

Forced return of Nigerian refugees:

Executive summary

In the face of public interest in what is happening in the Far North region as it pertains to Nigerian refugees, and in particular the heightened media attention to the movements of refugees to Nigeria, UNHCR Cameroon found it necessary to issue this document to provide detailed information about the vexing issue of refoulements, and the ongoing spontaneous and voluntary departures from Minawao camp. UNHCR intends to issue this report on a monthly basis, at the beginning of each month.

Background

Since 2014, there have been persistent reports in Cameroon of Nigerians being pushed back across the border. These reports came as Boko Haram militants extended their attacks into the neighbouring Lake Chad Basin countries (Cameroon, Chad and Niger). Since then, tens of thousands of people have returned across the border to Nigeria, including refugees, traders and other migrants. Most forced returns have occurred from the Cameroonian border towns of Bourha, Kolofata and Fotokol to the neighbouring Adamawa and Borno States in Nigeria. Despite efforts to sensitize the Cameroonian authorities about their international obligations as well as constant protection monitoring along the border with Nigeria, reports of forced returns continue to reach UNHCR post facto.

In the wake of Boko Haram suicide attacks in Cameroon's Far North Region and with the intensification of the military campaign against Boko Haram in north-eastern Nigeria, Nigerians crossing into Cameroon were considered as suspects and potential threat to security. In this context, and in an attempt to gain control over border areas with Nigeria, Cameroonian authorities and security forces started to return all foreign nationals found in those areas, especially around the towns of Fotokol and Kousseri (Logone et Chari department) and Mora and Kolofata (Mayo Tsava department). It must be mentioned that from the onset of the emergency, Cameroonian authorities had enforced a strict encampment policy for Nigerian refugees. Since then, they have maintained that only those who are in or arrive in Minawao camp are considered as refugees. Subsequent new arrivals underwent joint screening by UNHCR and the authorities before being transferred to Minawao camp.

Statistics of Nigerian refugees forced to return

- July-December 2015: between 9,000 to 12,000 people;
- In 2016: 76,525 people;
- In 2017: 3,400 people.

These statistics were collected by our protection focal points in the various localities. UNHCR Cameroon did not have access to the persons concerned to verify their status prior to their forced return. On the other hand, UNHCR Nigeria has conducted limited verifications with those who came into contact with its monitoring missions. It is likely that some of the people who were forcibly returned to Nigeria from the border areas were neither refugees nor asylum seekers. Moreover, because of the fluidity of population movements and the existence of multiple unofficial entry points, it is not excluded that there may be irregular movements with the result that an individual is arrested and returned to the border before returning to Cameroon again. The overall figure is thus indicative of the total number of persons taken back to the border but does not necessarily reflect the exact number of refugees that may have been refouled.

Brief analysis of the situation of forced returns in 2017

It should be noted that in 2015 and 2016, the authorities systematically returned to the border Nigerian refugees living outside Minawao camp in the border areas of the Far North region. Fresh reports were received in February 2017, and again in March 2017, shortly after the signing of the Tripartite Agreement between UNHCR and the Governments of Cameroon and Nigeria. The 3,400 people refouled so far this year are primarily from the Cameroonian communities of Kerewa and Kolofata in the department of Mayo-Sava. These two localities have recently recorded a high number of security incidents. The most recent report of refoulement occurred on 16 May when 430 recently arrived Nigerian refugees temporarily sheltered in Dabanga village in Logone et Chari department, were sent back to Gamburu, Nigeria. This latest incident was even more surprising considering that this group had been identified and pre-screened by UNHCR and the Joint Protection Committees in readiness for their transfer to Minawao camp.

Apart from the random round up and return of refugees in some villages, new arrivals are stopped at the border areas and sent back to Nigeria on grounds that Minawao camp is full to capacity with no room for new arrivals. It must be emphasized that there have been no forced returns of refugees from Minawao camp.

Also, refugees living outside the camp and who had been pre-registered by UNHCR and the Joint Protections Committees in November 2016 in the three districts of Mogode (Mayo-Tsanaga), Makary and Kousseri (Logone et Chari) have neither been harassed nor sent back across the border. As a reminder, UNHCR and the Joint Protection Committees had carried out a joint mission at that time and had pre-registered 21,886 refugees in these districts.

