing in these circumstances lies in the spiritual realm at least as much as in the political one" (Ellis, 1995:197).<sup>36</sup>

But returning to the political sphere, the signing of the Abuja Accords in August 1996 brought about the conclusion of the war largely because Charles Taylor finally achieved his goal and was democratically elected as the President of Liberia in July 1997. The elections were considered free and fair but whether or not the results truly reflect the will of the people is debatable.<sup>37</sup> All parties agreed to the electoral rules. However, it could be said that certain conditions played into Taylor's hands (in Harris, 1999).

First, elections were hastily scheduled resulting in a short and chaotic registration period. The compressed electoral timetable most likely benefited Taylor whose party was already well organised with established structures. Second, the impact of the absence of some 250,000 potential voters (compared to 622,000 who actually voted<sup>38</sup>) remaining in exile is extremely difficult to judge. While it is possible that refugees

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<sup>35</sup> An explanation for the rapid growth of Christianity in Liberia in the 1980s will be given in the 'Living as Liberians' section.

<sup>36</sup> Some Liberians are strongly in favour of rectifying the past by setting up tribunals, possibly under the auspices of the United Nations and/or ECOWAS, in order to try all those known to have organised, supported, or carried out massacres, human rights violations and genocidal killings (Sesay, 1996b: 417-418). However, a Truth Commission along South African lines is unlikely to be accepted since many of the alleged abusers now in power would have to agree to it (Kamara, 1999:13).

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor won 76 percent of the votes cast by 22.9 percent of the eligible voters. He ran against twelve contesting political parties who received the remaining 24 percent of the votes. In the legislature, Taylor's National Patriotic Party (NPP) controls 21 of the 26 seats in the upper house and 49 of the 64 in the lower house making it unlikely that he would face much opposition in government (Kamara, 1999:1). An oft-repeated comment expressing why Liberians may have voted for Charles Taylor as president is "He who spoil it, let him fix it" (Harris, 1999:451).

<sup>38</sup> Various sources report different numbers of votes cast in the 1997 election. Harris (1999:440) states that 622,000 voted, while Kamara (1999:1) reports that 472,863 voted in a country with an estimated pre-war population of 2.8 million. This discrepancy perhaps points to voting irregularities and different interpretations of voting statistics.

who did not return did not support Taylor, it cannot be concluded that all refugees would have voted against him.<sup>39</sup> In addition, it has been suggested that voting for Taylor was a reasoned ploy by the electorate who assumed Taylor would continue fighting if he did not win the election (Harris, 1999; Kamara, 1999:1; US Department of State, 2001). In other words, it is possible that voters were willing to reward the former warlord<sup>40</sup> with the office of the presidency as a way to restore peace and to be freed to improve their living conditions. Regardless of the factors that may or may not have contributed to the election results, Taylor currently remains the chief executive officer of Liberia.

However, Taylor's victory came at a very high price. The devastating conclusion of seven years of violence and bloodshed was an estimated 200,000 war casualties out of an estimated pre-war population of 2.8 million. In addition there were approximately 1.4 million internally displaced persons within Liberia and 700,000 refugees had fled out of the country. The UNHCR estimated that 160,000 of those were in Cote d'Ivoire, 235,000 in Guinea Conakry, 14,000 in Sierra Leone and 17,000 in Ghana. By 1997, Liberia, one of the smallest West African countries, ranked sixth globally in terms of refugee numbers (Kamara, 1999).

### **Reinventing business as usual**

So far, critiques of the humanitarian aid regime have been considered and the history leading up to the flight of Liberian refugees has been outlined. This section provides strong evidence to support the claim that while refugees may initially need external assistance, they are indeed capable of identifying and obtaining what they consider important for their survival independent of assistance from outsiders and often utilising survival patterns with historical antecedents. Certainly the scarcity of resources and poor economic conditions in the host country limit what refugees can do and not all refugees have the same social networks, education, and job skills significantly affecting the degree to which they are able to provide for themselves. But generally speaking, even as they face obstacles, most Liberians in Ghana are able to sustain themselves at levels similar to, or in some cases better than, what they experienced before the war.

In order to make a case for the resiliency of Liberian refugees in Ghana, the following considerations will be made. First, a brief description of how Liberians utilised the provisions of the aid regime to improve their situation in ways they considered appropriate is a fitting extension to arguments already put forward about refugee resourcefulness under the aid regime. Then, considerable attention will be given to the ways Liberian refugees have supported and continue to sustain themselves

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<sup>39</sup> Harris (1999:440) suggests that "logistics, expense, the desire to complete an election sooner rather than later, and the reluctance of Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire to allow voting in the camps were more likely factors that excluded the refugee population that was unwilling or unable to return". In other words, a variety of explanations for why Liberians in exile did not vote must be taken into account.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor invested considerable energy in reshaping his image from that of a warlord to that of a patriot and nationalist. In trying to put himself forward as all things to all men, "he claimed Gola and Americo-Liberian ancestry and changed his middle name in 1991 from MacArthur to Ghankay" (Harris, 1999:446). In addition, he became a born-again Christian in late 1996. And as part of his campaign strategy he doled out rice, Liberians' staple food, to replace the bulgar wheat distributed by the UN.

independent of humanitarian assistance. Looking first at the conditions in Ghana that limit them, the analysis will then focus on how Liberians have pursued various opportunities available in Accra, in Kumasi and at the camp, the three areas studied.

### **Living under the aid umbrella**

With the signing of the Abuja Accords in September 1995, it was hoped that peace was on the horizon and that soon conditions in Liberia would be favourable for refugee repatriation. However, the conflict persisted culminating in the April 1996 fighting in Monrovia that led to the well-publicised voyage of the *Bulk Challenge*, a leaking Nigerian cargo ship that carried about 2,000 fleeing paying passengers (Nagbe, 1997).<sup>41</sup> The situation worsened when the ship was refused entry in Cote d'Ivoire and in Ghana.

Upon recognising that lack of resources for assisting the refugees was the primary reason the *Bulk Challenge* was not allowed in any port, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan agreed to provide funding to whichever state would take in the unwanted fugitives.<sup>42</sup> President Rawlings of Ghana then called the ship back to Takoradi Harbour just outside of Accra on 14 May 1996. Subsequently, the *Bulk Challenge* refugees were placed at Krisan Refugee Settlement<sup>43</sup> and Buduburam camp and waning relief efforts hindered by a lack of interest on the part of donors surged back to life for a while longer. By August 1996 when Liberia's civil war officially ended, Ghana was said to be providing asylum for an estimated 17,000 Liberians, the majority being assisted at Buduburam Camp (Kamara, 1999:3). Up to that point the humanitarian aid regime was in full operation providing food rations, education, health care and other basic needs for refugees.

As early as 1993, UNHCR initiated a two-pronged plan for enabling the refugees to become completely self-sufficient, a plan that aid workers considered a failure (Interview with Tepe-Mensah, 18/8/00). First, an agriculture project was implemented as a way for refugees to grow their own food making it possible for them to be weaned off of food rations. From the perspective of refugees interviewed this was not

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<sup>41</sup> There is a discrepancy regarding the number of passengers on board the *Bulk Challenge*. According to the Ghana Refugee Board and UNHCR (*Help Refugees Help Themselves*, p.16) there were 1,559 refugees. A Liberian newspaper (*New Democrat Weekly*, 8-15 September 1996) reported that there were over 2,000 passengers on the ship, which supposedly had the carrying capacity of 50-100 passengers. Nagbe (1997), a Liberian refugee and university professor on board the *Bulk Challenge*, wrote a personal account of the journey and he estimated that there were 4,000 on board. This exaggeration quite likely reflects what it felt like to be on a small ship with so many people. In addition, it should be noted that the passengers did not consider themselves refugees at the time. When the crew tried to fly a UN flag, some of the passengers apparently felt this was inappropriate and protested vehemently saying that they were paying passengers and only ships carrying passengers free of charge could claim to be carrying refugees and fly the UN flag. In spite of this protest, later on all the passengers succumbed to the refugee label (Nagbe, 1997:56). *Bulk Challenge* passengers interviewed in Ghana made it clear that they had paid from \$50 to \$75 US for their passage.

<sup>42</sup> According to UNHCR Senior Desk Officer for West Africa, because of the great cost involved in assisting refugees, funding is a crucial issue in deciding which refugees are assisted, to what extent, and for how long (Interview with Pastor-Ortega, 12/1/01). The level of assistance that refugees receive is not uniform and depends largely on the will of donor states to contribute to the humanitarian relief efforts for the particular group of refugees under consideration.

<sup>43</sup> Krisan Camp, usually referred to as Senzoli for the town it is near, is located in the western region, and serves as a residence for refugees from several countries including Sierra Leone, Togo and Sudan as well as Liberians. Because it is a smaller camp, with relatively few Liberians remaining there, I did not conduct research at Senzoli.



a viable project because there was not enough water for everyone to farm, even after a dam was built in an attempt to remedy the situation. Although the agricultural programme did not work out as the aid workers had intended, it should be noted that some refugees currently do cultivate the land to supplement their diet, and they sell excess produce at the market. In addition, there is at least one group of seven refugees who are developing a ‘commercial farm’ next to the camp. However, they too complained of water shortage problems.

We must water twice a day and we have to purchase the water and rent the wheelbarrows. We tried to dig trenches around because we thought maybe we could dig for water near the garden, but you can see there is no water here (name not known, 14/8/00).

They also face the problem of insufficient markets. One farmer said,

There is too much [produce]. The cabbages will spoil before we can sell them all in the market. We need to find a restaurant that we can supply, or some other market” (name not known, 14/8/00).

So rather than viewing the failure of the agricultural programme as evidence of a lack of initiative on the part of refugees, upon further investigation it appears that other factors, namely poor environmental conditions and market failures, make farming difficult.

Simultaneously, since jobs in the Ghanaian labour market are not readily available to refugees, it was hoped that teaching vocational skills and providing a micro-loan scheme would enable them to establish their own businesses in the informal economy. Several vocational schools were set up, and refugees learned construction, carpentry, baking, tie and dye, soap making, sewing and other various skills. However, the loan scheme was a big failure according to UNHCR.

The refugees seemed to think that the UNHCR has unlimited funds. Their attitude was ‘what can the UN do for me?’ The message never sunk in that they are responsible to do things for themselves. The idea of becoming self-sufficient was not accepted. They refugees expected that the UNHCR would take care for them, and they used the loan money for consumption not for investment (Interview with Tepe-Mensah, 18/8/00).

Yet in spite of Liberians perceived inability to become self-sufficient, as of 1997 assistance was greatly reduced.<sup>44</sup> By 1998, the loan scheme was discontinued and food rations were only distributed to the most vulnerable refugees (Interview with Tepe-Mensah, 18/8/00). As of 30 June 2000 even food rations for vulnerable refugees ceased and all humanitarian assistance including “education, health and sanitation, skills training, shelter, water and community services” was withdrawn from Liberians according to UNHCR regional policy (UNHCR memo, 2000). One would expect that Liberians would have been gravely affected by this change of policy. However, this has not been the case.

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<sup>44</sup> Reasons for the reduction of aid will be explained in the ‘Buduburam and Beyond’ section.

On the contrary, regardless of when the refugees arrived, they did not sit around long waiting for handouts before they started to use what was available, food rations in particular, as a way to generate an income. One Liberian explained:

When we first got here, [Ghanaian women] cooked the food for us. There was always more than enough for us to go back for seconds and thirds if we wanted. But then we complained that we wanted to be self-sufficient and cook for ourselves. The UN agreed. The first day, they distributed food, and the food finished before the first half of the line got food. People went hungry that day. Those who came first took more than their fair share. So the UN decided to take a count for rations. How many in each house? There would be three or four in the house, but the family would say we are twenty. The UN distributed the food. Then they would go out to the road and see all the Liberians selling their rations (Pastor Cyrus, 16/8/00).<sup>45</sup>

Later, the refugees received maize rations that were completely inappropriate to the Liberians whose staple food is rice. Obviously, they were inclined to sell the maize to Ghanaians in order to buy rice. Other researchers have made similar observations in regards to food rations at other camps, and it is generally understood that given the scarcity of resources, refugees are industrious and will manage by trading what they have in order to get what they need and want (in previous ‘Literature Review’ section).

### **Living without aid**

The crux of the matter seems to be that refugees will utilise whatever opportunities remain open to them in order to maximise their situation, and when aid is removed or insufficient they adapt and find ways to meet their own needs in other ways. Certainly Liberians face a number of obstacles given the economic conditions of Ghana. Wage labour is not readily available even for Ghanaians so understandably, if there is a job opening a Liberian is usually the last to be considered. In addition, because many Liberians have not learned to speak the local Ghanaian language, primarily Twi, they often feel discriminated against.<sup>46</sup> Liberian women interviewed complained that when they tried to sell things in Ghanaian markets, the Ghanaians may have stopped to buy something but when they heard the distinctive accent of Liberian English, the *lingua franca* of Liberians,<sup>47</sup> they walked away without making

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<sup>45</sup> Not all Liberian refugees felt that this was justified behaviour. One refugee explained, “So many people would say there are fifteen or twenty people in our house, even if there is only three. I wanted to add people so that we could get a big food ration, but [my husband] said no. We suffered because [my husband] is too fair. It made me so vexed” (name withheld, 14/8/00).

<sup>46</sup> Many at the camp expressed this opinion. However, some have used this to their advantage. One refugee who works in Accra explained, “I understand some Twi but I don’t tell the Ghanaians that. I want to be able to listen to what they are saying about me without them knowing. If someone starts speaking Twi to me I politely tell them in English that I don’t understand. I had to drop my Liberian English slang in order to make it here. Ghanaians think sometimes that Liberian English is a dialect because they don’t understand it very well” (Othello, 9/8/00). Another refugee living at the camp said she uses the little bit of Twi she learned while attending a Ghanaian high school to bargain for better prices at the market (Annie, 4/8/00).

<sup>47</sup> Liberian English is its own distinctive dialect of English, sounding in some ways similar to Ebonics, the dialect of English used by some African-Americans usually in inner cities in America. It is likely that these dialects have similar roots given that freed American slaves founded Liberia. While at least sixteen indigenous languages are spoken in Liberia, in Ghana many Liberian children are growing up

a purchase. In addition, the fluctuating exchange rates<sup>48</sup> and frequent price changes serve as a continual frustration to Liberians (obviously Ghanaians are also affected by this). However, Liberians have learned to circumvent these challenges and seize other opportunities.

