

GAMBIA: POPULATION MOVEMENTS

18 December 1998

appeal no. 19/98

situation report no. 03

period covered: 14 October - 30 November 1998

The coastal area of West Africa extending from Senegal's southern Casamance region to Sierra Leone remains volatile, prompting the flight of refugees to the Gambia. With the deteriorating conditions of refugees housed in camps, the Gambia Red Cross Society (GRCS) has been requested by the Government of Gambia to provide assistance, pending the promotion of voluntary repatriation when conditions allow, or identifying longer-term durable solutions.

Appeal no. 19/98 covers refugee movements from Guinea Bissau to the Gambia and other host countries. Given that the vast majority of Guinea Bissauan refugees fled from the armed conflict in their country to neighbouring Guinea Conakry, the focus has previously been maintained on assistance to refugees in that country. This situation report, however, concerns a small caseload of refugees who fled from Guinea Bissau to the Gambia, and who are settled in camps together with refugees from Senegal and Sierra Leone.

The context

As a result of political turmoil and civil unrest in this region over recent years, there has been a constant influx of refugees to the Gambia. Since 1992, hundreds of refugees from the Casamance region of Senegal have found their way to the country, the latest wave arriving in June 1998. This year, some 1,040 refugees fleeing civil war in Sierra Leone between rebel forces, ECOMOG and government troops have also sought refuge in the Gambia. Most recently, the conflict between government forces and rebels in Guinea Bissau has led to the movement of some 150 refugees to the Gambia since July 1998. These figures relate to registered refugees living in five camps within the Gambia. Other refugees have settled with host families in the country and are integrated within the local population.

Traditionally, the Gambia Red Cross Society (GRCS)/Federation has been responsible for providing emergency relief assistance to refugees in the country through the provision of relief items, health assistance, tracing, and repatriation services. In recent years, however, these responsibilities have been shared between the GRCS and UNHCR, together with its implementing partner, GAFNA, a Gambian NGO. UNHCR, in particular, deals with all legal aspects of refugee influxes in the country.

Latest events

Today, a total caseload of 1,985 refugees is struggling to survive in precarious conditions in five camps. As a result of financial constraints within UNHCR, little or no assistance has been forthcoming for some four months. The refugees' situation is particularly difficult as they are not integrated into the community

and rely on external assistance for survival. In addition, it is the winter season in the Gambia where low temperatures and rain cause further suffering, and the refugees lack warm clothes and bedding, particularly given their poor diet.

Red Cross action

The GRCS maintains a strong involvement in refugee issues. Since 24 October, the GRCS, upon the request of the National Refugee Co-ordinating Committee, established two emergency refugee reception centres for the new influx of Guinea Bissauan refugees. The National Society provides three daily meals in Brikama Red Cross Branch Office, Western Division, and Soma Red Cross Branch office in the Lower River Division which are serving as temporary refugee emergency centres. Over 100 refugees are currently accommodated in these centres before they are housed with host families or in the refugee camps.

At the request of the Gambian government, the GRCS seeks to come to the aid of the portion of the caseload of refugees who are currently unassisted, located in camps as follows: 175 Senegalese refugees in Kitty Camp (40 km. from Banjul); 346 Senegalese refugees in Siffoe (35 km. from Banjul); 259 Senegalese refugees in Arankoli (100 km. from Banjul); 1,046 Sierra Leonean refugees in Basse (400 km. from Banjul); and 159 Senegalese and Guinea Bissauan refugees in Kwinella (150 km. from Banjul).

Outstanding needs

The Regional Relief Co-ordinator visited the Gambia at the end of November and stressed the need for an intervention on behalf of the refugees who have insufficient food, water, and health provisions.

The immediate aim is to provide 10 kg's of rice per person, one litre of vegetable oil per person, and 1 blanket for two persons, with a priority on women and children. The food assistance is intended for a period of one month only. The Federation has initially made available CHF 25,000 to the National Society for the local purchase and distribution of these food and non-food items. The National Society will purchase relief supplies during the week of 21 - 27 December, for distribution during the first week of January, 1999. The distribution will be carried out by the local Red Cross branch volunteers, monitored by National Headquarters staff. This short-term assistance is aimed at bridging the gap in providing urgently needed assistance during this difficult period, and pending UNHCR's and GAFNA's efforts to identify resources to resume longer-term assistance. No further Red Cross assistance is anticipated at present.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details (Contributions for Appeal 19/98).

Since the Federation's contribution for unassisted refugees is taken from funds generated for Appeal 19/98, but concerns a caseload of refugees from Senegal and Sierra Leone in addition to Guinea Bissau, donations to cover this additional expenditure are welcome. A revision of the budget is currently under consideration.

Conclusion

The Abuja Peace accord has resulted in a compromise agreement between the Guinea-Bissau Government and the rebel forces, ending five months of internal conflict and establishing preparations for Presidential elections. Furthermore, agreement was reached on 15 December regarding the composition of a national transition government and discussions held on the deployment of ECOMOG troops in

Guinea Bissau. It is therefore hoped that refugees from Guinea Bissau will be in a position to return to their country of origin in the near future.

Nevertheless, in view of the volatile situation in the region, the Gambia Red Cross Society will continue providing assistance to refugees and vulnerable groups.

Donor support to cover basic needs for 1,985 refugees for a one month period would therefore be greatly appreciated.

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