



Statement

Govt, UNHCR visit Nigerian refugees in Cameroon

This was the substance of a joint debriefing held in Abuja by the Government of Nigeria and UNHCR on 31 May, 2017, attended by the diplomatic/donor community, humanitarian actors and a cross section of the press.

ABUJA, 1 June, 2017 - The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the government of Nigeria last week visited the Minawao refugee camp in northern Cameroon, where they interacted with Nigerian refugees. The visit comes long after the signing of a Tripartite Agreement, and it is hoped that it provides information for the urgent convening of the Commission foreseen in the agreement, signed by the three parties on 2 March, 2017. Apart from, and before arriving Minawao refugee camp, the mission visited Kousseri and Fotokol in Cameroon (Cameroonian IDPs) and Gamburo-Ngala twin town in northeast Nigeria.

The visit became all the more important in the wake of the recent sudden return, in less than two weeks, of more than 10,000 Nigerian refugees from Minawao camp in Cameroon into Banki, thus creating a new emergency by straining to the extreme the social reception infrastructure in a small town already straining with displaced populations.

The objective of the mission was to seek understanding and clarify public opinion on the possible causes of the spontaneous returns, and to pass the message to refugees that conditions are not yet created for huge returns, and that both governments and UNHCR have signed a commitment to seek ways for voluntary, dignified, sustainable and safe return. Indeed, during their interaction with the refugees, the visiting team explained that steps were being taken to ensure that there were conducive conditions for refugees to return to lasting safety and dignity in their areas of habitual residence

The mission gathered that some forced return and denial of asylum (refoulement in legal parlance) had taken place and that since the public and bilateral government-to-government denunciation of these instances, no further refoulement has been recorded. The current spontaneous returns were prompted by a significant reduction in food rations, lack of livelihoods opportunities, general nostalgia, and the desire to catch up with the farming season, as over 90 per cent of the refugees are farmers.

Nonetheless, in the context of ongoing military operations and the legitimate security concerns, strict screening of populations freed from Boko Haram and running into Cameroon make access to asylum in Cameroon a real challenge. Equally, freedom of movement in the military operational area is seriously curtailed. Both rights are under threat. In other words, there is room for managing security while ensuring that

those who seek asylum genuinely can have access to the territory of Cameroon. Asylum and security should not be exclusive but they are. This is a serious protection threat that UNHCR commits to address.

The Nigerian delegation appreciated the hospitality of Cameroon and requested that refugees continue to be received in Cameroon, and assured refugees that inasmuch as they are welcome back to the country, there are still issues of insecurity. Cameroon government assured that refugees would not be forced to leave Minawao camp or the villages until conditions for their return were normalised.

Since July 2015, UNHCR and the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) have registered over **270,000** returnees from Cameroon and Niger, among whom some seven per cent claim to have been forcibly returned to Nigeria.

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