### **Work found in Accra and Kumasi**

While Liberians certainly utilised humanitarian aid, most did not depend on aid organisations to meet all their needs, but instead they looked for ways to earn an income. A range of opportunities were available depending on the skills a person brought with them to Ghana and the contacts they were able to make in the Ghanaian community. Some women found a niche plaiting hair for Ghanaian women at marketplaces in Accra. One refugee was able to help pay for her husband to attend mechanics school plus fed her family using money she earned from plaiting hair. Another refugee found work bundling papers at a Ghanaian newspaper in town. However, transportation costs were a problem for many who lived at the camp but worked in Accra.

Some but not all of those with professional skills and higher education found it easier to secure employment in Accra. Three refugees were trained accountants in Liberia and had the benefit of business contacts in Ghana prior to the war. When they arrived in Accra, they reconnected with the Ghanaian branch of the firm they worked with in Liberia. All three are currently studying to become certified accountants in order to improve their job skills. Another refugee assisted by a friend to go to journalism school now works for a Ghanaian newspaper, as do a few other Liberians. A Liberian refugee who found work in Accra explained the secret of her success.

Many Liberians told me you won't get a job. They said Ghanaians won't hire you. But I was determined. If you are determined you will get what you want (Agatha, 19/8/00).

Unfortunately for some, their university studies in Liberia were interrupted by the war, and several had to redo their studies starting from the beginning again in Ghana. After one such student completed his degree, he took a job teaching in a rural area of Ghana. His family lives at the camp, and he comes to see them on vacations. Jobs are there for those with special skills, but to get them is not always easy or convenient.

In addition, contacts with Ghanaians sometimes facilitate work opportunities for Liberians who may not have specialised skills. In Kumasi, one refugee received employment managing a computer school through the kindness of a Ghanaian friend she had before the war began. And in Accra, two Liberians interviewed found employment through involvement in Ghanaian churches. In the one case, the Liberian began working as the church accountant. In the other case, the pastor's wife who worked in medical research offered the Liberian a job doing secretarial work.

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only speaking Liberian English. Some refugees expressed annoyance that Ghanaians sometimes do not understand Liberian English and think it is a Liberian indigenous language.

<sup>48</sup> When I arrived in Ghana on 31 July 2001, the exchange rate was 8,600 Ghanaian cedis to £1. Each week the Ghanaian currency devalued, and when I left on 10 September 2001, the exchange rate was at 9,400 Ghanaian cedis to £1.

Although the Liberian had to work for a year without pay, she survived on money and gifts given to her by her Ghanaian colleagues. When she began receiving a salary, she used it to attend various training courses including a baking class. Now she hopes to supplement her income by selling wedding cakes. Employment in Ghana is not readily available, but some Liberians seem willing to make whatever sacrifices necessary to earn a living outside the camp and to gain new or improve upon already existing marketable skills through training courses available in Ghana.

For those who do find employment, the problem of securing housing outside the camp is another challenge. Two refugees started out living in poor conditions in youth hostels in Accra where they shared a large room with several young people and paid a small fee for their bed. However, to rent living quarters for a family is much more difficult. Typically in Ghana a person must pay rent for two to three years in advance. Understandably, many refugees are unable to afford this. Usually only those who have extra savings or those with relatives in the US who can help them are able to rent accommodation. In three cases, refugees were living in rented housing that had been given to them by Liberian friends who had gone to the US. Rather than terminating a lease, the renter simply passed on the housing to someone else who could live there until the three-year lease ran out. In two other cases, one in Accra and one in Kumasi, Ghanaian churches gave Liberians housing as part of their compensation for being involved in church work.

### **Work made at the camp**

Given the challenges of finding employment and housing *outside* the camp, Liberians have found ways to meet their needs *within* the camp itself. This will be further explained as follows. First, the role of camp based organisations, CBOs, gives evidence that Liberians were not willing to be merely recipients of aid, but they also wanted to be proactive in coordinating their own relief and development projects. Second, the importance of the telephone business for the community sets the stage for the special advantage some Liberians have in being able to access remittances. Third, the ways in which refugees have turned efforts to meet their most basic needs for shelter, food, and water into income-generating opportunities will be addressed. Fourth, a consideration of other businesses in which refugees are involved demonstrates that refugees are thriving at more than just a subsistence level. And finally, although they are not businesses, churches have proven to be a viable way to access material resources both locally and abroad in order to provide a livelihood for some individuals and valuable services needed generally at the camp.

### **Camp based organisations**

To begin with, one important way Liberians have facilitated their own relief and development in Ghana has been through setting up CBOs, which initially functioned under the aid regime providing similar services but were entirely the initiative of Liberian refugees. Typically, the founder of a CBO registered the name of his or her organisation with the Ghanaian government, set up a board, wrote a project proposal and requested funding through a variety of channels both in Ghana and abroad

(Karnaga, 1997:60-61). Initiating a CBO appears to have a double benefit. Not only does it provide a valuable service to the community, but it also offers a valid reason for bringing financial resources to the camp. It is not uncommon for foreigners visiting the camp to be approached by individuals handing out their business card seeking to raise money for their CBO.<sup>49</sup> After being the recipients of the humanitarian aid regime, Liberians have learned the way the system operates, and they have found ways to make that system work for them.

Some of the CBOs have contributed significantly to the camp. Help Eradicate Liberia's Problems (the HELP Society) set up The Oral Health Clinic with assistance from the World Health Organisation to provide basic treatment to patients<sup>50</sup> and dental health education in the schools, at the market and for sports clubs at the camp. Twelve refugees staff the clinic that continues to operate effectively. Other projects the HELP Society organised and raised funds for include various vocational training programmes and the Concerned Liberians Volunteer Organisation (CLVO), which planted seedlings around the camp and looked after camp sanitation. Other CBOs included Assistance for All Liberians (AFL), which liaised with the Canadian government to provide funding for Liberian students to study in Canadian universities and raised funds locally to build housing for the elderly and to construct toilets at the camp. They also set up reservoirs to mitigate the frequent water shortages at the camp, and they assisted in teaching Liberians to make bricks for building houses. Another CBO, Action Rebuild Liberia (ARL) operated a poultry farm supplying the camp with meat and eggs. Unfortunately, each of these CBOs for whatever reason has been disbanded. Misappropriation of funds is usually the explanation given, but whether or not these allegations are valid, it appears that CBOs have provided valuable services to refugees at the camp (John, 22/8/00).

### **The telephone business**

Secondly, the telephone business at the camp is particularly significant because it reinforces the importance of Liberian ties to America and it demonstrates that refugees are creative in finding ways to supply services that are in demand.<sup>51</sup> Most Liberians have a relative or at least a friend in the US and with the resettlement programme even more Liberians are going to America adding to Liberian connections with the US. Understandably, Liberians make every effort to keep in touch with loved ones and to maintain these social networks. When Liberians first arrived, they had to go to Accra to make phone calls to friends and relatives. Recognising the great demand for phone communication, in 1993 one refugee set up the first calling booth at the camp with two phone lines. He charged customers by the minute for calls made and received. It was obvious that there was money to be made in the telephone business, so by 1995, the first communication centre at the camp called BuduCom

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<sup>49</sup> Examples of cards collected while doing field work at Buduburam include: the Civil Rights Education for Democracy and Human Rights organisation, the Jehovah Jireh World Outreach Ministries for assisting orphans at the camp, and a Mothers for Street Kids group.

<sup>50</sup> An Australian dentist who continues to provide dental materials and technical support from time to time trained clinic staff. Difficult cases are referred to a Ghanaian dental officer who comes from Accra to the camp once a week to see patients (Dental Clinic staff, 22/8/00).

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that email is becoming increasingly popular as well. However, as of September 2000, email was not accessible at the camp, so Liberians go to communication centres in Accra to check their messages.

was established introducing cell phones for receiving calls. People would pay a small registration fee. Then when a call came in, a BuduCom employee took the phone by bicycle to the registered address<sup>52</sup> of the person receiving the call. As of September 2000, there were ten communication centres at the camp, four owned by Liberians, and six owned by Ghanaians who hire Liberians to manage the booths. In addition, refugees interviewed estimated that 200 or so mobile phones are in use at the camp with new ones being purchased all the time. Mobile phone owners often pass out their number to neighbours charging for incoming calls in order to earn some extra money.

It appears that one of the main benefits of phone communication at the camp is that it allows refugees to arrange for remittances from the US to be sent,<sup>53</sup> usually through Western Union which has branches in several locations in Accra. The country manager for Western Union, Ghana verified this:

Liberians are Western Union's biggest customers in Ghana. They don't receive large amounts usually, but they receive money often. Remittances come weekly for many of them instead of monthly. A few months ago 450 or so Liberians were repatriated to Liberia and our money transactions were greatly reduced. Now those Liberians are coming back and other Liberians are coming too so our transactions are back to normal (Interview with Owusu, 23/9/00).

One of the communication centre managers estimated that 99% of the calls made on his phones are to the US. He explained,

I overhear the conversations. Most of the calls are about sending money. You hear some people shouting at their brother or sister in the States. They will say 'how can you forget your brother in Ghana suffering? Why don't you send money to help us?' Everyone wants to call their relatives in the US. They also use them to discuss the resettlement. There could never be too many phones at the camp (Andrews, 22/8/00).

Of the thirty-five refugees questioned, twenty-three said they received money from the US at least on occasion, if not on a regular basis. Only four said they never did, and eight did not offer any information on the subject. A quantitative survey of how many Liberians use phones and for what purpose was not conducted, but it seems safe to say that many Liberians do use phones and accessing remittances is facilitated by this service.

However, not everyone has equal access to remittances. Many Liberians struggle along as best they can without the advantage of receiving money from the US, though it does provide a safety net from time to time. For example, a refugee mother of two said:

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<sup>52</sup> A number and a letter identify each house at the camp. The number is for the house. The letter is for the area in which the house is located. The camp is divided into Areas labelled A, B, C up to U.

<sup>53</sup> Reflecting on the importance of phone communication for accessing remittances, one refugee said, "Some people's work for the day is to call their family in the US to ask for money. They say, 'The food is finished, mommy is sick. We need money.' Even if you don't have a family member in the US, at least you have one friend who will send you \$50 once in a blue moon" (William, 14/8/00).

I can make enough money with my small market to pay for the soup we eat, but I don't have enough to buy rice or clothes for my children. The rice was finishing so I used the money for buying sugar for my market in order to buy half a bag of rice for us to eat instead. Then my friend in the US sent me \$20. I used that money to buy sugar for my market (Fransisca, 27/8/00).

Interestingly, that woman felt compelled to share some of the \$20 with a friend who was sick and in need of medicine. Sharing around money received is not uncommon. In this way, more people benefit than the direct recipient of the money alone, and later on, there is the good chance that one's generosity will be reciprocated. Another way remittances are shared around is simply through market exchange. Many Liberians use remittance money to finance small businesses. And of course, some of their remittance money or the profit from their businesses is used for consumption. As one refugee put it,

Even if I don't have someone to send me \$20, another refugee will get \$20 from his mother and then he can come and buy my oranges. Soon that \$20 has spread out to help the whole economy of the camp (Charles, 7/9/00).

While some benefit more than others, remittances received from the US play an important role in enabling Liberians in Ghana to maintain the camp economy.

### **Earning money by meeting basic needs**

While the aid regime helped to provide the refugees 'basic needs' at the beginning arranging for food rations, tents for shelter and the provision of water at the camp, as aid was removed or proved to be inadequate, Liberians had to find their own ways of meeting those needs. By January 1993, a number of enterprising Liberian women frustrated with failed attempts to sell at Ghanaian markets had established a market centre at the entrance of the camp (Karnga, 1997:59).<sup>54</sup> Supplementing money earned from selling rations with remittance money received from relatives in the US, Liberians began to establish small businesses at the camp starting with the sale of Liberian dishes on Broad Street, the central street of the camp named after the longest and largest street in Monrovia, Liberia. Food continues to be readily available and easily purchased at the camp.

In addition, to replace the tents they had been given upon arrival, refugees were encouraged to build permanent houses<sup>55</sup> using the brick-making skills that they were taught in vocational schools run by some NGOs and CBOs. The refugees provided

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<sup>54</sup> Previous to this, Liberians had to go to Kaneshie or Kasoa, Ghanaian markets nearby, to buy items such as kerosene, soap, etc. (Karnga, 1997).

<sup>55</sup> While the camp is on property owned by the Ghanaian government, it appears that refugees are required to pay a fee for building permanent structures on the land. Chief Jerry M. Gonyon, a disgruntled refugee and former Liberian MP took this to the Ghanaian press (*Daily Graphic*, 2000). He was cited as saying that "[the Camp Management and the Liberian Welfare Council (the Liberian refugee representative body)] often sell a plot of land for 50,000 Ghanaian cedis to selected Liberians who, after building, hire the room out to others at the cost of 360,000 to 500,000 Ghanaian cedis per room per year". Chief Gonyon said, "no receipt is issued for the sale of the plot of land. This means that the proceeds from the sale go into individual pockets, thus undermining the generosity of the government and people of Ghana". The accused parties were not interviewed for the article so it is difficult to determine the validity of these allegations.

the labour and purchased cement needed for the foundation and walls of their houses and the aid regime provided wood, nails and felt for roofing. With all the building going on, many men were able to contract out their labour to other refugees to earn a small income. Now with rumors that the camp may be closed down and the Ghanaian government may require Liberians to leave not much building is going on any more. And unfortunately, because the labour market is flooded with construction workers, whenever work is available, the job usually goes to those willing to work for the lowest wage (Charles and William, 3/8/00; Armah, 6/8/00; Juice, 12/8/00). However, regardless of the current lack of demand for construction work, the labour of refugees has transformed the appearance of the camp into a permanent town and not a make shift temporary residence. In addition, trees have grown up and shops line the two main streets of the camp. An uninformed visitor could visit Buduburam without suspecting that it is the recent creation of displaced refugees who arrived with almost nothing. Conditions at the camp were so improved that by 1993 a UNDP fact-finding team declared Buduburam a model refugee centre (McCarthy, 1998).