UNHCR's response

At the field level, UNHCR set up joint protection committees in each of the three border departments of the Far North region in April 2016 in a move to strengthen collaboration with the local authorities on refugee protection, especially as it pertains to access to asylum, as well as to institutionalize joint monitoring, screening and registration of refugees. UNHCR has on several occasions sought clarification from the Government of Cameroon on reports of forced returns of thousands of Nigerians, including letters addressed to the Governor of the Far North region by UNHCR's sub-office in Maroua.

On 2 March 2016, UNHCR and the two governments signed a Tripartite Agreement in Cameroon on the voluntary repatriation of Nigerian refugees living in Cameroon. Nevertheless, on 7 March, barely days after the signing of the agreement, additional reports emerged about cases of refoulement.

The commitment taken by Cameroon at the national level must be upheld at the local level to ensure that all returns remain voluntary. UNHCR has carried out advocacy at regional, national and international levels along the following main messages:

- These deportations are contrary to Cameroon's regional and international obligations in the area of refugee protection and the Tripartite Agreement signed on 2 March by Cameroon, Nigeria and UNHCR;
- UNHCR has acknowledged the security challenges facing Cameroon and stands ready to support the authorities in developing enhanced screening, status determination and registration mechanisms for those in need of protection, particularly through the set-up of transit centers in key localities.

In addition, UNHCR has addressed several high-level written correspondences to the Cameroonian government and made public statements about the issue, including:

- A letter from UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner (Protection) to the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization on 1 July 2016.
- UNHCR press statement on 21 March 2017 which the Cameroon government had resolutely protested against on 28 March 2017.
- A letter from UNHCR’s High Commissioner to President Biya on 23 March 2017 following the press release issued by the organization a couple of days earlier.

It should also be noted that the former Humanitarian Coordinator in Cameroon had equally written letters to the Minister of External Relations and the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization on 21 June 2016 and 3 January 2017 respectively, following reports of refoulement.

UNHCR’s current approach is to manage relations with the government to avoid a further stiffening on their part and to deflect any negative impact on refugees. Also, in the face of these developments, UNHCR Cameroon and Nigeria have taken initiatives to jumpstart the tripartite consultations, such as the recent joint mission from UNHCR Nigeria and the Nigerian government.

Spontaneous return of Nigerian refugees

Background

The month of April 2017 saw the beginning of spontaneous returns of refugees living in Minawao camp. This wave of returns was again witnessed in May 2017. Refugees have been returning on their own accord and by their own means. Information reaching UNHCR Cameroon indicates that refugees have been swayed to believe that conditions are back to normal in their areas of origin. Refugees have apparently been led to believe that they can safely resume economic activities and are therefore making arrangements to return before the planting season. Authorities in the Far North have been providing security escorts for spontaneous returns. It should be stated clearly that UNHCR is not involved in facilitating or assisting the returns in any manner.

Statistics of spontaneous returns

Thus far, a total 12,202 Nigerian refugees have returned spontaneously:

- 9-16 April 2017: a total of 1,754 returnees;
- 13-22 May 2017: a total of 10,448 returnees.

No spontaneous returns were recorded between the two periods. Their main areas of return are Banki, Pulka, Mubi and Bama in north-eastern Nigeria.

Brief analysis of the situation of spontaneous returns in 2017

These returns have taken place in a precipitous manner and, in both waves, during and after the distribution of food rations. In some cases, these rations were sold to provide the means to pay for their return to Nigeria.

Despite information circulating that areas of origin are now back to normal, reports indicate that a good number of the spontaneous returnees have ended up in IDP camps, pending a return to their areas of origin, and some others have returned to Cameroon.



Departure from Minawao camp – spontaneous returns. UNHCR.

UNHCR's response

As stated above, UNHCR has not sanctioned these returns as we have yet to establish whether areas of return are indeed safe. These will be determined under the authority of the Tripartite Commission as it is the only body allowed to sanction voluntary repatriation. Contact with the immigration officials on both sides of the border has been maintained in order to collect statistical information on spontaneous and other forms of returns.

UNHCR and partners continue to sensitize refugees in Minawao camp about the potential risks of return and to await the take-off of the Tripartite Commission. According to the Nigerian side, they envisage convening the first meeting in the first half of June 2017.

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