
RI BULLETIN

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Contacts: Sally Chin and Mamie Mutchler
ri@refugeesinternational.org or 202.828.0110

Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire: Upcoming elections may exclude displaced persons

National elections in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire will be held in three months, with the security and stability of West Africa hanging in the balance. While over 1.3 million Liberians have registered to vote on October 11, hundreds of thousands of refugees are still in camps outside the country, with those of voting age unable to register. Additionally, tens of thousands of internally displaced persons that did register may not get to vote because they have not been able to return to their home country. The situation in Cote d'Ivoire is even more uncertain, with little progress made on moving the country towards elections planned for October 30.

In Liberia, motivated by the electoral timeline, the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), donor governments, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Liberian government have implemented a strategy to accelerate IDP and refugee returns over the past six months. The hope was that a large proportion of refugees would have returned to their home counties in time to take part in voter registration from April 25 to May 21 (with a two week extension until June 4 for returnees). Yet at the end of the registration period only around 18,000 had taken part in the facilitated return process and some 200,000, approximately half of whom are of voting age, remained outside Liberia.

Ironically, one reason many refugees have decided to stay in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire is because they are too fearful to return to Liberia until they know the results of the elections. "We are going to wait and see what happens," said one refugee. "We had elections in 1997 and look what happened – we got Charles Taylor." Yet, according to an NGO representative, UNMIL and governments supporting the transition process in Liberia rejected the option of allowing refugees to register and vote in camps, as was done in the case of the Afghan elections, because of the complexities of funding and organizing such a process with neighboring countries. Due to conflicting information regarding the repatriation process given to refugees in Cote d'Ivoire, some there were still under the impression that they would be able to register and vote once they got home. Further, counties with large populations of returning refugees risk under-representation in the House of Representatives, as seats in the House have been allocated based on the number of registered voters per county.

As for the internally displaced, nearly 150,000 of them were still in camps during the registration period. They were able to register in the camps, but they had to decide at the time of registration whether they were going to vote in the camps or in their home counties come October. An overwhelming 70% of those who registered chose to vote back home. IDP return, however, has not proceeded as quickly as hoped due to a number of factors: coordination problems, logistical setbacks, an emphasis by UNMIL on delivering return packages in camps as opposed to in areas of return, security fears, the onset of the rainy season, and a lack of infrastructure in home villages. While donors and implementing NGOs believe that IDP returns will not be complete until some time in 2006, a senior UNMIL official insisted that "everyone would be back before October."

There is now a real concern that many IDPs that registered to vote in their home counties will not be able to do so. IDPs interviewed by Refugees International in Bong county camps stated that they registered to vote in their home counties because they were "promised" by National Elections Commission (NEC) officials that they would be home in time for the elections. They are still waiting in camps for their return packages and transport. RI spoke with a senior UNMIL official responsible for elections who stated categorically that there was no "Plan B" for absentee voting by internally displaced persons who would not be able to return to their home counties in time to vote.

Political candidates have tried to take advantage of this situation, promising the displaced rice and transport home in exchange for votes. RI witnessed a bus heading from Maimu 1 camp in Bong County to Salayea district in Lofa County covered in campaign banners. While this is a potential solution to IDP transportation problems, it reinforces a prevalent “vote buying” mentality. To combat this mentality, and to assist all Liberians in understanding the complicated political landscape, intensive voter and civic education projects in the rural areas must be reinforced. With over 50 presidential candidates, many Liberians simply don’t know who they should vote for, and how they should decide.

The electoral process in Cote d’Ivoire is facing even more severe constraints, with time running out. Senior United Nations Operation in Cote d’Ivoire (UNOCI) officials insist that elections will take place on schedule, even though a High Representative for elections has only just been appointed, there has been no agreement on voter rolls, and there has been little in the way of technical preparation and voter education. An electoral law was finally passed by presidential decree, but rebel forces are saying they will wait to see the fine print before accepting the conditions. Disarmament, a condition for elections, has not taken place yet, with deadlines on both sides repeatedly ignored.

According to an NGO specialist, the estimated 500,000 internally displaced persons in the country would risk disenfranchisement if elections were to take place this October because little thought has been given to ensuring how they would participate. Up until now, there has been little real information about the exact numbers, whereabouts, and needs of IDPs; the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) has been tasked with launching an IDP survey, but the work has yet to begin. The political situation is also still so polarized and unstable that unrest in the run-up to elections is highly likely. With the recent massacres in the west of the country and the prevalence of anti-foreigner sentiment, disruptive forces can easily manipulate ethnic tensions with violent results. Potential targets of violence include the displaced Burkinabé who have been living in isolated camps for the past several years near Guiglo, as well as Liberian refugees. Because of the severely reduced timeline for election preparation in Cote d’Ivoire, an enormous investment by the international community, which heretofore has been reticent at lending support, is required.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

Liberia

- As the right to vote is mandated by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, the National Election Commission and UNMIL closely monitor IDP enfranchisement during the run-up to October elections with “transfer of vote” processes, absentee ballot provisions and transportation for voting purposes organized if necessary.
- UNMIL facilitate IDPs’ return by increasing investment in home counties and providing transportation for those who want to return home.
- UNMIL and donor governments intensify voter education programs to assist local populations.
- UNMIL and donor governments organize transportation for those in secluded villages for election day and improve roads in the run-up to elections.
- UNHCR clarify to refugees in camps that they will not be able to vote in this year’s election.

Cote d’Ivoire

- UNOCI make public their assessment on the feasibility of holding elections in October.
- UNFPA and donor governments organize and implement the planned survey of internally displaced persons as soon as possible in order for the humanitarian community to better address IDP needs and to determine the most effective coordinated way to respond to crises.
- Donor governments support voter and civic education projects.
- The High Representative and Independent Electoral Commission put in place a process to ensure enfranchisement of the estimated 500,000 internally displaced in the country.

Advocates Sally Chin and Mamie Mutchler assessed the humanitarian situation in Liberia and Cote d’Ivoire in May and June.