

Guinea Conakry: Influx of Sierra Leonean Refugees

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The Disaster

Fierce fighting which broke out on Friday 6 February between the military junta in Freetown and ECOMOG forces is continuing, leaving an unknown number of dead and injured and sending thousands of civilians fleeing to safety.

The Federation's representative has remained in Freetown, despite the heavy fighting, and is assisting the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society (SLRCS), wherever possible, in helping the civilian population affected by the conflict.

Yesterday the Federation residence, which was designed as a base for emergency response and where all relief supplies -- first aid kits, a small quantity of food, ambulance, fuel --were stored, was looted by armed men.

The fighting in Freetown has reportedly caused numerous casualties, but it is not possible to give precise figures at this stage because of the difficulty in obtaining reliable information. Civilian deaths have been reported and many others have been wounded by bullets, shrapnel and grenades.

Large numbers of civilians have fled their homes in search of safety. An estimated 500 --800 persons, who left from the east of Freetown in eight makeshift boats, reached the Guinean port of Boussoura, some 10 kms from the capital, Conakry, on Tuesday.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Red Cross Society of Guinea, together with the Federation Delegation in Guinea and the President of the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society -- who was on mission in Guinea prior to the outbreak of hostilities in Freetown -- immediately took steps to assist the new arrivals by despatching a dozen first aiders to Boussoura to provide assistance to the most vulnerable.

Although the port has been sealed off for security reasons, the Federation and the Red Cross of Guinea have had access to the refugees. The first aid team carried out a preliminary check of the refugees, mainly women and children. Most of them were exhausted. Those most seriously affected and the sick were immediately evacuated in a Red Cross of Guinea ambulance to Donka hospital.

The first aiders also treated 82 other refugees suffering from malaria, sea sickness, diarrhoea and vomiting.

The refugees have been temporarily moved to Bonfi Stadium which is bigger and offers more space for providing assistance.

At an interagency meeting held yesterday at the UNHCR office, operational partners were entrusted with specific responsibilities. The Red Cross of Guinea and the Federation will take on first aid and care for the refugees, food and non-food distributions and assistance to the most vulnerable.

Needs

Further major influxes of civilians from Freetown are expected in the next few days if the fighting goes on. It should be recalled that since the military junta seized power in Freetown in May last year, approximately 63,600 Sierra Leoneans have sought refuge in Guinea. They have been settled in camps at Forécariah, about 100 kms to the east of Conakry. It is hoped that the Guinea authorities will quickly move the refugees from Bonfi Stadium, which does not have any latrines or shelter from rain, in order to avert a deterioration in the already precarious health situation there.

The Red Cross of Guinea plans to continue providing humanitarian assistance in co-operation with the Federation Delegation, but will need financial and material aid. For the moment the Federation Delegation in Guinea is drawing on its existing resources to support the National Society's operation, but these will soon be exhausted. A needs evaluation is under way.

More details on needs, taking into account possible further influxes of refugees, will be issued shortly.

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