

REFUGEES FROM SIERRA LEONE: PREPAREDNESS FOR POPULATION MOVEMENTS IN THE SUB REGION

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The Context

Recent weeks in Sierra Leone have seen an escalation in hostilities between government/ECOMOG troops and rebel forces from the Revolutionary United Front and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council. Pressure had been mounting with constant rebel attacks focusing on the Southeast, the ECOMOG stronghold, on Waterloo (30 km South of Freetown, the capital) and in recent days on Freetown itself. On 6th January in the early hours of the morning, rebel forces entered Freetown and claimed to hold major strategic parts of the town. Inhabitants remained at home and were warned by the government not to venture onto the streets. Humanitarian organisations are for the time being not able to provide services and international organisations, with the exception of ICRC, have pulled out their expatriate staff from Sierra Leone. The situation is unpredictable, information is scarce and communications with the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society are reduced to radio contact with Kenema Branch or through ICRC. Latest reports (as of 12 January) indicate however that the government /ECOMOG forces had reasserted control in many areas.

As a result of the continuous rebel war since 1991 and a subsequent military coup in Sierra Leone in May 1997, 350,000 Sierra Leonean refugees fled to Guinea and a further 90,000 fled to Liberia. In addition, UNHCR estimates that 350,000 persons are currently displaced within Sierra Leone itself. Despite attempts to make government and rebel forces enter into dialogue, fighting continues, and there are risks of further refugee movements within the region, affecting Guinea-Conakry in particular.

Red Cross Action

The Sierra Leone Red Cross Society, supported by the ICRC and with financial and in-kind assistance from the Federation, was operational in Freetown until 6 January, and is still operating in Bo, Kenema and Kambia which accommodate large populations of displaced. In the present circumstances, however, activities have been halted for security reasons in Freetown, whilst limited work is continuing in the relatively safe areas of Bo, Kenema and Kambia.

The ICRC is in contact with the National Society in Freetown, and is preparing a plan of action for assessment and medical assistance.

Federation Delegates are on stand-by in Abidjan and are working with the Regional Delegation.

The Regional Delegation has been in constant contact with the Delegations in Guinea and Liberia. Some 227 refugees from Sierra Leone have already reached Conakry; however, these are mostly traders and harbour workers. UNHCR conducted negotiations with the Guinean authorities to allow them to enter the country and the Red Cross Society of Guinea is undertaking registration, emergency food distribution and medical screening, whilst MSF is providing medical care, as required.

Should the cease-fire in Sierra Leone prove impossible and security in the capital deteriorate further, the two national societies in Guinea and Liberia (with support from the Federation) have updated contingency plans designed to receive refugees from both countries.

The 350,000 Sierra Leonean refugees already in Guinea are either living in camps or with the local population in the Guéckédou area. The Head of Delegation and the Regional Relief Delegate will visit Guéckédou next week to review the structures which are currently in place. They will also visit Forécariah which has little infrastructure, although it is the site of a Red Cross branch office.

Co-ordination is taking place with UNHCR which estimates that refugee influxes could be in the range of 1,000 to a maximum of 40,000 persons, depending on developments in the coming days. Negotiations are also taking place with a view to the National Society resuming responsibility for food distributions in Forécariah, should camps be re-established.

In Liberia, the National Society and the Federation is on stand-by and is constantly monitoring the situation. As a result of the presence of ECOMOG forces on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border, reinforced by 5,000 Liberian soldiers, massive influxes of refugees are not expected. Since the focus is currently on rebel activity in the capital, population movements are more likely to be towards Guinea-Conakry, rather than towards Liberia. Nevertheless, co-ordination meetings are taking place with the government, ICRC, UNHCR and WFP in order to define roles in the event of a refugee influx from Sierra Leone.

Because the Gambia and the Ivory Coast have also been traditional refugee asylum countries in the region, both National Societies are closely monitoring the situation.

Needs

In the event of an influx of refugees from the Freetown area to Guinea, the Red Cross Society of Guinea and the Federation plan to provide camp management, food, basic supplies, water and sanitation facilities and health education for some 20,000 refugees over an initial period of six months.

Conclusion

The current situation in Sierra Leone is uncertain. The National Society is prepared to recommence activities in Freetown as soon as there are indications of improvements in the security situation. In the event that negotiations do not bring forth a solution, refugee influxes from Freetown may increase towards asylum countries in the region.

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