

West Africa: Liberian Boat People

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period covered: 22 May -- 17 July 1996

Red Cross Societies in Sierra Leone and Ghana have responded effectively to the plight of refugees fleeing on board ships from renewed fighting in Monrovia/Liberia from April this year onwards. Red Cross health specialists and volunteers have been on hand at the harbours and disembarkation points in both countries. In Ghana, the National Society is implementing a full relief operation for nearly 1,700 refugees. After being accommodated at a temporary site, this group has been transferred to a new camp where the Red Cross is overseeing the installation of shelter, health, sanitation, water and education facilities and organising regular food and non-food distributions. Support from sister Red Cross Societies and international agencies has been timely and generous for the beginning of this programme.

The context

On 14 May the Governments of Sierra Leone and Ghana granted permission to two ships carrying 2,500 refugees from Liberia to anchor in the harbours of Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Takoradi (Ghana). All refugees disembarked and underwent a thorough screening covering nationality, family status, health and other needs. In Ghana 1,686 people came ashore; the count in Freetown was 935. All were given food, water and, where necessary, first aid. Those in need of intensive medical care were transferred to hospitals in Freetown and Takoradi. The nationals of the host countries were allowed to return to their homes after identification by relatives. In Sierra Leone, all Liberians with no family ties were sent back to the ship. In Ghana they were allowed to stay and found shelter in a camp. Since mid-May, no more refugees from Liberia have been allowed to disembark from ships in Ghana.

Latest events

Sierra Leone

Vessels with refugees from Liberia continue to arrive in Freetown without attracting much media attention - the latest in mid-June with 84 orphans on board, accompanied by three caretakers and a doctor. In the harbour area, Sierra Leone Red Cross (SLRCS) provides a medical check-up, food, drinking water, and clothes. Transfer to the Waterloo camp - where all Liberian refugees are currently housed - follows.

Ghana

At first, the refugees were accommodated temporarily in tents and one uncompleted school building in Essipon. After a short hold up while various options were examined, an alternative

location was identified -- in Nzema East district, almost 100 km away from the present camp -- which offers better living conditions for the refugees. Construction of the new site has been put in hand rapidly, with ground clearance, and provision of water, approach roads and sanitation among the top priorities. Health services are available at a hospital about 2.5 km from the camp.

The delayed transfer of the refugees to the new camp began on 9 July, which now houses almost all the refugees; 300 tents have been erected (100 from the German Red Cross, 47 from the Spanish Red Cross and 153 from the UNHCR), with more underway -- and better spread out once ground clearance has been completed. General lighting is provided by a generator and the refugees have received kerosene lamps for each tent. Two existing classroom blocks have been renovated to accommodate the Red Cross staff, a camp clinic and the warehouse for the relief supplies. Two 14-cabin bathhouses are under construction and two 500-gallon water tanks will be in place shortly.

Meanwhile the programme established in Essipon is mirrored in the new camp. The Government is responsible for security and overall co-ordination. Food (as dry rations from 4 June) is supplied by WFP. UNHCR compensated local farmers whose land was requisitioned for the settlement, funded ground clearance, the generator, plastic sheeting, some of the tents and distributed temporary ration cards - with the permanent documentation due to be handed out only after registration at the new site is completed. UNICEF assists the Ministry of Health with drugs and has introduced an infant feeding programme in addition to contracting the Ghana Water and Sewerage Corporation to sink two wells with hand pumps.

A preparatory school is being established in the camp and a supplementary feeding programme for malnourished children is underway. The Inter-NGO consortium, initially established to coordinate the immediate response to the influx in the harbour of Takoradi and at Essipon, was dissolved on 31 May.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Sierra Leone

The SLRCS has established a programme for the immediate deployment of volunteers, food, water and non-food items whenever a ship arrives with Liberian refugees. If disembarkation is not allowed, SLRCS hires small boats for Red Cross doctors and first aiders to reach the ship and provide health services, food, drinking water and non-food items.

Ghana

During the review period, a tripartite agreement was signed between UNHCR, the Ghana Refugee Board and the Ghana Red Cross Society (GRCS) covering: the implementation of food/non-food distributions, sanitation, water supply, health, shelter, and Red Cross transportation; the care and maintenance of the drainage system; the on-going supply of fuel for waste disposal; the installation of a telecommunications radio system; and the organisation of health care in the camp.

As a result, GRCS effectively is coordinating and implementing relief activities in the new camp, in particular shelter (erecting tents) and the distribution of food and non-food items. The Society is also responsible for health services, water and sanitation including: first aid and the transfer of sick patients to hospital; establishing a small dispensary in the completed school buildings; supplying between 10,000 and 15,000 gallons of drinking water daily utilising the Federation's water truck from the Togolese refugee operation in the Volta region, until two wells have been constructed; the installation of 10 mobile latrines prior to a longer term solution; and motivating the camp population through health and sanitation education campaigns. A thorough spraying of the new site took place on 16 and 17 July.

In addition, GRCS registers all families and unaccompanied minors for the tracing programme. To date, 45 children have been identified and are now in the care of the GRCS District Chairman, a

senior social welfare officer by profession. Two NGOs are interested in cooperating with the International Federation on the future well-being of these children.

Outstanding needs

To date, contributions to the International Federation appeal 09/96 for CHF 547,000, launched on 14 May 1996, cover most of the needs of the next three months. Whether additional support will be sought depends on developments in Sierra Leone and Ghana, which will be closely monitored by the two National Red Cross Societies and the International Federation's delegates in Freetown and Accra.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

From the start of the operation, the Ghana Government and National Red Cross Society, supported by various agencies and NGOs working in the country, have been directly involved in delivering primary services, assessing the needs and then organising relevant assistance for the refugees. An application for funds from the European Union was prepared by GRCS in conjunction with the International Federation and the EU's representative in Accra. Media coverage of the GRCS operation has been slight.

Contributions

Sierra Leone:

A donation from the Netherlands Red Cross has enabled the SLRCS to establish a small permanent structure in the harbour of Freetown, in order to improve Red Cross services to the boat people arriving from Monrovia.

Ghana:

The timely shipment of tents from Red Cross Societies in Germany and Switzerland ahead of preparations for the new camp was particularly welcome. The consignments are currently being used in the new camp.

From cash contributions, the International Federation has purchased one vehicle for GRCS refugee activities.

See Annex 1 for further details.

Conclusion

Due to the strong working relationships between the National Red Cross Societies of Sierra Leone and Ghana, their respective governments and various UN organisations and NGOs in their countries, the coordination of assistance to the refugees has been carried out effectively from the start of the emergency. As a result, the operations have been implemented rapidly and efficiently.

Timely and generous support from donors has enabled GRCS and SLRCS to fulfil their humanitarian roles with commitment and confidence.

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