

Population Movements from Cameroon to Banki

On 19 and 22 July, two movements took place from Cameroonians' Kolofata Region with 155 people returning to Banki in North-Eastern Nigeria under two separate circumstances. The 56 people that arrived on 19 July told UNHCR staff in Banki that they returned voluntarily and on their own while the 59 individuals that returned on 22 July were transported by Cameroonian military convoy. They told staff in Banki they were rescued by the Cameroonian military from Boko Haram and held at the Maroura Salak Military Barrack in Cameroon for eleven months before being transported to Nigeria on 22 July. The UNHCR team in Banki described the physical condition of all the 155 people as satisfactory. Majority of the returnees are women and children. After being screened by the Nigerian military, the Immigration Service began formally documenting them, using the UNHCR supported registration system for all Nigerian returnees. With the latest arrivals, the total number of individuals in Banki is now close to 45,000.

Situation Analysis

Unexpected returns to Banki and other areas have created further emergency because those returning are coming back to a situation of internal displacement. The management of this situation is proving challenging to the government and the humanitarian community. Over the last several weeks, UNHCR stepped up its advocacy efforts to ensure that the return process is conducted in conditions of safety and dignity, and in line with the provisions of the Tripartite Agreement signed between the agency and the Governments of Nigeria and Cameroon on the 2nd of March 2017. The Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Mr. Volker Turk and the Regional Representative based in Dakar, Senegal, Ms. Liz Ahua visited Nigeria and held talks with federal and state officials on the return of Nigerians from Cameroon and other countries in the region. The Regional Representative also visited Borno to get a broader understanding of the IDP and refugee returnee situation. She sought to appreciate the overall complex and volatile humanitarian environment in the North-East including conditions under which UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies work.

Gaps and Response Efforts

Upon arrival, the returnees are kept in the UNHCR transit facility and provided with wet feeding for three days while their shelters are being constructed for relocation. Materials were provided to the Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (MRR) for the construction of shelter for the new arrivals. UNHCR also provided the returnees with essential non-food items which among others included cooking pots, sleep mats, blankets, buckets, jerry cans, mosquito nets, solar lanterns, eating plates, bathing soap, laundry detergent, slippers, and for women sanitary pads. Due to security concerns returnees and IDPs are unable to access firewood. Those who make the effort to do so have been exposed to protection risks including violation and abuse. To mitigate the risk, UNHCR is providing charcoal to address this important protection challenge to women. WFP, UNICEF, IOM and MSF with some NGOS are the other agencies currently operating in Banki and are working with the government to support ongoing response efforts.

On 21 July, a government delegation led by the Director-General of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) was in Banki as part of continued efforts to support those returning from Cameroon. During the visit the delegation distributed relief items including food, mattresses, blankets and clothes donated by the government to refugee returnees and IDPs. The minister also announced that the redeployment of the police to Banki would take place in early September. Despite all the efforts, services and needs such as food, shelter, health, water and sanitation remain inadequate and formal education is also yet to be restored as children have been out of school since the insurgency began more than seven years ago.

Key Operational Challenges

Freedom of movement is being limited by continued security restriction in the immediate surroundings of areas such as Banki, Pulka, Bama, Gwosa, Ngala and Damasak. This is significantly impacting expansion of services such as construction of additional shelters for people returning to newly liberated areas and affecting ability of returnees to engage in income generating activities. According to the military, the decision to restrict movement and access to areas not cleared is a precautionary measure intended to prevent infiltration by the insurgents, protect refugee returnees, IDPs and humanitarian workers against possible incidents of unexploded ordinances.

Meanwhile, On 17 July in Maiduguri, several Boko Haram coordinated suicide explosions killed 12 people and wounded others near a military barracks in the city. Several suicide attacks have killed scores of people and injured others at the University of Maiduguri less than 10 kilometres from the main city centre in the last few weeks, and efforts to prevent such attacks have not been successful. Humanitarian workers including UNHCR staff have been advised to remain vigilant and follow necessary security advisories. As the military continues to dislocate the insurgents from areas they previously occupied, analysts say such attacks will be difficult to control and may continue into the unforeseeable future.