

Benin,	Gabon,	Niger,
Burkina Faso,	Gambia,	Nigeria,
Cameroon,	Ghana,	Sao Tomé and Príncipe,
Cape Verde,	Guinea,	Senegal,
Central African Republic,	Guinea-Bissau,	Sierra Leone,
Chad,	Liberia,	Togo.
Côte d'Ivoire,	Mali,	

## WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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### Recent Developments

The region has witnessed a shift from massive refugee movements to multiple, inter-related conflicts and smaller displacement crises. The region has also been affected by spill-over effects of the humanitarian situation in the Great Lakes region: Gabon and the Central African Republic have received large numbers of refugees from the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo respectively. Currently, more than 2.1 million refugees and others are of concern to UNHCR.

The Togo peace agreement signed in July 1999 in Lomé by the Sierra Leone Government of President Kabbah and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) marked a breakthrough towards regional peace and security. But rebels have been slow to hand in their arms, as required by the agreement.

Moreover, the RUF leaders have only recently returned to Freetown to speed reconciliation efforts. So conditions do not yet favour full-scale repatriation of about 450,000 Sierra Leoneans in exile.

Continued instability in parts of Liberia has led some observers to question the long-term wisdom of returning and reintegrating refugees to certain counties. Without a rapid improvement in security, objectives in these areas can only be partly achieved. When the organised repatriation programme is finally concluded, more than 335,000 returnees will have regained their homes and received reintegration assistance.

The improving security situation in southern Chad has raised hopes that the long-standing refugee problem there will finally be solved.

### Strategic Objectives

UNHCR's main goals for this region are to consolidate current voluntary repatriation operations, primarily to Liberia and Guinea-Bissau. In 2000, UNHCR will facilitate the return of Liberian refugees by providing them with repatriation packages. Organised voluntary repatriation of Chadian refugees will also take place on a larger scale than during 1995-1998. UNHCR is cautious about promoting voluntary repatriation to Sierra Leone. A gradual return will be facilitated only when the country is sufficiently safe and after unhindered access to areas of return has been established.

So some of the region's basic humanitarian assistance programmes will continue in 2000, particularly for the Sierra Leonean refugees. UNHCR will re-orient its assistance to focus on improving the self-sufficiency of refugees remaining in asylum countries. Urban refugees will continue to receive educational grants and be encouraged to attend training courses to learn skills to generate income while their legal status is being normalised.

Of the 20 West and Central African states, the majority have ratified the 1951 Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Improved protection for the region means further building on these gains, i.e. additional ratifications of these documents, and the incorporation of their tenets into national laws. UNHCR will also establish partnership with regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States - ECOWAS - to help governments and civil society handle refugee issues. These include conflict prevention and resolution, and post-conflict rehabilitation.

UNHCR is extremely concerned to protect refugee women and children, especially those located close to a conflict zone. Therefore national police forces, border guards and others in contact with refugees must be alive to gender issues and the security needs of refugees. They must prevent illegal incursions and any destructive or violent activity in areas where refugees are living, or through which they are travelling. UNHCR will widely encourage the active participation of refugee women in food distribution, camp management, education, agriculture, skills training and community-based activities (such as income-generation and counselling). A regional policy officer for refugee women and children will remain based in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Small-scale tree-planting and reforestation projects will help alleviate environmental concerns in areas hosting large numbers of refugees.

### Operations

The Regional Directorate in Abidjan will assume increasing responsibility for UNHCR's interventions in West and Central Africa, overseeing operations in 20 countries. The Directorate will operate with 42 UNHCR staff (equally divided between international and national staff) as well as two Junior Professional Officers. This presence is a result of a gradual decentralisation of key functions from UNHCR Headquarters to the field, including those of coordinating protection strategy, programme delivery and financial management. Specialists on security, refugee women and children, health, logistics and telecommunications provide advice to staff in countries in the region on how to best adapt programme design to fit regional goals and strategies.

The following paragraphs summarise UNHCR's objectives and activities by country, except for those countries covered in subsequent separate chapters (i.e. **Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone**).

In 2000, UNHCR's assistance to internally displaced persons and returnees in Guinea-Bissau will be scaled down after the conclusion of the voluntary repatriation of the remaining refugees from Guinea-Bissau from neighbouring countries. Exceptionally needy returnees will receive limited assistance through micro-projects. UNHCR will also continue to promote the self-sufficiency of Senegalese refugees (from Casamance) currently in Guinea-Bissau. Basic services in health, education and water will continue for this group. **Senegal** is home to more than 20,000 Mauritians, many of whom are already integrated locally. The remaining refugees from Guinea-Bissau are expected to return home after the elections scheduled for November 1999. Senegal also hosts 1,200 urban refugees of various origins. Although voluntary repatriation is the preferred solution for this group, UNHCR will also support projects to foster self-reliance and provide educational grants. **Gambia** and **Cape Verde** still host a limited number of refugees from Guinea-Bissau. Gambia hosts 9,800 Sierra Leoneans, some of whom - depending on the security situation in Sierra Leone - may choose to return home, as well as more than 3,500 refugees from Senegal. UNHCR is also concerned with a further 9,400 urban refugees in Gambia. In 2000, UNHCR will continue to protect and assist all these groups, pending durable solutions predicated on improved security in their respective countries of origin.