However, the provision of water has proved to be one of the biggest challenges for camp refugees, and as a result it illustrates the degree to which refugees are capable of solving their own problems in spite of severe limitations. When refugees first arrived at the camp, World Vision was responsible for setting up water pumps. But the faucets broke so water was continually flowing out on the ground. According to the refugees interviewed, the UN was responsible to pay the water bill, but they did not so the water to the camp was cut off. One refugee said,

It is also true that at the time, the UN was slowly taking assistance away from us so maybe they will say that is why the water stopped. But anyway, from 1996 to 1997, getting water was a big problem at the camp ... People went as far as Kasoa to get water. Most of us walked to the reservoir which has very dirty water ... When I first came to the camp, they gave me three cups of water to bathe in. It was a serious problem (Charles, 27/8/00).

Looking for a solution, some Liberians imitating Ghanaians in the village nearby, built cement reservoirs and paid for truckloads of water to be brought to them for storage. Someone discovered that big black Poly tanks™ that hold 2,000 to 5,000 gallons of water are better for storage than cement reservoirs and soon several were set up around the camp. Even the Ghanaians in the village followed suit and upgraded their reservoirs. Now Ghanaian truck drivers bring water into the camp daily, and Liberian water distributors purchase it by the tank load for storage and then resell it to other Liberians by the bucket full. The system is well organised and efficient and Liberians have learned to conserve water since it is a valuable commodity at the camp.

Yet still drinking water was particularly a problem. The Ghanaian camp management took over the task of checking each truckload of water to ensure that the water was safe. But the sale of little bags of 'mineral water' has become the primary solution to the safe water problem, and it has grown into an important small business for many on the camp. 'Mineral water,' or purified water, is bagged in Accra and brought to the camp by the truckload, sold to Liberians, and then redistributed to household businesses. Those with refrigerators are the ones most inclined to go into the



'mineral' business, because in Ghana's hot climate, cold drinking water is in high demand. Little insulated coolers are strategically located all around the camp so that people can walk by and make their water purchase.<sup>56</sup> While this is not a big money maker, it provides a steady trickle of cash that a family can use for necessary daily expenditures. Not only are Liberians adequately providing the things they need to survive at the camp, but they are making money by providing these services to one another.

### **Other businesses**

Proving adept at meeting their most basic needs, refugees have moved well beyond that showing remarkable creativity and ambition in the other economic enterprises they are pursuing. As is generally the case in a society that depends primarily on income earned in the informal economy, most Liberians are involved in a variety of income generating projects at the same time, thus diversifying risk and providing themselves with petty cash received from one business or the other. When electricity was brought to the camp in 1993, the potential for a variety of other business ventures arose. Night-clubs and video centres were established at the camp. In addition, bicycle businesses have become quite popular allowing people to rent transportation to get around the camp more efficiently. And young children and older youth, perhaps the main customers of the bike businesses, seem to find the spare change needed for purchasing joy rides. In addition, tailoring shops, clothing shops, shoe shops, manicure shops and hair salons, carpenter shops, and electric repair shops are all available at the camp.

Another category of business becoming quite popular is computer and typing courses. Currently there are two typing schools and two computer training schools located on the camp. Training school owners generally access their hardware through connections in the US either through relatives or friends. Students sign up for courses and pay a fee that covers maintenance costs and provides an income for the trainers. While anyone is welcome, demand for this sort of training is especially high among young people who are anticipating being resettled to the US. The director of a typing school explained: "Those who go the USA can learn typing while they wait. It is good for them to learn a skill while they are wasting time here" (Joseph, 14/8/00).

Not wanting to be left behind in an age of technology, Liberian refugees who have the means to do so are seeking to make themselves marketable for jobs they hope to find in the US. And not only are they doing business at the camp, but they have also found ways to earn money through business transactions made with customers in the US by capitalising on a demand for African clothes,<sup>57</sup> especially among African-Americans in the US. However, there are some problems to overcome in this business as one refugee explained.

It costs a lot of money to send the clothes. It is better to send them by EMS than to give them to someone going to the US. That is risky because you can't

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<sup>56</sup> There are usually two choices for drinking water, either 'mineral water' or water purchased at the camp that is put into small tied plastic baggies. The 'minerals' are slightly more expensive.

<sup>57</sup> One refugee was hoping to send jewellery to the US with some friends so they could sell it for him there.

trust them. Some people will sell the clothes and keep the money for themselves, or wear the clothes. It is a good business if you have a way to get the clothes to the US at a low cost, and if you have someone you can trust on the other side to market the clothes for you (name not known, 4/9/00).

As a result, this business, like many others at the camp is not usually a person's sole means of survival. Instead, it is just one more way to earn a living. Liberians are always looking for market demand and calculating the ways in which they can become a supplier, utilising whatever social networks they have and investing whatever expendable income available to them.

However, not all businesses in which Liberians are involved are necessarily 'legitimate'. But from the perspective of a refugee, some of these practices, especially prostitution,<sup>58</sup> if not justifiable are understandable. One refugee woman explained:

There is a saying in Liberia, 'one man can't fill [a woman's] valise.' You need one man to put clothes inside, another man to put food inside, and another man to give you money for school. Before the war, at least the women in the village did not play sex. But now women take three or four men so they can get what they need (name withheld, 25/8/00).

For many Liberian women, though certainly not all, having sexual relations with more than one man whether within their community or outside their community is a necessary economic coping strategy. Unfortunately, the activities of Liberians who have resorted to con scams,<sup>59</sup> crime and prostitution have negatively effected the reputation of Liberians in general.<sup>60</sup> Certainly the reputation of a minority should not

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<sup>58</sup> Prostitution is used broadly in this instance to refer to sex exchanged for money or some other form of payment. However, it should be noted that many Liberian women engaged in this activity would not consider themselves prostitutes. Those labelled as prostitutes are generally women who dress provocatively and make their services available in a more obvious manner.

<sup>59</sup> The 'Black Money' scam con game was brought up several times in discussions with refugees. CMBs, 'cash money boys', are highly professional, taking a briefcase of blank bills to clients and demonstrating that the bills can be cleaned with mercury so that writing for a \$100 bill reappears on the blank paper. The demonstration bill is a legitimate \$100 bill, but the brief case is full of blank paper. The person watching the demonstration is asked to contribute a large sum to purchase the mercury so that the rest of the bills can be cleaned and divided between the CMBs and the client. Upon receiving money for the mercury, the CMBs then disappear. Apparently, Liberians are not the only ones involved in this activity (names withheld, 1/8/00; 9/8/00; 11/8/00; 7/9/00).

<sup>60</sup> Regarding Liberian women, a Ghanaian who had lived in Liberia for six years previously said, "many Ghanaians think the Liberian women are loose and will steal your husband" (Interview with Aryeetay, 2/8/00). A political science professor from the University of Ghana who has studied the situation of Liberian refugees for a decade verified this saying, "Ghanaians have the perception that all Liberian girls are prostitutes" (Interview with Essuman-Johnson, 17/8/00). As to the reputation of Liberians in general, two passing comments from Ghanaians whom I met in Accra provide a glimpse of what at least some Ghanaians think of Liberians. "I don't like those Liberians. They are bad people. They always have money, but they don't work. They steal. You better watch yourself". And another, "Ghana is a free country. Anyone is welcome here. We have so many Liberians, Togolese, Nigerians and Sudanese. We don't mind people coming to our country. But those Liberians are somehow greedy. Even up to the point of stealing from us. Not all Liberians are like that, but some are and it is not good". One Liberian living in Accra explained, "Sometimes Liberian have trouble renting because Liberians have a bad reputation. Our landlord didn't want to rent to us at first. Finally, he agreed and now he doesn't want us to move. He has come to realise that not all Liberians are the same" (Martha, 20/8/00). Further evidence of a tendency for Ghanaians to view Liberians negatively involved a series of brutal killings of women in Accra in 1998 that were blamed on Liberians (Leroy, 1/8/00; John, Julianna and Julietta, 19/8/00).

be applied to the majority, but it does underscore the reality that people in difficult circumstances may resort to ‘illegitimate’ means to survive.

### **Churches as a means to accessing resources**

In considering how Liberians are making it without humanitarian aid, the important role that churches play in providing material support became increasingly obvious as field research was conducted. Although churches are certainly significant for reasons other than for their material benefit, the economics of Liberian Christianity should be explained. But before addressing the role of the churches, a brief history of how churches emerged on the camp sets the stage for the discussion (from Sondah, 1996).

When refugees arrived at Buduburam, one of the first organisations they established was LIDA, the Liberia Inter-Denominational Assembly indicating that refugees considered church integral to restructuring their lives. The Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Anglicans and any other denominations all met together for worship services, daily devotions, and other church activities, this being organised and arranged entirely upon the initiative of the refugees themselves.

By 1992 the church members (about 450) began constructing a church building. Apparently members of the church contributed portions of their monthly food rations that were gathered and sold to help purchase building materials. In addition, the church leaders utilised linkages with other Christian organisations abroad and in Ghana to raise money for the project.<sup>61</sup> While LIDA was the first church at the camp, various denominations soon began to meet on their own and the number of churches currently meeting at the camp has increased to approximately forty. The number of churches could be several more if house churches were included. However, these smaller churches spring up frequently but do not always last making them difficult to count.<sup>62</sup>

A brief survey of the more well-established churches that have either built their own meeting place or found some other suitable accommodation was conducted (Appendix 3) in order to determine when they were established, how many members they have, where and how often they meet, and from where their funding comes.<sup>63</sup> Churches at the camp fall into three general categories: those that were transplanted from Liberia, those that were established for the first time in exile by refugees, and those that are branches of churches in Ghana.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, church attendance figures do not accurately reflect the level of church involvement at the camp because church

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<sup>61</sup> Funding came from the Christian Council of Ghana, the Full Gospel Businessmen Fellowship International, a Baptist Church in the US, and from other individuals as well.

<sup>62</sup> There is one mosque at Buduburam with a membership of about 250, a number that includes those who profess the faith but do not practice it regularly. In exile some Liberians continue to practice Islam, but they are a small minority, and are usually, but not always, Mandingo.

<sup>63</sup> This survey was an update of one already conducted by Sondah (1996), a Liberian refugee and religious studies graduate student at the University of Ghana living at the camp.

<sup>64</sup> These categories are not necessarily clearly divided. For example, the Catholic Church existed in Liberia prior to the war, but the church at the camp is officially a branch of the Ghanaian Catholic Church. And Trancea and Deeper Life Ministries were Ghanaian churches taken to Liberia that came back to Ghana with Liberians during the war.

attendance fluctuates as people come and go.<sup>65</sup> In addition, some Liberians attend church in Accra or in the Ghanaian churches in the villages surrounding the camp.

Putting aside church statistics and looking instead at information collected from refugees themselves, of the thirty-five refugees interviewed twenty-six were members of a church, though they were involved in Christian activities to a varying degree. Only one said he did not attend church at all,<sup>66</sup> and the other nine did not bring up the topic so conclusions cannot be accurately drawn from this portion of the sample. However, even if the purposive sample may overestimate Liberians' involvement in church, the sounds of morning prayers and singing on a daily basis make church a ubiquitous feature of camp life.<sup>67</sup>

Because the Church represents a global network of Christians, Liberian Christians wanting to undertake church projects are able to access assistance not only from Ghanaian Christians, but also from Christian churches, organisations and individuals abroad, most specifically, but not exclusively, in the US. In a manner similar to that of CBOs, some churches have solicited external financial support to build clinics, to set up schools and to assist their churches as needed. For example, with the help of an American Lutheran missionary in Ghana a leader of the Lutheran church at the camp established links with the Missouri Synod and sent them a proposal for a clinic and a pharmacy. The Lutheran church in the US gave money for the project and by 1996 the Evangelical Lutheran Church Clinic was up and running employing two Liberian doctors and four Liberian nurses.<sup>68</sup> Since UNHCR closed the central camp clinic in 2000, the Lutheran Clinic remains as the only medical facility available at the camp.

Another significant church related project at the camp is the Agency for Holistic Evangelism and Development Training (AHEAD), established in 1997 by Liberian Bishop Maweah who solicited a World Vision grant to start the school and raises funds in the US each year to cover operation costs. AHEAD provides vocational training in missions and evangelism, community health, business, agriculture and construction to students who have completed high school. So far about five hundred Liberian students have received training at AHEAD and thirty people are employed as administrative and instructional staff.

While churches do pursue funding from abroad and from their denominational headquarters in Accra when possible,<sup>69</sup> most churches rely on their local congregation

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<sup>65</sup> In addition, church leaders surveyed did not often have exact church attendance figures. Also there was some confusion as to whether only members should be counted, or if regular attendees, visitors and children should also be included.

<sup>66</sup> The refugee who was not a church member claimed to be a Christian but did not go to church because "here at the camp I don't go [to church] because I don't have new clothes to wear. You can't go to church wearing the same thing over and over" (name withheld, 12/8/00).

<sup>67</sup> One church leader explained, "Daily church activities keep people occupied and prevent them from focusing on their problems" (survey notes).

<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, conflicts arose that led to the Liberian doctors resigning and the Ghanaian Lutheran church took over clinic administration (Golo, 28/8/00). If they do not go to the Lutheran Clinic, Liberians at the camp go to Ghanaian hospitals or clinics in town when they are sick.

<sup>69</sup> One church made it clear that they are the Independent Pentecostal Church, and not the International Pentecostal Church, saying that this distinction was necessary for the purposes of raising funds. If they were 'International' they would be confused with a larger denomination and all funding would have to be channelled through the Ghanaian branch giving the church less autonomy over their finances. It appears that sometimes conflicts arise when funding for Liberian churches is channelled through their Ghanaian counterparts.

to finance their operations. Only ten of the forty churches at the camp receive funds from abroad, and the leaders of these churches stressed that this assistance is very infrequent and while helpful is not to be depended upon. Instead, when churches have special projects such as the purchase of a keyboard or a PA system or a building project, they often send out letters to contacts abroad in order to raise money. Whether or not this strategy yields significant financial dividends, many churches feel it is important to at least keep friends informed of their activities. A more reliable strategy utilised to fund one-off projects is to have a rally where church members make donations separate from their usual weekly offering. In addition, some churches run income-generating projects that provide services to the community. One church runs a communication centre, and several others run small primary schools on the church premises charging a small fee and employing teachers in the congregation.

