

Joseph, an 18 year old Sierra Leonean head of household, living in a camp in Liberia

At 18, Joseph is older than most seventh graders. He attends primary school in Zuannah Town refugee camp in Liberia. Joseph is a refugee from Sierra Leone.

When the fighting reached the region where their coffee and banana farm was situated, Joseph's father decided it was time for the entire family to leave Sierra Leone and head towards safety in Liberia. But danger and hardship followed them right to the border. While crossing into Liberia, Joseph's father was badly wounded and his mother was killed by rebel soldiers. Joseph's aunt picked up the responsibility of the family and shepherded her wounded brother and his children to the refugee camp where she looked after them until her death a short while later.

Joseph's father is now too disabled to work and cannot take care of his two sons. His days of hunting and fishing, in between periods of hard work on his farm, are over. It is up to Joseph to be the breadwinner and head of the household. Joseph tries his best to juggle all that he has to do, and wants to do. He wants to finish his education which was interrupted by the flight from Sierra Leone. He grumbles that "I went backwards in my education. I went to school for eight years in Sierra Leone. Here in Liberia, I go to school, but it is primary school". When Joseph does finish his schooling, he would like to be a social worker.

Classes at school are limited to the afternoons. The rest of the time is spent doing household chores around the hut, cooking and cleaning, and looking for menial jobs from local farmers, to earn money to buy food to feed himself, his father and his younger brother. The family does not receive any support, neither from UNHCR nor from any NGO. He is able to work on Saturdays and Sundays on a cassava farm but the money he earns is barely enough to cover his family's needs. When he has some spare time, he supplements the larder by fishing. He says, "I remember how my mother and I used to go on the farm, and we went fishing and hunting and hooking. The happiest memory I have about home is harvest time – eating and playing at night with friends. I miss our farm, the river, my mother."

If peace did return to his home country of Sierra Leone, Joseph is not too sure whether he would like to return immediately. "I am a student right now. My education here is free. My father would not be able to pay my school fees if we went back to Sierra Leone. But when I can go back, I will help rebuild our houses. I pray for a better future because I am facing a great problem as a child."