

WEST AFRICA: LIBERIAN BOAT PEOPLE

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On 14 May, the governments of Sierra Leone and Ghana granted permission for two ships carrying refugees from Liberia to anchor in the harbours of Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Takoradi (Ghana). Altogether, 1,686 people came ashore in Ghana, while in Freetown, 935 refugees were screened to ascertain their nationality, family status, health and other needs. All the refugees were given food, water and first aid, and those in need of intensive medical care were transferred to local hospitals. However, both governments have so far denied the Liberian boat people official recognition as refugees, instead accepting them only as asylum seekers. In Ghana, those arrivals of non-Ghanaian origin (1,547) were kept in the harbour area and later transferred to a camp in the small town of Essipong. In Sierra Leone, the Liberian refugees are being kept in the harbour area or on-board the ship that brought them. In both places, the National Red Cross Societies have been at the forefront of relief efforts and they plan to continue this assistance until all the refugees are able to return home.

Latest events

At present, all the basic needs of the refugees in both Sierra Leone and Ghana are being met from the emergency stocks of the National Red Cross Societies and the assistance mobilised through UN and other Non-Governmental agencies. The nationals of the host countries who arrived on the ships were allowed to return to their homes after being identified by relatives.

In Sierra Leone, 104 Liberians and 38 Sierra Leoneans who were married to Liberians had to return to the ship in Freetown, while another 70 Sierra Leoneans from areas far away from Freetown found temporary shelter in a small camp managed by a local Christian NGO. Nationals of countries other than Liberia were allowed into the country as normal visitors. The ship in Freetown is anchored in the harbour, and access is possible for the Sierra Leone Red Cross in order to provide two meals a day, drinking water and first aid. MSF is also providing drinking water.

In Ghana, the government has identified a new site for a camp for the 1,547 boat people — about eight kilometres from Essipong in the western region of the country. The transfer is scheduled to take place today (22 May). In both countries, assistance to the refugees is being co-ordinated by a

national committee, in which the relevant ministries, the UN and international and national humanitarian organisations are represented.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Ghana •

The Ghana Red Cross Society (GRCS) immediately deployed its Western Region Emergency First Aid Team (EFAT) and volunteers at the beginning of the crisis, with the Secretary General taking personal control of the GRCS operation. Besides providing first-aid services and transfers to hospitals when needed, the GRCS also offered family reunion and welfare services, distributed 2,550 blankets, 150 buckets, 536 plastic cups and 579 plates. In the temporary shelter, the GRCS took over responsibility for the sanitation and health facilities. In the new site, the National Society will be responsible for temporary shelter until houses have been built; for health and sanitation services; and for tracing and organising family reunions. It will also work with UNHCR in the general camp management at the site. The Federation will send an expatriate delegate for three months to assist the GRCS, especially in the fields of evaluation and reporting.

Sierra Leone •

Even before the boat carrying 935 passengers was allowed to dock in Freetown, the Sierra Leone Red Cross Society (SLRCS) hired boats to sail 12 miles off-shore with first aiders, bread, sardines and drinking water for the refugees and to allow the National Society to assess their needs. As soon as the ship was allowed in the Freetown harbour, the SLRCS assisted in the initial screening, organised sanitation facilities, and provided cooked meals and drinking water for the refugees. The National Society — together with most of the other humanitarian organisations — supported UNHCR in its negotiations with the government regarding the status of the refugees. Because the government has not yet granted the new arrivals official ‘refugee’ status, the Liberian ship may even be asked to leave Freetown.

Outstanding needs

Ghana •

The GRCS urgently needs CHF 200,000 in cash to cover the refugees’ needs for health, sanitation and communication facilities, and to pay for local personnel.

Sierra Leone •

Since mid-April, the SLRCS has been assisting some 2,500 people who have arrived in Sierra Leone from Liberia on board ships. The National Society provided food, drinking water and medical supplies to all of them, in most cases using naval vessels though recently this has become increasingly difficult. In this latest case, the Society had to hire smaller boats to reach the ship.

With the situation in Monrovia deteriorating, many more Sierra Leoneans and other nationals are expected to try to escape on board ships from Monrovia to Sierra Leone. The SLRCS is preparing for an influx of approximately 5,000 Sierra Leoneans from Monrovia who have expressed a wish to return home as soon as transport by sea is available. This figure is the lowest possible estimate, as there are more Sierra Leoneans in Monrovia and other nationals are likely to leave Liberia by boat to Sierra Leone.

Meanwhile, the National Society plans to attend to the needs of this latest group of refugees until they either leave for their homes, are transferred to camps or their ship sent back to sea. The SLRCS is preparing not only to deliver food, drinking water and basic medical supplies, but also to provide shelter, as the empty containers used at the moment

in Freetown harbour are intended for other uses and will not be available during the next few months. The sanitation needs are becoming critical. The SLRCS therefore needs CHF 150,000 now in order to provide health, sanitation, drinking water and storage facilities for the present and future refugees arriving in Sierra Leone.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

Ghana •

The Ghanaian government is providing security and co-ordinating all relief contributions through the National Mobilisation Programme (NMP). The Ministry of Health has opened a clinic in the present camp. UNHCR, in collaboration with the NMP, is engaged in registering the refugees, issuing registration cards and negotiating the status of the refugees with the government. The new site in Apowa was identified by UNHCR, which has overall responsibility for the camp though the GRCS will work with the UN agency in the management of operations there.

The National Society has forged good relations with other organisations involved in the relief effort. WFP is supplying food for distribution and UNICEF 6,000 sachets of Oral Rehydration Salt (ORS), infant feed and other emergency medical supplies through the Ministry of Health. The GRCS is collaborating with UNICEF, Save-the-Children (UK) and Actionaid Ghana in the provision of family reunification and welfare services. An inter-NGO consortium — which was in existence before the latest influx of boat people — is also assisting in the camp by preparing meals, adding to the food supplies of WFP and helping out with non-food items necessary for these services.

Sierra Leone •

UNHCR is negotiating with the government on the status of the newly-arrived Liberians after assisting in the registration of the boat people. The NGO Committee, comprising most of the national and international NGOs in the country, is trying to support UNHCR in order to achieve official refugee status for the Liberians. A Christian NGO runs the small transit camp for those Sierra Leoneans who come from remote areas and whose relatives could not travel immediately to identify them. MSF and SLRCS share the provision of water.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The violence and inter-factional fighting in Monrovia is the direct cause of the latest refugee crisis and shows no sign of ending. As a result, the need to support the newly-arrived Liberian refugees in both Ghana and Sierra Leone is likely to remain for the foreseeable future. Both National Red Cross Societies in Ghana and Sierra Leone have already demonstrated their effectiveness in supporting the refugees, and they intend to continue this assistance as long as these people cannot return to their homes in Liberia. To do that, the Ghana and Sierra Leone Red Cross Societies will rely on a continuation of the financial support already being extended by the international community.

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