The added advantage of all this church activity is that those involved in running church work are partially financially sustained by it. Out of the sample of thirty-five, eight were receiving some compensation for their involvement in church work though they also mentioned other income generating projects they were doing to supplement their income from the church. Additionally, six of the eight benefited by being sponsored, either in the past or currently, to attend a Bible school or training course. Sponsorship usually came from an American missionary or friend. Understandably because I lived with a pastor at the camp, I was perhaps exposed to a higher proportion of church workers than was representative of the population.

However, Christian workers seem to be prevalent in Liberian society and are not limited to pastors alone, but also include lay people assisting in running churches and those who do their own Christian work independent of the church. For example, on bus rides traveling between Accra and the camp, preachers often stand or turn in their seat to address their captured audience and deliver a message usually concluding by collecting an offering to support their ministry.<sup>70</sup> Yet, regardless of how many are involved in Christian leadership, the large number of people contributing to Christian work makes the issue important to consider.

The question that then arises is why do refugees struggling to make a living bother to give to an offering? It appears that giving is motivated by a strong and prevalent belief taken from the Bible that the more a person gives, the more God will bless him or her.<sup>71</sup> This belief is reinforced by tremendous social pressure, perhaps reminiscent of *Americo largesse* and the value placed on maintaining the appearance of wealth.<sup>72</sup> One pastor interviewed explained,

In some churches people are urged to give their last cedi, even so they don't have money for transport to go home. The pastor will tell the people that if they give, God will provide for them. Those who have nothing to give in the

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<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that this activity is not unique to Liberians, and has become a typical feature of West African bus transport in many places. The main bus company in Ghana has banned bus preaching in order to preserve peace and quiet for their passengers.

<sup>71</sup> The Bible verse most often quoted by refugees in reference to Christian giving was Luke 6:38. "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you".

<sup>72</sup> However, it should be noted that among other West African Christians, there is similar pressure to give generously to the church, so it is likely that African cultures, and not just *Americo* culture, perpetuate this social obligation.

offering are very embarrassed because everyone can see (Pastor Cyrus, 22/8/00).

Apparently it is typical for church leaders to require members to pay membership dues, departmental dues, monthly tithe, weekly offerings, and to make special contributions for church projects. In addition, offerings are usually a very public activity in the church service where the congregation sings and dances as each individual files up to the front of the church in order to deposit an offering for all to see. In many churches two and sometimes three offerings are taken at each service, and responsibility for how that money is used is often left up to the church leader. In one service that was observed, the youth of the church had designed a signboard to advertise the church at the front of the camp, but when they unveiled it they asked individuals representing various departments in the church to make a contribution on the spot. In such a situation, it is very difficult to refuse to give.

Because Liberians are willing to give money to the church, either out of belief or out of social obligation, it could be argued that economic factors are in many cases as important as a 'religious calling' in people's commitment to leading church work.<sup>73</sup> In saying this, it should be noted that the church workers interviewed seemed to view whatever financial support they received as God's provision for their needs and none would say that they are doing church work for the money. But after all, churchmen and their families need to eat as well, and the more time they spend in ministry the less time they have for earning an income in other ways. It is understandable then that they should be rewarded by the generosity of those who benefit from their leadership.

### **Implications of the data**

Taking these economic coping mechanisms into consideration, it should be noted that not all of refugee life is consumed with moneymaking endeavors. For example, the football field and basketball court<sup>74</sup> at the entrance of the camp are almost always full of activity as Liberians, especially young people, enjoy playing football,<sup>75</sup> basketball, and kickball.<sup>76</sup> To be sure, many aspiring athletes dream of the possibility of playing professional football in Europe or the US, following in the footsteps of George Weah, Liberia's world re-known football star. In addition to sports, refugees at the camp are often seen playing games such as checkers, scrabble, ludo (a game played with dice) and video games, and discos and nightclubs are also a popular form of entertainment.

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<sup>73</sup> In one location at the camp, several different churches meet simultaneously in classrooms next to each other often competing to be louder than the service next door. It would seem far more efficient for these churches to combine, but several refugees agreed that "everyone wants his own church so he can have his own offering" (names withheld, 10/8/00).

<sup>74</sup> Money for building the basketball court in 1999 was donated by President Tolbert's nephew who resides in the US.

<sup>75</sup> There is a well-organised football league at the camp with teams representing each of the counties in Liberia. In addition, a team known as Refugee-11 represents the camp in matches played against other Ghanaian teams. When asked why Liberians play so much football, one refugee remarked, "because there is no work" (Ida, 15/8/00). While football does provide an opportunity for young, unemployed men to excel among their peers, the simple love of the game and the potential for stars to play abroad are factors that probably also contribute just as much to the popularity of football at the camp.

<sup>76</sup> Kickball is usually played by women who have organised a kickball league. Both men and women play basketball, also with organised teams and competitive matches played.

While economic survival certainly occupies a great deal of their time and energy, Liberian refugees make room for leisure and relaxation.

Evidence from field research conducted in Ghana shows that while Liberian refugees were set back by the war, they were not necessarily incapacitated by it. In addition, living under the aid umbrella has not transformed them into children who need looking after. Certainly after being forced to flee their homes carrying very little with them, Liberians needed assistance and thus the aid regime played an important role in their rehabilitation. However, it should not be forgotten that Liberians are people who lived responsible lives, who had jobs and cared for themselves before they fled into exile. There is no evidence to suggest that offering assistance to Liberians fundamentally changed them and took away their capacity to sustain themselves. Instead the data shows that Liberian refugees in Ghana have responded to their situation by being adaptive and inventive, completely capable of navigating obstacles and capitalising on opportunities to live either with or without humanitarian assistance.

### **Buduburam and beyond: what is next for Liberians in Ghana?**

It would seem a ‘fortunate accident’ that aid was available in the early years of Liberians’ exile in Ghana, but then dwindled forcing refugees to become self-sufficient. Currently, they are managing well enough in Ghana without humanitarian assistance, but this section will address the options Liberian refugees are weighing as they consider how to proceed in light of current conditions at home and in Ghana and the possibilities of getting to the US. While the majority of Liberian refugees in other West African countries have repatriated, most Liberians in Ghana have resisted returning home.

As they deliberate about what to do next, the issue of resettlement to the US is particularly poignant. Problems arise because the resettlement programme is designed to provide protection in the US for only a limited number of refugees, and therefore, it is unable to accommodate the large numbers who claim to need that protection. Because questions of peace and security in Liberia are not objectively defined and better opportunities may be available in Ghana and in the US, the decision to return to Liberia is a debate for many, not a given conclusion. In questioning the assumption that refugees are dependent and passive, I will argue that when faced with a variety of opportunities and constraints, refugees make rational choices to move forward in the way that best suits them.

### **Repatriation and current conditions in Liberia**

Part of UNHCR’s mandate is to seek permanent solution to refugee problems (UN, 1950). ‘Permanent solutions’ are defined as repatriation, integration and naturalisation into the host country, or resettlement to a third country of asylum. In the case of Liberians, UNHCR identified repatriation as the best solution largely because donor

countries showed an increasing reluctance to provide funding for Liberian refugees<sup>77</sup> and because other conflicts in the region, such as in Sierra Leone, took precedence (Interview with Pastor-Ortega, 12/1/01).

In addition, after democratic elections were held in Liberia in 1997, it appeared that political conditions in Liberia had improved and the situation was conducive for refugees to return. As a result, the UNHCR sponsored 'voluntary repatriations' for Liberian refugees. UNHCR statistics show that out of 480,000 Liberian refugees registered in West Africa, 376,537 have returned home primarily from Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea, either as part of an UNHCR organised repatriation scheme or spontaneously without assistance.<sup>78</sup> Added to these numbers are thousands of Sierra Leoneans who have fled into Liberia to seek safety from the fighting in their own country.<sup>79</sup>

However, most Liberian refugees in Ghana did not return home making the repatriation programme quite unsuccessful. According to UNHCR statistics, 732, 2,515 and 350 Liberians were assisted to repatriate from Ghana in 1997, 1998 and 1999 respectively. But in 2000, there were no UNHCR assisted repatriations from Ghana because "no one asked to go", said an UNHCR representative (IRIN, 2001). Even the withdrawal of assistance to Liberians in Ghana, which was meant to reiterate the message that the time had come for them to go home, proved ineffective for inducing them to repatriate. Further highlighting the failure of the repatriation programme, a sizeable number of Liberians who received repatriation packages went home but later returned to Ghana (IRIN, 2001; Interviews with Blavo, 5/9/00; Tepe-Mensah, 18/8/00; Afun, 15/8/00).<sup>80</sup>

The primary reason that Liberians in Ghana give for not wanting to go home is that they do not consider it safe. Refugees interviewed had these comments to make about the current state of affairs in Liberia. A woman living in Kumasi who had just returned from a month's visit in Monrovia said,

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<sup>77</sup>As well as a lack of donor interest for funding Liberian refugee relief, according to the United States Committee for Refugees (1999), financial support for aid programmes in Liberia itself fell far short of actual needs in 1999, and this problem persists according to the UNHCR Senior Desk Officer for West Africa (Interview with Pastor-Ortega, 12/1/01). Because international donors, including the US, lack confidence in the competence and accountability of the Liberian government, international aid organisations struggle to provide rehabilitation and long-term development projects in the face of limited budgets and concerns about security in some regions. International donors in 1998 had pledged more than \$200 million over a two-year period to help rebuild Liberia but provided only a fraction of that money during 1999. UNHCR received funding of \$17 million for its operations in Liberia, far short of its original \$27 million budget appeal. The International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) cut its programmes more than 50 percent and reduced its beneficiary list by two-thirds because of poor donor response to its 1999 funding appeal. By late 1999, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) had received only 20 percent of the food rations needed for beneficiaries in Liberia (USCR, 1999).

<sup>78</sup>Repatriations from Cote d'Ivoire have remained consistent at about 23,000 Liberians returning home each year since 1998. Repatriation from Guinea was at its peak in 1998 when 48,527 Liberians returned home. Since then, 13,374 and 6,386 Liberians repatriated from Guinea in 1999 and 2000, respectively ("UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Statistics Summary").

<sup>79</sup>About 250,000 Sierra Leonean refugees crossed into Liberia and Guinea in 1999. There are several reported cases of arbitrary arrests and detentions of Sierra Leonean refugees in Liberia (Kamara, 1999:11). Hosting refugees does not necessarily mean that Liberia is a safe country of asylum.

<sup>80</sup>A refugee explained one reason why people returned. "The UNHCR repatriation programme was seen by many as an opportunity for a free trip home to check out the situation. Then they came back to Ghana" (Pastor Cyrus, 3/8/00).



It is not normal there. After what I have already seen of war, I will not live in a place where there is that threat again. Liberia has a long way to go. Our country is not okay (Alice, 2/9/00).

Reflecting on a report heard from a friend, another Liberian said,

I would like to go back [to Liberia] some day, but not while Taylor is in power. I have friends who went back in 1995. Then the war came again in 1996 and things were much worse for them than the first time they ran. They had to run back to Ghana for a second time. They said going back to Liberia was the worst mistake they ever made. How can you go back to that kind of insecurity? (Nancy, 29/8/00).

If these comments are representative of how many Liberians in Ghana view conditions at home, their refusal to repatriate makes sense. These opinions appear to be valid concerns that are shared by the international community.<sup>81</sup> The US State Department (2001) has reported the following concerning Liberia's human rights practices for the year 2000.

During the year, security forces frequently acted independently of government authority, particularly in rural areas...Members of the security forces committed numerous, serious human rights abuses...Extortion is widespread in all levels of society. The Government's human rights record remained poor...Security forces tortured, beat, and otherwise abused or humiliated citizens...The judicial system, hampered by political influence, economic pressure, inefficiency, corruption and a lack of resources, was unable to ensure citizens' rights to due process and a fair trial...The Government continued to discriminate against indigenous ethnic groups that had opposed Taylor in the civil war, especially the Mandingo and the Krahn.<sup>82</sup>

Clearly, although 'democracy' has been restored to Liberia, conditions in the country are not optimal. In addition, social services and economic conditions in Liberia are just as dismal. As of 1999 nearly ninety percent of the population lacked access to clean water or basic health care, and hospitals lacked sufficient drugs to treat patients. More than half of school-age children still did not attend school according to one estimate. And even though secondary school enrollment has more than doubled as families repatriate, the level of education provided is severely hampered by frequent strikes of teachers and students in some areas of the country (USCR, 1999).

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<sup>81</sup> In August 2000, the Liberian government arrested four international journalists from Britain's Channel Four network and charged them with espionage. The journalists, who were visiting the country to gather material for a documentary about countries in post-conflict stages in West Africa, were denied bail because the charge was considered a capital offence by the prosecution, punishable by the death penalty if the defendants were found guilty. As a result of intense international criticism, the journalists were released from detention, which had lasted for one week. They reported that Liberian security personnel had beaten and threatened them (US Department of State, 2001).

<sup>82</sup> Similar information is contained in the "Monthly Situation Report, UNHCR BO in Monrovia Liberia, December 2000". Although UNHCR is concerned about the current situation in Liberia and are monitoring it closely, unfortunately, they are faced with lack of donor interest in the Liberia situation and other more immediate conflicts (such as Sierra Leone) that require their services (Interview with Pastor-Ortega, 12/01/01). As a result, Liberian refugees who do not want to go home have been left to fend for themselves while UNHCR attends to more pressing matters.

In addition, it is reported that wages, if and when paid, remain depressed. Unemployment is estimated to be as high as eighty-five percent (Kamara, 1999:6).<sup>83</sup> As for government officials and former combatants, they continue to exploit the country's natural resources for personal benefit (US Department of State, 2001). And Liberia's infrastructure is in chaos. Even Monrovia, the capital, remains without running water or electricity, and the government claims that it is incapable of providing these basic services. Meanwhile, the President maintains a lavish lifestyle, riding in a Rolls Royce, while at the same time seeking aid from international donors (Kamara, 1999:5).<sup>84</sup>

As to the political situation of the country, it remains tenuous at best. In April and August 1999, violence erupted in Lofa County, Liberia (USCR, 1999) and rebel groups in that area continue to intimidate civilians according to recent Voice of America radio reports.<sup>85</sup> It has been suggested that it is within Taylor's political interests to maintain fear and instability in Liberia so that in the next election in 2003, if it is not postponed due to the unrest, people will feel obligated to vote for him in order to prevent a resurgence of the conflict.<sup>86</sup> An incident in July 2000 suggests that this could be the case.

