WEST AFRICA: LIBERIAN BOAT PEOPLE

THIS APPEAL SEEKS CHF 547,000
IN CASH, KIND AND SERVICES
TO ASSIST 5,000 BENEFICIARIES FOR 3 MONTHS

Summary

Two ships carrying some 5,000 Liberian refugees fleeing the civil war in Monrovia were caught in an increasingly desperate search for refuge after the governments of Sierra Leone, Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire refused to allow them into port. The boats became the centre of worldwide media attention as living conditions on the vessels for the refugees became increasingly poor.

The Red Cross National Societies of Ghana and Sierra Leone provided some assistance to the refugees on board the boats on 13 May, and the Nigerian Red Cross Society began preparations to receive them after the ships were reported to be heading for Lagos. However, on the afternoon of 14 May, the two vessels were finally allowed to dock in Sekondi-Takoradi in Ghana and Freetown, Sierra Leone.

The Intended Operation

The Ghana Red Cross and Sierra Leone Red Cross Societies have responded quickly and effectively to the emergency, and are presently assisting the disembarking refugees with registration facilities, health care (including first aid and health screening), the construction of sanitation facilities, social services (for family reunion and psychological support) and the distribution of government-supplied drinking water.

Once this screening is complete, the longer-term needs in terms of food, shelter and sanitation will become apparent. However, the two National Societies require immediate funds to sustain their relief operations and resupply their emergency stocks. The operations are being supported by the Federation’s five-person delegation in Freetown, Sierra Leone and representative in Accra, Ghana.
The Disaster

Two ships, the ‘Bulk Challenge’ and the ‘Reefer’, carrying some 5,000 Liberian refugees from Monrovia, were initially refused permission to land in Sierra Leone, Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire by the respective governments and were on their way to Lagos, Nigeria. However, this afternoon (14 May), the two vessels were finally allowed to dock in Sekondi-Takoradi in Ghana and Freetown, Sierra Leone, respectively. Living conditions on the boats are extremely poor due to the lack of drinking water, food and basic medication.

The Response so far

Government Action

Whilst the governments of Ghana, Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire had initially agreed only to accept their own nationals fleeing Liberia, on 14 May the Nigerian government indicated that it was considering allowing the refugees to disembark if the boats arrived there. The port authorities in Lagos even went so far as to open some of their warehouses to shelter the boat people. However, given the state of the Liberian refugees on board the ships — and the guarantees being offered by UNHCR — the governments of Ghana and Sierra Leone reversed their earlier decisions and permitted the passengers to disembark, though these governments were still in the process of negotiating their exact status.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

On 13 May, the Red Cross Societies of Ghana and Sierra Leone attended to the needs of the refugees in the boats offshore their respective countries (first detailed in the *International Federation Information Bulletin*, no. 1, 13 May).

Sierra Leone

The Sierra Leone Red Cross Society (SLRCS) provided bread, sardines, drinking water and first aid to between 950 and 1,000 refugees on the ‘Reefer’, 12 miles outside Freetown’s harbour. Preparations were also made to prepare for the eventual disembarkation of the refugees, so that when the ship finally docked, an SLRCS medical team, a number of first aid volunteers and other relief workers were on hand to assist in the process of registration and settling in of the new arrivals. Medical examinations, together with treatment where required, were also carried out. Accommodation and food are being arranged together with shelter and sanitation.

Ghana

In Ghana, the Secretary General of the Ghana Red Cross Society is currently in Takoradi, organising the disembarkation of the ‘Bulk Challenge’ together with the port authorities. Between 3,000 and 6,000 people were being brought ashore at the time of this Appeal. Registration is underway. The Ghana Red Cross has dispatched 2,500 blankets, 50 tents and some buckets and cups to Takoradi from Accra. The Takoradi Emergency First-Aid Team is working with Ghana Red Cross volunteers to treat the most urgent cases under the supervision of Dr. Quiz, the chairman of the local branch.

Both Red Cross Societies are urgently in need of cash to be able to replenish and re-supply stocks which they have drawn upon, and purchase food, sanitation material, blankets and hygiene-related items (such as anti-lice shampoo, soap, etc.).

The Nigeria Red Cross Society also remains on a high state of alert. Together with the National Commission of Refugees and UNHCR, preparations are being made should the refugees now in Ghana and Sierra Leone finally be transported to Nigeria.
Other Agencies’ Action
UNHCR is engaged in discussions with the respective governments, particularly concerning the status of the refugees. MSF has been asked to conduct limited medical work in Ghana.

Co-ordination
In Ghana, a national coordination committee has been established. However, of the dozen or so Non-Governmental Organisations involved, none had any volunteers nor sufficient resources to be able to respond to the emergency, so that the Ghana Red Cross is the only local agency actually reacting to the plight of the refugees.

The Needs to be met
The Liberian refugees are in desperate need of good food, drinking water and medication, together with counselling after their harrowing voyage. Shelter, food, medical care and sanitation requirements will need to be covered in the longer term.

Red Cross Objectives
- The Red Cross Societies of Sierra Leone and Ghana will provide health care, food, sanitation and shelter for all the refugees now disembarked from the two vessels.

National Society/Federation Plan of Action

Emergency Phase
In both Ghana and Sierra Leone the following activities are being undertaken:
- Initial reception;
- Health care (including first aid and health screening);
- Transfer of patients using Red Cross ambulances to specialised units in the municipal hospitals;
- Construction of sanitation facilities (mobile toilets and rubbish bins for the collection of refuse);
- Social services for family reunion and psychological support;
- Distribution of government-supplied drinking water.

Once this screening is complete the longer-term needs in terms of food, shelter and sanitation will become apparent.

Capacity of the National Societies
Both the Sierra Leone and Ghana Red Cross Societies have been well prepared for these kind of emergencies, as their reactions in this case shows. Little inputs other than financial support will be required from the Federation.

Present Capacity of the Federation in the Region
The Federation has a single delegate in Accra, Ghana, and a country delegation in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with five delegates based there. A Federation delegation is also present in Kano, Nigeria (which helped the Nigerian Red Cross Society begin preparing for the arrival of the refugees before news arrived of their landing in Ghana and Sierra
Leone). These delegations are actively supporting the National Societies in planning their responses, and are providing immediate cash for the most urgent purchases to take place.

**Immediate action**

The International Federation’s Under-Secretary General (Disaster Response Operations Coordination) has approved the use of CHF 200,000 from its DREF funds (Disaster Response Emergency Funds) in order to get this emergency relief operation started. Once registration of the refugees is complete, and the true number of beneficiaries known in each site together — with their essential requirements — a modified appeal budget may be presented.

**Budget summary**

See Annex 1 for details.

**Conclusion**

The three National Societies in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria have responded quickly, flexibly and effectively to this fast-changing emergency situation. They have proved, once again, the value of investments in disaster preparedness and the unique reach of the Red Cross in humanitarian relief work. We hope that donors will respond equally quickly to this Emergency Appeal to ensure that the present relief efforts can continue.

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