Student leaders at the University of Liberia issued a statement questioning the official accounts of the seriousness of the fighting in Lofa County. In response government security forces entered the Monrovia campus, took the student leaders into custody, and offered to fly them to Lofa to tour the conflict area and forced them to visit wounded soldiers hospitalised in Monrovia. The media was urged to cover this visit, after which the students were compelled to offer apologies and were released (US Department of State, 2001).

This account suggests that Taylor is willing to go to great lengths to ensure that the Liberian public is aware of continuing conflict in the country. But at the same time he is obligated to maintain appearances of a deep commitment to reconciliation as a precondition for receiving international aid (Kamara, 1999:5).<sup>87</sup> In July 1998, Taylor

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<sup>83</sup> According to refugees who had recently been in Liberia, most people in Liberia survive by selling things in the informal economy (Sanyan, 25/8/00; Alice, 2/9/00).

<sup>84</sup> The American Chief of Mission to Liberia, Donald Peterson remarked, "There are disparities in wealth in every country in the world, but in a country where so many people have so little, those who have it shouldn't flaunt it. The President has an image of an African leader that I don't share" (Kamara, 1999:5).

<sup>85</sup> The opposition party known as LURD, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, has taken credit for attacks in Lofa County. In an interview with COPLA, the Coalition of the Peoples of Liberia in the Americas, General Joe Wylie, LURD's defence spokesperson and senior military advisor, was asked why LURD prefers to deal with Mr. Taylor militarily and not democratically in the next election scheduled for 2003. He responded, "The year 2003 is too far. At the rate Mr. Taylor is killing our people and suffering the nation, the refugees in the region might also increase by the year 2003. So ours is a rescue mission to free our people from refugee camps, provide drinking water for our people, provide light that Mr. Taylor cannot provide, etc" (Siapoe 2001). Claiming to have God on their side, the LURD leader promised to overthrow Mr. Taylor and to call the Liberian people to elect their own leaders in the shortest time possible.

<sup>86</sup> I give credit to Professor Essuman-Johnson at University of Ghana, Legon for this insight (Interview, 18/8/00).

<sup>87</sup> The international community, headed up by the United States and Great Britain, have threatened to impose sanctions on Liberia due to President Taylor's alleged covert involvement in gun running and diamond smuggling in neighbouring Sierra Leone. The government has persistently denied the allegations and senior government officials have registered their indignation over the matter stating that

urged his government to adopt reconciliation as a key policy, but this has not materialised. In the international arena, Taylor continues to speak of a commitment to peace but all the evidence on the ground would suggest otherwise.

Given these disheartening reports, it would seem unlikely that anyone would view Liberia as an optimal living environment. But then, why have so many Liberians refugees returned home and why have Sierra Leonean refugees fled there? Given the ongoing turmoil in the region, it is likely that many who go to Liberia do so because to remain in other conflict ridden areas would be a worse option. If they had a better alternative, as do Liberians in Ghana, it is likely that they too would choose that option over going to Liberia.

### **The deliberations of Liberian refugees in Ghana**

Refugees everywhere carefully consider their options when deciding on their future, and they do what suits them best given the constraints that they face. Going home *is* an option to consider. However, a host of other issues are taken into account in determining if this is the *best* option. Several refugees interviewed expressed concerns about returning to Liberia similar to this.

Sometimes I wonder if we will ever go home. It has been ten years now. Here I have a house. I have electricity. If I go back to Liberia it means renting a house. It means starting from the beginning (Annie, 12/8/00).

Liberians are well aware of the conditions they would face if they go home. In addition, in order to finance re-establishing their lives in Liberia, they need sufficient start-up capital, which is beyond the means of many. Considerations for their children's education also prevent many from going back to Liberia where educational facilities are inadequate, if even available. One refugee said, "We have very few relatives left in Liberia ... Most of them have gone to the US. If I go home, I will be a stranger there" (Nancy, 29/8/00). Put simply, Liberians recognise that home is not the place they left and returning to Liberia is fraught with obstacles that are more easily avoided by maintaining the status quo in Ghana.

However, Liberians expressed some concern as to whether or not they will be allowed to stay on in Ghana. Although they were granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis during the civil war, since the 1997 elections in Liberia the legal status of Liberians in Ghana is no longer clear. Upon UNHCR's failed attempts to encourage Liberians to repatriate, the Ghanaian government announced that Liberian refugees wishing to remain in the country indefinitely must regularise their immigration papers (Interview with Blavo, 5/9/00). If the government chose to enforce immigration control, as many more affluent states do, this would mean that Liberian asylum seekers who are unable to prove themselves eligible for refugee status could be deported to Liberia.<sup>88</sup>

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the action of comprehensive sanctions against Liberia is unjustifiable and would increase the suffering of ordinary citizens who have been struggling with the deteriorating economic situation in post-war Liberia. ("Monthly Situation Report, UNHCR BO in Monrovia, Liberia", December 2000).

<sup>88</sup> According to Article 1C(5) of the *1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, "This Convention shall cease to apply to any person ... [who] can no longer, because the circumstances in connection with which he has been recognised as a refugee have ceased to exist, continue to refuse to avail himself of the protection of the country of his nationality. Providing that this paragraph shall not

However, as of September 2000, the Ghanaian government appeared slow to execute its planned individual refugee status determination process. As a result, most Liberians continue living in Ghana as de facto refugees, if not de jure, hoping that the Ghanaian government will leave them alone and allow them to stay (Interview with Essuman-Johnson, 17/8/00).<sup>89</sup>

But most importantly, Liberians recognise that by holding onto their 'refugeeness' they can remain eligible to resettle in the US<sup>90</sup> and once there, to remain. Since 1991, the US government has granted Temporary Protective Status (TPS) to about 20,000 Liberians in the US. However, fearing that TPS could be revoked with improved conditions in Liberia, in May 1999 thousands of Liberians demonstrated in Washington pleading for permanent residency (Kamara, 1999:3). As expected TPS for Liberians expired on 28 September 1999 because "conditions in Liberia no longer support the need for temporary protection" a US Justice Department statement said (USCR, 1999).

Many Liberians in the US opposed this decision asserting that conditions in Liberia remained unsafe for their return, and they had established permanent roots in the US.<sup>91</sup> As a result, although the US government refused to grant permanent residency and to reinstate TPS for Liberians, President Bill Clinton agreed to confer an administrative status known as 'delayed enforced departure,' DED, on the former Liberian TPS case load. DED prevents the US Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) from commencing deportation proceedings against the designated group and also allows affected nationals to work during the DED period (USCR, 1999; NCCB, "Policy Notes"). Similar to Liberians in the US, Liberians in Ghana recognise that maintaining their refugee status is crucial for maintaining a strong case for their need for resettlement. By remaining at the camp, Liberians are able to further reinforce their special status reminding the Ghanaian government and the international community that the issue of Liberian refugees remains unresolved.

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apply to a refugee...who is able to invoke compelling reasons arising out of previous persecution for refusing to avail himself of the protection of the country of nationality". In other words, a contracting state has the legal right to require refugees to repatriate if there is sufficient evidence that upon returning home they will no longer face "a well-founded fear of persecution" for stated Convention reasons. Affluent western countries apply this clause more rigorously, largely because they have the resources to facilitate an individual status determination process.

<sup>89</sup> As members of ECOWAS, Liberians are eligible to remain in Ghana for ninety days without a visa, which further complicates the issue of establishing Liberians' legal status in Ghana. It has also been suggested that the Ghanaian government is hesitant to deport Liberians since there is a large population of Ghanaians residing in Liberia who could also very likely be deported by the Liberian government in political retaliation. Ghana's 'non-policy' toward the Liberians that they host works to the advantage of Liberians who wish to stay on in Ghana. (Interview with Essuman-Johnson, 17/8/00).

<sup>90</sup> According to a 1994 UNHCR Centre for Documentation and Research report, in 1992 some 10,600 Liberians applied for asylum in Europe. In 1993, less than 5,000 Liberian asylum applications were recorded in Europe and extrapolation of the 1994 figures resulted in a total number of 2,000 applications for that year. Some Liberians are also being resettled to the Canada. However, the majority are resettled to the US.

<sup>91</sup> Prompted by the termination of family reunion for refugees from some African countries, including Liberia, the Black Caucus group of the US Congress adopted a resolution calling for immediate resumption of the family reunification resettlement programme. Citing 1997 refugee figures, "the Black Caucus said Africa had 4.3 million of the worlds refugees but the US government admitted just over 6,000 refugees from Africa in contrast to 48 million refugees from Europe" (UNHCR, 6 December 1999). Presumably the Black Caucus did not mean that all of these Europeans were admitted in 1997, but instead they were seeking to expose what they consider to be a racial bias in which refugees and how many are allowed into the US.

A brief explanation of the resettlement system will help to set the context for understanding the ways Liberians are navigating its constraints and maximising its benefits. The US has a quota system for refugee intake<sup>92</sup> and that quota is filled by claims processed in the US as well as by claims processed in refugee camps in other countries. Liberians in Ghana<sup>93</sup> can apply for resettlement as either Priority 1 (P1) refugees, which are political asylum cases, or as Priority 3 (P3) refugees, which are family reunification cases.<sup>94</sup> P1 cases are processed through UNHCR Ghana and P3 cases are processed through the Joint Voluntary Association (JVA), a Nairobi based NGO that periodically sends teams to the camp to interview applicants.

If UNHCR or JVA considers the applicant and his or her dependents eligible candidates for resettlement, then INS officials sent periodically from the US to the camp verify information and make a final decision on the applications. If the refugee and his or her dependents are found to meet the stipulated criteria and pass medical clearance, then the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) arranges for their flight to the US.

Such a system appears workable, but the reality is that because the US only accepts a limited number of refugees, resettlement is a scarce resource in very high demand. However, as the refugee intake quota established in the US Congress has increased from 12,000 in 1999, to 18,000 in 2000 to 20,000 in 2001 (NCCB, "Policy Notes")<sup>95</sup> the number of Liberian refugees leaving for resettlement in the US has almost doubled each year.

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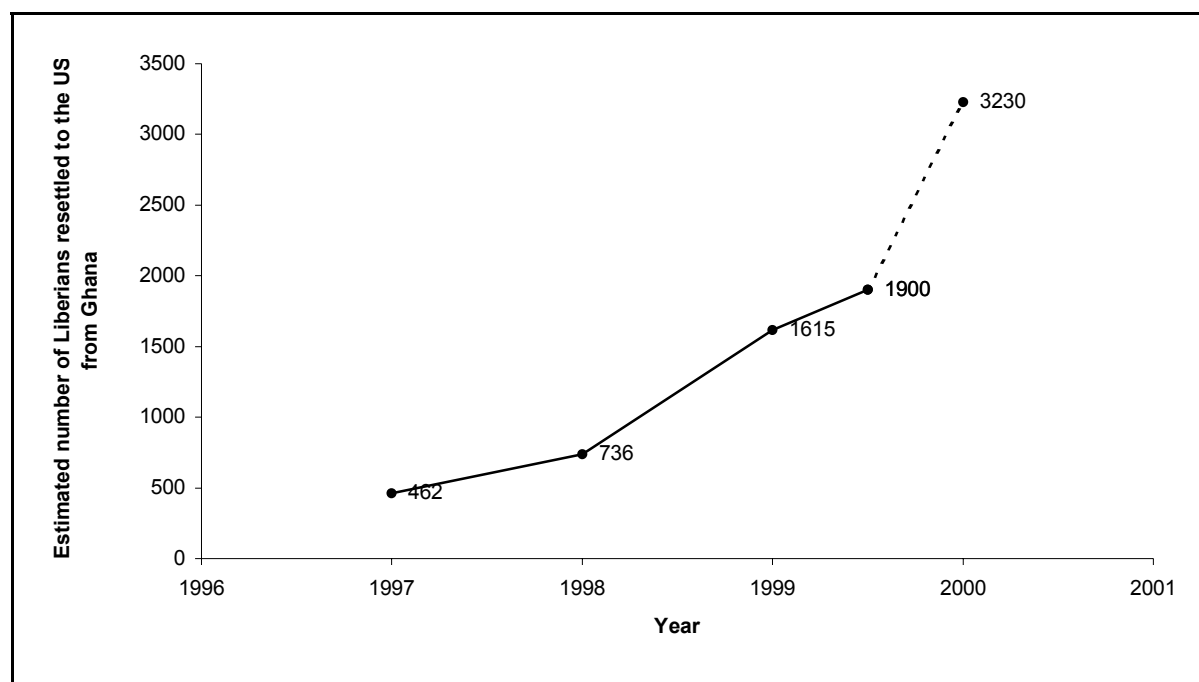
<sup>92</sup> It should be noted that it is not necessarily intended that the quota should be filled each year, but rather that the quota should not be exceeded.

<sup>93</sup> Liberian refugees can apply for resettlement from other locations. However, JVA and INS were not authorised to process P3 family reunification cases in Cote d'Ivoire in 1998 and 1999 because UNHCR was conducting an active repatriation programme at that time making it counter productive to encourage refugees to stay in Cote d'Ivoire to apply for resettlement. However, as of June 2000, JVA and INS were granted permission to resume processing P3 applications from Cote d'Ivoire (NCCB, "Policy Notes").

<sup>94</sup> The US has devised a worldwide priority system as a management tool to ensure that those refugees who are of greatest concern to the US have access to the US refugee admissions programme. As well as P1 and P3 refugees, designated groups of special humanitarian concern to the US can apply for Priority 2 (P2) refugee status. Liberians are not classified as eligible for P2 refugee status (NCCB, "How to Sponsor a Refugee Relative").

<sup>95</sup> I was unable to find the official US quota for African refugees in 1997 and 1998. However, the Head of Office for IOM Ghana (Interview with Polosa, 8/8/00) and a UNHCR Ghana officer (Interview with Tepe-Mensah, 18/8/00) both said the quota for African refugees was set at 7,000 for several years, and only since 1999 has the quota increased on a yearly basis.

**The estimated number of Liberian refugees being resettled to the US from Ghana for each year from 1997 to 2000<sup>96</sup>**



If the trend continues doubling again for 2000 as the graph indicates with a dotted line, it would mean that about 3,230 Liberians would be resettled to the US by the end of the year. Given that as of July 2000, already approximately 1,900 had been resettled, it is very likely that the total number for the year could reach 3,800 if just as many left in the second half of the year as did in the first half.<sup>97</sup> The Head of IOM Ghana said, “Basically, if a Liberian wants to go the US, Ghana is the place for them to be” (Interview with Polosa, 8/8/00). In effect, Ghana, as the center for the US resettlement programme for the West Africa region, has become a gateway to the US for many Liberians.<sup>98</sup> Each week at the Buduburam ‘groundport’ (instead of the airport), Liberians at the camp watch friends and relatives leaving to US get into IOM chartered buses that take them to the airport. It is no wonder that incentives to

<sup>96</sup> Since IOM is actually responsible for putting people on the plane, I used their numbers for the discussion. Because IOM keeps records for all refugees resettled to the US from Ghana, not breaking down numbers by nationality, the Head of Office for IOM Ghana estimated Liberian refugees comprise about 95 percent of all refugee resettlement from Ghana (Interview with Polosa, 8/8/00). The numbers represented on the graph were derived from this estimate. However, there is a discrepancy between IOM numbers, UNHCR numbers and INS numbers. According to UNHCR Geneva, resettlement figures were 209, 878 and 1308 for 1997, 1998 and 1999 respectively. And according to the INS (1998), 231 and 1,494 Liberian refugees arrived in the US in 1997 and 1998 respectively. Figures for subsequent years were not available. Recognising these statistical discrepancies, the point I wish to make is that each year more Liberians are being resettled to the US, a fact that all sets of numbers illustrate.

<sup>97</sup> Updated numbers for 2000 and 2001 were not accessible.

<sup>98</sup> JVA, which is based in Nairobi, had plans to set up a branch in Accra, Ghana by 2001 in order to make the resettlement process more efficient in West Africa. With a backlog of 60,000 cases to clear, JVA stopped accepting P3 applications in December 1999. However, it remains unclear as to whether or not new P3 applications will be accepted (Interviews with Polosa, 8/8/00; Dow, 11/8/00). For prospective P1 applicants, UNHCR posted a notice saying that as of 29 October 1999 no new applications for resettlement would be accepted in order to allow the office to clear the backlog of pending cases. However, a UNHCR officer in Ghana said, “We get twenty applications a day for P1 resettlement. No one wants to go home. There is no end in sight to the resettlement programme” (Interview with Tepe-Mensah, 18/8/00).

repatriate may dim in comparison to this weekly visual reminder of the opportunities one can access by maintaining one's status as a refugee.<sup>99</sup>

Liberians at the camp are highly informed about the resettlement programme and recognise the ways that they must conform to the rules of the system in order to benefit by it. The P3 family reunification criteria<sup>100</sup> are particularly unsuited for the realities of the Liberian definition of 'family', requiring refugees to bend their stories in order to qualify. A Liberian woman explained what makes it so difficult.

This interview [with JVA] is a problem for us because we are all related but we have not lived together. And to me, [Joyce] is my daughter, but to the Americans she is my brother's daughter [so she does not technically qualify to go with me on resettlement]. They don't understand the African family. Also they say you cannot take children over the age of 21. But my oldest daughters are 23 and 24. There is no way I can leave them here alone. In the African family, children, especially girls, stay with their parents until they marry. We must tell JVA they are under 21. It is a lie, but what can we do? We have to write everything down that we will tell the people at the interview. Then we must call our mother in the US to make sure we all agree on the same information in case they ask her to verify. Now do you understand why we must have 'school?' (Name withheld, 29/8/00).

'School' refers to the family meetings that go on before a resettlement interview where the family's story is created, altered as needed, discussed and memorised. Families rely upon lists of potential interview questions that are circulated around the camp in order to prepare answers to the anticipated questions. A disgruntled refugee who had just been denied resettlement at her JVA interview said,

We failed our exam [the JVA interview]. We failed because the papay [grandfather] didn't tell his story good (name withheld, 21/8/00).

Understandably, JVA interviewers are on the look out for inconsistencies in a family's story, and those are easy to find when people are asked to remember details from ten years back and to identify times, dates and places that are easily forgotten, especially if they have been made up.

Because priority for resettlement to the US is given to "those refugees with acute legal and physical protection needs and, in particular, to women-at-risk" (UNHCR, 1997:IV/3), Liberians desirous of resettlement realise that they must create a good

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<sup>99</sup> While Liberians are leaving the camp to resettle in the US each week, Liberians waiting to be resettled expressed frustration at the long, drawn out process. JVA and INS often over-schedule the number of interviews they will do on a visit. As a result, appointments are frequently postponed until the next available circuit ride. One group of refugees had formed an organisation called 'Long-Stayed/Underprivileged Refugees in Ghana', or LSURG. They register people for resettlement who came to the camp between 1990 and 1995, intending to take the list of names to UNHCR in order to petition for resettlement. When asked why she was registering with LSURG, one refugee said, "I don't know why they are registering us again. I already registered for the P3 resettlement, but you try all. I will see which one is successful" (name withheld, 28/8/00).

<sup>100</sup> Family members eligible for P3 resettlement are defined as "spouses, unmarried sons and daughters under the age of 21, and parents of persons lawfully admitted to the US as permanent resident aliens, refugees, asylees, conditional residents, and certain parolees" (NCCB, "How to Sponsor a Refugee Relative").

enough story to convince UNHCR, JVA and INS interviewers that they are in need of this protection. One Liberian interviewed explained the dilemma in this way.

The problem with the resettlement programme is that sometimes even those with legitimate reasons to get political asylum are denied, so you have to lie in order to get through. People make the system work for them. Because I am a journalist, my friends and family ask me to write a good refugee story for the resettlement application. I look at what they prepare and see the inconsistencies. I help them to upgrade the story. You have to tell JVA what they want to hear. The truth has nothing to do with it. Some people at the camp have made a business out of writing good refugee stories, but I never charge for the help I give (name withheld, 18/8/00).

It seems that refugees at the camp do not necessarily want to lie, but the system is such that they feel they must lie in order to be eligible for resettlement. Just as they were required to act as 'exemplary victims' in order to access aid, so now they must cast themselves as 'exemplary victims' once again in order to access resettlement. It would seem that the system is manipulated not necessarily because the refugees want to be corrupt but because the system itself is unable to accommodate real people who have been victims but also plan for a better future.

Having defended the good intentions of refugees and exposed the inadequacies of the resettlement criteria, it must be recognised that some refugees have exploited the resettlement programme for their own profit.<sup>101</sup> The primary way this is done is by 'selling places' on the affidavit of relationship (AOR) for P3 family reunification resettlement. The process for P3 resettlement begins when an anchor, a refugee in the US, fills out an AOR listing all the eligible family members he or she wishes to bring to the US from Ghana, or wherever the family is. JVA sends people to Ghana to interview those listed on the affidavit. Now if for some reason, one of those listed is not in Ghana, it has become common practice for other family members to sell that space to the highest bidder thus filling all the places.<sup>102</sup>

In addition, often JVA will accept the dependents of those listed on the affidavit thus increasing the potential for adding members to the family. There are reports that people come regularly from Liberia to the camp simply for the purpose of getting on the resettlement programme. The UNHCR is well aware of what this referring to it as 'irregular movements' and viewing it as a "negative phenomena...often related to

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<sup>101</sup> The most creative scam that refugees at the camp discussed was the Hawaiian Baptist Church resettlement programme. A Liberian claimed to have contact with a Baptist Church in Hawaii, which allegedly wanted to sponsor resettlement for Liberians to Hawaii. He began by registering people at a cost of 10,000 cedis. He was very clear that only Baptists would be eligible. As people found out about the programme, allegedly many people decided to become Baptists, including even a few Muslims. The scam went on for months and hundreds were registered, some paying up to \$300 to get their names on the list. The organiser skilfully manoeuvred around questions about when the resettlement would begin by making daily trips to Accra saying he was in communication with the Hawaiian Baptist Church and soon people would be on their way. Eventually, the con man himself went to the US on the US government resettlement programme and not one person made it to Hawaii. A Liberian relating the story said, "This is nothing new to Liberians. You could say it is clever business" (John, 22/8/00).

<sup>102</sup> Some refugees interviewed said, "It was JVA who suggested giving spaces in the first place. They did not say to sell them, but to help our Liberian brothers by giving them a space so that a full group could go on the affidavit. At first people gave spaces to help their brothers, but now it is for money" (names withheld, 30/8/00).



inconsistent resettlement activities” (UNHCR,1997: IV/2). The UNHCR-Ghana representative interviewed remarked:

Liberians are staying in Ghana because of the resettlement programme. There is massive fraud. Let me repeat, massive fraud, and we don't know what to do about it...Of course refugees would rather be resettled to the US than to go home. And if they sell a place, they can earn an extra \$1,000 for each place plus go to America. Why would they go back to Liberia? I've heard that Liberians are selling places to Nigerians and Ghanaians for as much as \$2,000, and they go to the US posed as Liberians. Liberians are resettling to the US and making money in the process. To collect money for a place is a risk. If you apply and JVA rejects you, you have to refund the money. But that doesn't stop people. If they are rejected they just change their names and start the process all over again (Interview with Tepe-Mensah, 18/8/00).

While there is no documented proof that this is occurring, it appears to be common knowledge among Liberian refugees and aid workers alike that the resettlement programme is being manipulated for personal profit.

As more Liberians go to the US a migration pattern is developing and social networks among Liberians in the US and in West Africa are becoming well established. Liberians left behind hear of the opportunities they are missing by staying in Ghana and they look for ways to get to the US. A refugee summed this up in saying,

If I stay here, or go back to Liberia, there is no education for me. If I go to Liberia, so many of my friends and colleagues have gone to the States, gotten degrees, started businesses and established valuable contacts. Then when they come to Liberia to visit they will say, 'why have you been wasting your time?' I have to try to get to the US. That is the only way to use my time well. So please, if you know I am [James] and I tell you [at the JVA interview] that I am Peter, then just believe that I am Peter and let me go on my way (Name withheld, 18/8/00).

Conversations at the camp frequently centre on things Liberians have heard from friends about life in the US and plans people have for what they will accomplish if they can manage to get there, too.<sup>103</sup>

While Liberians do have a case for needing special protection, it would seem that the high demand for resettlement is also a manifestation of the well recognised trend of increasing numbers of people from developing countries wanting to access work and educational opportunities in affluent countries. Rather than welcoming these people in, affluent countries have tightened immigration controls such that one of the few channels for admission is political asylum.

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<sup>103</sup> Indigenous Liberians are primarily the ones who are competing for resettlement places. Americo-Liberians typically have more money and more well established US contacts, thus they have a greater likelihood of getting to the US by means other than refugee resettlement. However, it should be noted that due to intermarriage and external liaisons between Americos and tribal people distinctions between the two groups are not necessarily always clear.

However, it should be noted that not all Liberians are interested in going to the US as refugees. Some would prefer going as business professionals because they feel that carrying the refugee label would limit their opportunities abroad, a view expressed by all three Liberian accountants interviewed. Others try to get to the US as students.<sup>104</sup> If Liberians have a way to get to the US other than as a refugee, it appears that they pursue those other options. But most do not have the luxury of choosing options. As a result, while Liberians are certainly not glad for the war in their country, many are pleased that by becoming refugees they now are potentially eligible to resettle in the US.<sup>105</sup> In fact, a few Liberians at the camp expressed gladness upon hearing of the recent conflict in Lofa County, Liberia reasoning that as long as there is fighting at home, resettlement to the US will remain an option for them.

Since not everyone can go to the US, most people remain flexible continually weighing the pros and cons of various choices thus making rational decisions about their next move. A comment made by a mother at the camp is representative of the type of deliberations many Liberians continually make.

I'm too tired of trying this resettlement business. I am only wasting my transport money going to UNHCR in town. The woman [the UNHCR resettlement officer] is in Senzoli. I wanted to try for the P1 just in case, but I don't think they will take me. When they see how fat I am and that I have good clothes they will say this woman is not at risk. I won't put on rags and become dirty just to go and stand in front of someone to beg for resettlement. I want to go the US so I can work. I would work hard, two or three jobs and send money back to my family in Liberia. I am tired of being in Ghana. Here I am having my children, and they are growing up without knowing Liberia. I stay here because if I go home there are many people to take care of. My sister and brother have many children and they will ask me to help them. They think that because I am in Ghana I have more money to help. I want to help them, but how can I? In Liberia you can work for two weeks or a month and when you go to collect your pay there is no money. I don't know what I should do. But I can't stay here forever. I will wait for six months and then decide what to do (name withheld, 5/9/00).

It would appear that Liberian refugees are adept at maximising whatever opportunity is on offer. But when it becomes clear that they have exhausted one possibility, they simply look to another and carry on with their lives.

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<sup>104</sup> One Liberian post-graduate hopeful expressed this opinion: "Resettlement is not a solution by itself. If I can go on a scholarship to the US then that is fine, but I don't want to go to just sit" (Julianna, 19/8/00). Liberian students who want to study in the US usually must return to Liberia to get their visa at the US embassy in Monrovia. Those who feel they cannot return to Liberia face the problem of trying to obtain the necessary paper work to prove their refugee status in Ghana. Such paperwork is difficult to obtain given the problems already outlined concerning the legal status of Liberians in Ghana.

<sup>105</sup> Driving home the point that being a refugee comes with special privileges that non-refugees may wish to have, one refugee said, "Liberians are blessed because of the resettlement. Even some Ghanaians wish that there was war in their country so they could have resettlement" (John, 11/8/00).

## **God's will and resettlement**

While most Liberians actively plan for their future based on economic, educational and familial considerations, a Christian perspective appears to permeate this aspect of their lives. Refugees interviewed often expressed the belief that their hopes could only become a reality if their prayer requests were in keeping with 'God's will'. After being denied a second time for resettlement to the US, one refugee remarked,

It means that God is testing me to see if I am really serious. It didn't work out this time, but God will help me for the next time (name withheld, 18/8/00).

Calling upon divine intervention for gaining the opportunity to resettle in the US is not uncommon at the camp. There are churches and certain individuals apparently skilled in receiving positive results for prayers who allegedly charge a fee to those who request their services, although there is no conclusive evidence to show that this practice is prevalent. More commonly, in most churches each week whoever is leaving to the US on resettlement is invited to come to the front of the church for a special farewell prayer thus reinforcing the link between resettlement and divine approval. But to balance this link with the reality that the majority will not be resettled, sermons at church often warn their congregations that it is unwise to put all their hopes in resettlement to the US.

Liberians routinely ask God for what they want, but on the basis of their observed behaviour it would seem that many would share the sentiment expressed by this refugee.

Praying is important, but you can't sit all day praying. God will never bring you food that way. He won't even have someone else come to bring you food. You have to get up and move. You have to work for your food. God doesn't always bring you what you want. You have to work for it (Francisca, 17/8/00).

Many Liberian's hope that it is 'God's will' that they be resettled to the States, but they also believe that God may have other plans for them. So in the mean time they act for themselves while they wait for God to act on their behalf.

## **Living as Liberians**

The analysis up to this point needs to be put into its larger context. It seems obvious that refugees would find ways to survive and to plan for a better future, but understanding why they choose to do so using some ways and not others requires a more careful investigation. While the behaviour of refugees may be constrained by the larger framework of history that affects them in ways beyond their control, they are not puppets of history but are in fact individual agents acting within that history. As a result, Liberian economic, cultural, social, and religious life is certainly not stagnate and continues to evolve in Ghana. Bearing this in mind, what then is old about the way Liberians are living in Ghana and what is new and changing?

## **The significance of Americo-Liberian culture**

First, Liberia's long love affair with America, in spite of being abandoned by the US in their greatest hour of need, is being perpetuated and reinforced by the resettlement programme to the US. Historically speaking, Americo-Liberians have always been attached to America, but resettlement is making the US accessible to many more Liberians who in all probability would not have had the chance to get there before the war. In addition, desires to mimic American pop culture permeate Liberian culture in exile.

While this may not be unique to Liberians, the identity crisis of the Americas who were not quite American but felt themselves not really African continues to hold Liberian social life in tension. The Americo obsession with maintaining the appearance of affluence is a particularly noticeable aspect of the culture of Liberians in exile. Those who have greater access to remittances from the US are the ones most able to flaunt wealth.<sup>106</sup> A young Liberian at a night-club boasted, "My mother sends me \$100 from the America whenever I ask, so now I'm just out enjoying until I go to the US, too" (name not known, 24/8/00). Around the camp, one sees Mercedes and BMWs parked here and there alongside refugee houses. Whether or not money for these cars comes from remittances or from business dealings, be they legitimate or illegitimate, the message seems to be that many Liberians enjoy looking rich.

The focus on 'dressing', as the Liberians describe it, also gives evidence to the value placed on public displays of wealth. With laughter, some refugees described the time a journalist came to the camp to distribute clothes. When he saw how nicely the refugees were dressed he was too embarrassed to pass out the shabby clothes he had brought. One woman commented,

But some of us needed those clothes. I came from Liberia with only the dress I was wearing. But because the majority were wearing looking fine, the others did not receive what the man brought (Martha, 20/8/00).

On more than one occasion Liberians were overheard saying that they would not go to church or to a wedding because they did not think their clothing was nice enough. One Liberian shared his insight on why Liberians place such a high priority on external appearance.

You can trace it to the Americo-Liberians. Whenever you have a black man trying to act like a white man you run into problems. Liberians have not been willing to be who we are, not in the past and not in the present either. Unfortunately this attitude makes it easy for Liberians to get into corruption. We are always looking out for our own gain (Pastor Cyrus, 24/8/00).

It seems clear that the cultural value of extravagant living has been cultivated through a hundred plus years of Americo rule in which indigenes people sought to become

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<sup>106</sup> Because the Ghanaian exchange rate seems to continually depreciate, Liberians benefit enormously from receiving hard currency. It should be noted that Western Union keeps the dollars transferred and gives Ghanaian cedis. Even so, those who receive dollars have a much greater purchasing power advantage than those who only have access to Ghanaian cedis.

like the Americas in every way possible in order to access opportunities for power in government and in business. Now Liberians are perpetuating these values in exile and in many cases extravagance is financed by remittances from the US.

Refugees interviewed recognised that Liberians tend to want a lifestyle very different from the more conservative, frugal one that Ghanaians seem to value. The following comments highlight this perception.

If a Liberian man gets \$1000 he will live like a \$1000 man. If a Ghanaian gets \$1000 he will live like a \$50 man and save the rest for the future. Many Liberians are wasteful. We want the good life, and instant gratification (Pastor Cyrus, 24/8/00).

Have you seen some the cars some Liberians drive? Liberians like to enjoy life. If they have 5,000 cedis in their hand today, they will treat themselves to meat and a coke. The concept of sacrificing now to save for the future is not a part of Liberian culture. Instead people use every last dollar they have to live the biggest life possible. Ghanaians are not like that. They are much more conservative, so they resent Liberians for their extravagance (Wilfred, 20/8/00).

Several Liberians said they felt that Ghanaians were jealous of what Liberians view as their more western, comfortable lifestyle. While a comprehensive study of Ghanaian attitudes toward Liberians was not conducted, on the basis of limited discussion with Ghanaians it would seem that resentment does exist due to different cultural expectations of how wealth should be managed.

Certainly not all Liberians agree that living large is the best way forward. While most Liberians feel it is important to look their best, not everyone values the unrestrained extravagance of some. In fact, those who have the luxury of collecting cash at Western Union are not necessarily envied by those less 'fortunate'. A refugee living in Accra said,

Some people at the camp are better off than we are here in town because they have family in the US who send them money every week. We have to work for our money, but then I would rather work than sit around at the camp (Agatha, 19/8/00).

Another refugee living at the camp expressed his frustration with the opulence of some,

I can get too vexed when I see Liberians who get \$200, \$300 per month who waste that money and do not invest it (Larry, 15/8/00).

While most Liberians probably would not refuse some cash assistance, many generally seem to agree that working for one's own living gives a person self-respect that cannot come from living on handouts from America. So while Americo culture does influence Liberians in exile it does not necessarily rule the way they live their lives.

In addition, some Liberians have come to value the nationalistic pride they have observed in encounters with other West Africans, and they wish to incorporate this into Liberian culture. Some seem to be rethinking the significance of their American connections and what it means to be an African as expressed by these refugees.

It really gives me pain sometimes. I wish someone could teach our people. I wish I could teach our people to love Liberia, to be proud to be Liberians. The Ghanaians train their children from the time they are small to love Ghana. They even have a pledge of allegiance that speaks of their national pride. The government supports and nurtures that pride. But we Liberians? Our government abuses its people. And even our children no longer learn the dialect but only speak English. I think sometimes that the colonised countries are better off than Liberia. Maybe it is because they had to fight for their independence. They are proud to be Africans. But a Liberian is always trying to be an American (Annie, 16/8/00).

I tell you it wasn't until I lived in Nigeria that I learned to be proud to be a black man. In Nigeria they are proud of being Africans. Liberians can learn something from that (Pastor Cyrus, 16/8/00).<sup>107</sup>

At the camp, Liberians do celebrate their national holidays such as August 24, Flag Day, just as they used to in Liberia, with great fanfare, marching bands, a large parade and prancing pom-pom girls dressed in red, white and blue. However, one wonders to what extent these festivities are an opportunity to express national pride or an opportunity to imitate American culture. It remains to be seen to what extent that culture will be moulded and reshaped as a result of Liberians' experiences in exile.

### **The significance of Christianity**

A second significant feature of refugee life in Ghana is Christianity. Although tied historically to the Americo-Liberians, in the 1980s during President Doe's regime, Christianity gained a great deal of popular support among indigenous Liberians. Paul Gifford (1993) argues that the biggest reasons for the proliferation of Liberian churches<sup>108</sup> in this era were socio-economic and not necessarily religious concerns.

In a context of a disintegrating economy with high unemployment, churches became increasingly attractive as an alternative community for rural-urban migrants, as a

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<sup>107</sup> A Liberian living in Nigeria has begun writing and producing Liberian nationalistic songs. He said, "One thing I've learned from the Nigerians is to be proud of being an African. My ideas are changing from being around Nigerians. I don't know what to call it but there is a Liberian mindset. It comes from our history. Liberians are always running to America. It is the only thing of value that they see. But we must build Liberia. That is our future. I want to produce songs that will help us to think about being Liberians" (James, 2/9/00).

<sup>108</sup> Paul Gifford (1993) distinguishes between four types of churches in Liberia during this era. First, the mainline churches were the original Americo churches whose power was largely stripped from them by President Doe. Second, evangelical churches were basically pure American fundamentalism transplanted and perpetuated in Liberia by American missionaries according to Gifford. Third, churches of the faith gospel of health and wealth proliferated as a result of widely distributed Christian literature and televangelist programming from America. Fourth, independent churches practiced Christianity in more 'civilised,' 'western' ways similar to the mainline churches but under indigenous leadership.

place for miraculous healing since medical services were inadequate, and as a platform for talented people with leadership skills to earn a living as pastors of churches. Within this milieu, Gifford argues that churches became increasingly dependent on affiliations with churches in the US who provided funding to their Liberian counterparts. However, conflicts often arose over financial issues when Liberian churches did not receive as much money as they expected or American churches felt that their generosity was being abused. It would seem that these financial linkages between America and Liberian churches were quite widespread although Gifford offers no conclusive evidence to support this claim.

While Gifford insightfully exposes the impact of American Christianity upon Liberia, it would seem that his analysis gives too much credit to American hegemony for the spread of Christianity in Liberia. For example, he questions the motives of US missionaries suggesting that they might have consciously forwarded US political and economic goals in Liberia.<sup>109</sup> However, it is not likely that Liberians would so readily accept a religion that controlled them. Instead, it appears that Liberians recognised, implicitly if not explicitly, the potential for empowerment through Christianity.

It should be noted that throughout Africa, and not only in Liberia, Christianity has spread rapidly such that currently about half of all Africans are Christians.<sup>110</sup> Certainly this could not have happened because white people engineered it. Instead, Christianity, introduced by white missionaries and heralded more effectively by freed African slaves, persisted in spite of colonialism and upon independence it provided an effective way for African converts to reorder their lives and answer questions that a changed historical circumstance had forced upon them (Sanneh, 1983).

In addition, while acknowledging that African Christianity came primarily from Europe and the US, one should not ignore the power of 'traditional' religion and local culture to shape Christianity making it relevant within a given context. Instead of viewing Christianity as a powerful force dominating the traditional way of life, more accurately, African 'traditional' religion such as was practiced in Liberia should be viewed as a powerful, yet flexible force, capable of accommodating change. While Christianity came to challenge traditional religions, and sometimes even displaced them, initially at least "it did so by compensating the converts in recognised currency" (Sanneh, 1983:182). Many Africans were willing to accept change and development in their former concepts of the Supreme Being and the forces of good and evil at work in the spiritual realm. In other words, converts accepted "the power of a Christian God over a territory of long familiarity, rather than shifting the religious contest to totally new ground" (ibid.).

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<sup>109</sup> Gifford (1993) anticipates criticism for his America-centric discussion of Liberian Christianity and seeks to counter it. Understanding the nuances of his perspective would require a more careful investigation moving beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, he states that "there is in some places conscious manipulation of Christianity to accomplish US policies...But it is too simple to see the growth of this Christianity across Africa as orchestrated by the CIA. What has been argued here is that this modern American Christianity has *of itself* inevitable socio-political effects, regardless of the conscious intention of its proponents" (p. 282).

<sup>110</sup> In 1900 there were an estimated 8.7 million Christians in Africa; in 1970, 118 million Christians; and by 2000, 338 million Christians comprising 9%, 40% and 48% of the total population respectively (Barrett, 1997:25). The statistics show that 'traditional' religions have become increasingly marginal while Islam and Christianity compete for converts. Given the limitations to measuring religious affiliation with precision, it is useful to consider these statistics in terms of the broad picture they represent.

It appears that concepts of Liberian Christianity and perspectives on ‘traditional’ religion continue to evolve among Liberians in Ghana. Those interviewed reported that ritual killings and initiation rites of the secret societies have fallen by the way side in exile.<sup>111</sup> They expressed gladness at being freed from the remembered fear that permeated the societies and seemed convinced that their lives were more meaningfully lived within a Christian framework. However, ‘traditional’ religion has influenced the way Liberians express their Christianity, allowing for miracles, healing, exorcisms, and the enjoyment of drums and dancing in services, for example.

While economic motivations for church involvement at the camp discussed earlier are important, they do not go far enough. As well as providing financial support for some, churches at the camp are significant on a social level. They provide a place where people can build and maintain social networks. In addition, for people who have lost their family, the church can function as a valuable surrogate. In most churches, members address one another as ‘brother’, ‘sister’, etc, reinforcing a family-like environment. And as for important cultural rites of passage such as weddings, funerals and baptisms, these are undertaken in the church.

Having recognised the socio-economic aspects of Liberian Christianity in Ghana, it is just as important, if not more so, to acknowledge the spiritual significance of Liberian Christianity. Many Liberians rely upon their Christian beliefs to be the stabilising force in a social world disrupted by war. Comments made by refugees speak for themselves.

If you’ve been through war that’s when you really get to know there is a God...Everyday you wake up and you have no job and no food, but by the end of the day you find something to eat. Then you know God is providing for you. He is there and he is making it possible for you to live (Charles, 7/9/00).

We don’t compare our income and our expenditure. We never do that. We just survive by the grace of God. For example, we were discussing today about lunch. The old ma next door heard and gave us a cup of rice. That is how God provides. It is not like that everyday, but somehow God always provides (Armah, 11/8/00).

It seems implicit within current Liberian religious beliefs that when times are hard and there is nowhere else to turn, people go to prayer and to the church for support and encouragement. According to a study conducted by the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Ghana (Akotia and Sefa-Dedeh, 2000), 77% and 84% of 600 Liberians interviewed at Buduburam and Senzoli camps respectively said that being a refugee has positively affected their life in that it “made their faith in God increase”. Statements from my own research support these findings.

Our family’s faith in God has grown strong through all we have passed through. God has used this war for some very good things in our lives. He

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<sup>111</sup> Liberians interviewed reported that secret societies are being re-established in Liberia itself. According to the US State Department (2001), ritual killings in which human body parts used in traditional rituals are removed from the victim continued to be reported in Liberia in 2000.



has used the hardships to draw us to himself. Spiritually we are very fine. We may not have much, but we know God is with us (Joseph, 2/9/00).

Before the war Liberians weren't serious about Christianity. Now many are religious even if they are not committed Christians. The war made people serious about God. The war was bad, but it has a good side (Annie, 2/8/00).

Needing to reorient their lives in exile around something familiar and powerful, many Liberians look through the lens of Christianity to see the world and to interpret their experiences.

### **The significance of living**

In conclusion, the reality of living with or without humanitarian assistance is that it is an active and not passive state of being. It entails far more than reacting to events and being recipients of help when others feel it is needed. Many Liberians experienced violent ordeals, lost all they had and needed assistance, but that has not brought about a fundamental change in who they are as social beings capable of maintaining their own lives and planning for their future. In addition, it would be foolish to assume that all Liberians are the same. There is rarely if ever any such thing as a homogenous culture as each family and every individual is shaped by different opportunities and experiences. In one sense, Liberia did fall apart in its civil war and conditions do not seem to be improving. But in another sense, Liberia is alive and well as Liberians wherever they may be carry on marrying, burying, eating, working, playing and *living* in familiar, yet unique and changing ways.

It must also be recognised that Liberia's civil war, while devastating has opened up the world to many Liberians in positive and beneficial ways. As refugees, Liberians have traveled widely and have made and built upon global networks with Liberians going to the US on resettlement, with other Liberians travelling to new places in the region, with other West Africans and with American donors and churches sympathetic to the needs of African refugees. One Liberian refugee expressed the changes well in saying,

Before the war, most people lived in their village. They never traveled far, not even to Monrovia.<sup>112</sup> But the war has caused Liberians to move far and wide and has exposed them to many new things. They are not satisfied with the old tradition now...People's minds have opened up by seeing other things. They will not be happy to go back to the village life again (Sanyan, 25/8/00).

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<sup>112</sup> According to a 1994 report (Carver), Monrovia roughly doubled in size from around 400,000 in 1989 to 800,000. The US Committee for Refugees (1999) reported that "large numbers of internally displaced Liberians who sought shelter in Monrovia during the war continued to return to their homes in rural areas during 1999, often under pressure from government authorities intent on alleviating overcrowding in the capital and eager to convert shelter sites to other uses..." It seems that many who leave Monrovia to move back to the village do so under duress.

Understandably, this heightened transnational perspective has and will continue to have implications for how Liberian economic, social, cultural, and religious life evolves. In considering how Liberians are able to live and how they choose to live, they should be seen not simply as victims affected by their history but also as protagonists actively creating that history.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **Dissertations**

- Jablasone, J. (2000) "The Process of Integration of Refugees into a Host Nation: A Case Study of Liberian Refugees in Ghana," Dissertation for a BA degree submitted to the Department of Social Sciences, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.
- Karnga, E. (1997) "The History of the Buduburam Refugee Camp," Dissertation for a BA degree submitted to the Department of History, University of Ghana, Legon.
- McCarthy, J. (1998) "The Management of Refugee Reception Centres in Ghana," Dissertation for a BS degree submitted to the Department of Development Planning, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.
- Sondah, S. (1996) "Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land: A Case Study of the Religious Life of Liberian Refugees in Ghana," Dissertation for a BA degree submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.

## APPENDIX 2

### Church Survey Conducted at Buduburam Refugee Settlement, Ghana from 7/8/00 to 10/8/00 with the help of John McCarthy. (Updated from Sondah 1996).

Funding: L = local (the camp)  
 N = national (Ghanaian)  
 F = foreign (USA)

#### A. Churches that existed in Liberia prior to the war

Name of Church	Year Established	# of Members in 1996	# of Members in 2000	Place of Worship	Funding L/N/F	# of Meetings /Week
1. Church of Christ	1990	200	210	Pastor's building	L	Daily
2. Seventh Day Adventist	1991	50	100	Church elder's school	L/N	3x/week
3. All Souls Episcopal	1992	250	200	Church building	L/F	Daily
4. Trancea*	1990	85-90	105	School Room	L	4x/week
5. End of Time Ministry	1991	50	50-60	Church building	L	4x/week
6. Deeper Life Ministry*	1991	30	30-40	School room	L	3x/week
7. Refuge Baptist Church	1991	150	200	Church building	L	Daily
8. Budu United Methodist Church	1993	75-100	700?	Church building	L	6x/week, all night prayer 1/mo.
9. Budu Lutheran Congregation	1995	100-150	200-250	Church building	L	3x/week
10. Association of Independent Churches (AIC)	1995	24	85	School building	L	4x/week
11. Bethel World Outreach Ministries, International	1997		145	Church building	L/F	Daily
12. Assemblies of God	1991	NA	200-250	Church building	L	Daily
13. Advent Christian Church	1995	50	40	Rent a building	L	Daily
14. Glory of God	2000		46	School	L/F	5x/week

Church						
15. Bethel World Outreach, #2**	2000		60	School	L	3x/week
16. Prophet Church	1995		50	Church building	L	Daily

\* Trancea and Deeper Life Ministries were Ghanaian churches established in Liberia that came back to Ghana with Liberians during the war.

\*\* Bethel World Outreach #2 is a church split.

### B. Churches established on the camp by refugees

Name of Church	Year Established	# of Members in 1996	# of Members in 2000	Place of Worship	Funding L/N/F	# of Meetings /Week
17. CHIDRA Christian InterDenom. Assembly, formerly LIDA	1990	450-500	900	Church building	L/phone business	Daily
18. Gospel Revival Ministry	1998		50-60	Church building	L	Daily
19. Church of the Solid Rock	1994		100-165	Church building	L/school	4x/week
20. Christian Women's Movement	1997		100	Church building	L	5x/week
21. Christian Pentecostal Church	1996		90-95	Borrowing space	L	Daily
22. Free at Last	1995	10	80	Church building	L	4x/week
23. House of Prayer of Jesus Christ	1994	63	350	Church building	F/L	6x/week
24. Gethsemany Garden Fellowship	1996		150	Church building	F/L	Daily
25. House of God Assembly Church	1994		250-300	Church building	L	Daily
26. Christian Outreach Church	1993	15	30	Video hall	L	4x/week
27. House of Prayer Church of the Brethren	1995	NA	100-150	Church building	L	5x/week
28. Faith in Christ International	2000		80	Church building	F/L	4x/week

29. Church of the Brethren	1995	NA	150	School	L	5x/week
30. Grace Christian Fellowship	2000		50	Private School	F/L	4x/week

### C. Branches of churches in Ghana

Name of Church	Year Established	# of Members in 1996	# of Members in 2000	Place of Worship	Funding L/N/F	# of Meetings /Week
31. Leading Saints	1997		350	Church building	L	3/week
32. St. Gregory Catholic Church (also in Liberia)	1990	1000	650 on Sunday, 2000 members	Church building	F/L	Daily
33. Fundamental Baptist Church	1992	200	200	Church building	F/L	Daily
34. Independent Pentecostal Church	1995	18-25	90-110	Church building	L	Daily
35. Apostolic Church of Ghana*	1995	70	NA	NA	NA	NA
36. Christian Action Faith Ministry*	1995	75-100	NA	NA	NA	NA
37. Jehovah's Witnesses	1990	NA	43-150	Kingdom hall	L	3x/week
38. Victory Praise Chapel International	1999		1000	Roofed open building	L	6x/week
39. Ghana Christian Center	2000		50	Rent	L/N	Daily
40. Bahai*	1990	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

\* 'NA' connotes information 'Not Available'. Some church leaders are rarely at the camp. They are in town or travelling for whatever reason so I was unable to obtain data about these particular churches.

### **APPENDIX 3**

#### **Interviews conducted with non-refugees knowledgeable about Liberians in Ghana**

Mr. R.S. Adu (4/8/00) NMP (National Mobilisation Programme-the government organisation responsible for administrating relief efforts in Ghana), Director, Accra, Ghana.

Mr. C. Afun (6/9/00) NMP, aid worker, Accra, Ghana.

Mr. C. Akumiah (2/8/00) Christian Council (a Ghanaian NGO), aid worker, Accra, Ghana.

Mr. E. Akyempong (15/8/00) NMP, Camp Manager, Buduburam, Ghana.

Mr. S. Aryeetah (2/8/00) Pioneers Africa, Director, a Ghanaian who lived in Liberia for six years and now heads up missionary work in Ghana, Accra, Ghana.

Dr. E.Q. Blavo (5/9/00) Ghana Refugee Board, Chairman, Accra, Ghana.

Mr. R. Dow (11/8/00) JVA (Joint Voluntary Association), Team Manager, Buduburam, Ghana.

Dr. A. Essuman-Johnson (17/8/00) University of Ghana-Legon, Senior Lecturer of Political Science, assisted Liberian students and has studied the Liberian refugee situation since the early 1990s, Accra, Ghana.

Ms. Michelle (surname not known) (7/8/00) JVA (Joint Voluntary Association), resettlement interviewer, Buduburam, Ghana.

Mr. E. Owusu (23/9/00) Western Union-Ghana, Country Manager, London, England.

Mr. C. Pastor-Ortega (12/1/01) UNHCR-Geneva, Senior Desk Officer for West and Central Africa, Geneva, Switzerland.

Mr. A. Polosa (8/8/00) IOM-Ghana (International Organisation for Migration), Head of Office, Accra, Ghana.

Mr. F. Tepe-Mensah (18/8/00) UNHCR-Ghana, Associate Community Services Officer, involved with Liberian refugees since they first arrived, Accra, Ghana.

## APPENDIX 4

### Cursory information on Liberian refugees who participated in the study

#### A. Camp Refugees

Name	Economic Activities	Frequency of Remittances Received from the US	Level of Church Involvement	Future Plans
1. Pastor Cyrus and Annie	Church work, sell cold water, sell Nigerian clothes and hair	Sometimes	Very involved, church leaders	To Nigeria or resettle to the US if possible
2. William and Johnson	Play golf, some construction	Regular	Attend church regularly	Resettle to the US
3. Thomas	Student, farming, book binding, typing, church work	Sometimes	Very involved, Bible school, church leader	Return to Liberia
4. Armah and Sanyan	Students, some construction, church work	Sometimes	Very involved, church leaders	Return to Liberia after finishing school in Ghana
5. Terrance and Paul	No economic activities mentioned, play soccer	Regular	Attend church regularly	Resettle to the US
6. Annie's friend	Church work	NA	Very involved in church ministry, prophecy and healing	Return to her ministry in Gabon
7. Newton	Gardening and small market	Sometimes	Infrequent church attendance	Resettle to the US
8. Abraham	Small market	Regular	Infrequent church attendance.	Resettle to the US
9. Juice	Farming, some construction	None	No church involvement	Uncertain, no resettlement opportunity
10. Ida	No economic activities mentioned	Regular	Regular church attendance	Resettle to the US (or immigrate)
11. Deborah and Sandoh	Tailoring, small market	Sometimes.	NA	Resettle to US if possible
12. Larry	Church work, small market	None	Very involved, church leader	Return to Liberia



13. Stanley	No economic activities mentioned	Regular	NA	Resettle to the US
14. Webster	Student, no economic activities mentioned	NA	NA	Uncertain
15. Peter	Sells cold water, farms, small market	Sometimes	NA	Uncertain
16. John	Typing, teacher, consultant	Sometimes	NA	NA
17. Rita	Student, no economic activities mentioned	Regular	Regular church attendance	Resettle to the US
18. Jacob	Teaches in Ghanaian school, tailoring	NA	NA	Stay in Ghana for now
19. Eleen	Student, no economic activities mentioned	Regular	Very involved, youth leader at church.	Resettle to the US
20. Fransisca	Small market	Rarely	Regular church attendance	Uncertain, probably return to Liberia in 6 months
21. Charles	Water business	NA	Regular church attendance	Uncertain
22. John	NGO work when available	NA	Regular church attendance	Resettle to the US

## B. Town Refugees

<b>Name</b>	<b>Economic Activities</b>	<b>Frequency of Remittances Received from the US</b>	<b>Level of Church Involvement</b>	<b>Future Plans</b>
23. Leroy	Works in admin for a Ghanaian church	Sometimes	Very involved, church music group	Resettle to the US
24. Sue	Works for a medical research office, bakes wedding cakes to sell at the camp	Sometimes	Regular church attendance	Resettle to the US
25. Julianna and Julietta	Students, no economic activities mentioned	NA	NA	On or trying for scholarships in Canada
26. Frances	No work available	NA	Regular church attendance	Uncertain, move to camp if possible
27. Agatha	Husband is accountant with Ghanaian firm, Agatha works for in Accra	Rarely	NA	Go back to Liberia with the firm, or to the US on business visa
28. Lucretia	Husband is accountant with Ghanaian firm, Lucretia is going to bank school	None	NA	Possibly to the US on business visa
29. Liz, Irene and Cristel	Students, supported by mother in Switzerland	Regular	Very involved, music ministry	Stay in Ghana
30. Wilfred and Martha	Accountant with Ghanaian firm	None	Regular church attendance	Go to Canada with a business firm
31. Nancy	Worked for Americans in Accra as a nanny, now no employment	Regular	Regular church attendance	Resettle to the US

### C. Kumasi Refugees

<b>Name</b>	<b>Economic Activities</b>	<b>Frequency of Remittances Received from the US</b>	<b>Level of Church Involvement</b>	<b>Future Plans</b>
32. Alphanso	Student, Church work	Sometimes	Very involved, Bible school	Return to Liberia, maybe to the US
33. Bea	Runs a computer school for a Ghanaian boss	NA	Regular church attendance	Stay in Ghana for now
34. Alice and Joseph	Students, work at a local Ghanaian church Bible school	Regular	Very involved, church leaders	Uncertain, stay in Ghana for now

\* 'NA' connotes information 'Not Available'.

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