In **Benin**, a pilot project for resettlement begun in 1997 will continue, targeting 120 refugees in 2000. UNHCR will also continue to assist some 1,300 Togolese refugees, who for security reasons cannot return to their country of origin. Simultaneously, UNHCR will help some 300 Nigerians, 1,300 refugees from the Great Lakes region, and 300 refugees of other nationalities find solutions to their current situation. A local integration project will help 475 refugee families become self-sufficient. It is expected that some 2,000 Liberian and 2,000 Sierra Leonean refugees unable to return to their homes in 1999 will still need UNHCR's protection and help in **Nigeria**. In **Ghana**, more than 9,000 refugees are currently in need of UNHCR's assistance. The Government of Ghana has expressed its willingness to receive any of the 11,000 Ghanaian refugees integrated in northern **Togo** who wish to return home, and the Togolese Government stands ready to support their voluntary repatriation. The resettlement pilot project in **Burkina Faso** is expected to gain ground, helping 100 refugees by the end of 2000. Urban refugees in Nigeria (1,500), Burkina Faso (620) and Togo (643) will need financial and legal support to pursue activities leading to financial self-sufficiency.

In **Chad**, UNHCR is preparing for the voluntary return of 17,000 refugees from neighbouring countries. A comprehensive reintegration programme will cover immediate needs for nutrition and water, health, education, and agriculture. A Memorandum of Understanding between UNHCR and the Government provides a legal framework for the three-year project. In addition, protection and humanitarian assistance are needed by 23,000 Sudanese refugees in 33 sites in the eastern part of Chad, as well as 6,500 persons within the local population and 500 urban refugees. UNHCR will play an important role in the repatriation of Chadian refugees (currently 40,000, of whom 2,500 live in camps) in **Cameroon**, one of the main countries of asylum for them. UNHCR is helping another 7,000 refugees of other nationalities there to either integrate locally or resettle. Some 4,000 Chadian refugees currently in the **Central African Republic** will also benefit from the repatriation and reintegration programme. Once repatriation is underway, a small reforestation project will begin in areas previously inhabited by the Chadian refugees. The country also hosts 34,300 Sudanese as well as 13,500 Congolese refugees who will be assisted to find a lasting solution through voluntary repatriation or self-sufficiency in food production. More than

2,000 Congolese refugees, mainly women and children, are awaiting clearance from the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo for repatriation to Kinshasa. Some 200 urban refugees will also be helped to find solutions.

Until fairly recently, **Gabon** - considered a haven of peace and stability in Central Africa - hosted 2,000 refugees and asylum-seekers. The influx of 12,500 refugees from the Republic of the Congo during the spring and summer of 1999 put a severe strain on the country's limited resources at a time of economic crisis. The Government is concerned about the possibility of continued conflict in the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and hence has maintained a close watch on its borders. UNHCR continues to sensitise officials to the need for an open-door policy for refugees fleeing armed conflict, and is working to ensure that adequate protection and assistance are provided. Pending a durable solution, the main objectives for 2000 are to help these refugees with basic domestic, health and transport needs, while promoting self-reliance in the form of income-generating activities.

In others parts of sub-Saharan West Africa, reintegration programmes have been concluded and consolidated. This is the case in **Mali** where UNHCR's withdrawal from the north took place in mid-1999. In 2000, protection and limited assistance will be extended to 2,000 urban refugees, over 1,000 of whom are Sierra Leoneans, until solutions are found. In **Niger**, reintegration projects begun in 1998 will emphasise income-generating activities for needy returnees. UNHCR will continue to advocate security and humanitarian assistance for some 300 urban refugees pending their resettlement or local integration.

## WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

### BUDGET (USD)

Country	Annual Programme	Supplementary Programme	Total
Benin	1,111,675	0	1,111,675
Burkina Faso	233,500	0	233,500
Cameroon	612,097	0	612,097
Central African Republic	2,984,387	0	2,984,387
Chad	941,471	0	941,471
Côte d'Ivoire *	8,855,356	0	8,855,356
Gabon	290,000	0	290,000
Gambia	867,100	117,000	984,100
Ghana	1,209,861	0	1,209,861
Guinea	28,438,514	3,492,000	31,930,514
Guinea Bissau	392,836	0	392,836
Liberia	16,362,412	1,248,000	17,610,412
Mali	293,363	0	293,363
Niger	267,400	0	267,400
Nigeria	1,324,726	0	1,324,726
Senegal	1,532,429	0	1,532,429
Sierra Leone	1,313,930	10,990,282	12,304,212
Togo	409,391	0	409,391
Regional Projects**	836,500	0	836,500
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>68,276,948</b>	<b>15,847,282</b>	<b>84,124,230</b>
Liaison Unit at Headquarters	930,990	0	930,990
<b>Total</b>	<b>69,207,938</b>	<b>15,847,282</b>	<b>85,055,220</b>

\* Includes administrative costs for the Regional Director's Office of USD 4,616,810.

\*\* Covers voluntary repatriation assistance, resettlement assistance and scholarships for refugee students in West African countries.





## Sierra Leonean Refugee Situation

The civil conflict in Sierra Leone (1991-1999) was one of the most violent wars in recent African history, and among the most soul-wrenching tragedies of the century. More than 450,000 people were forced into exile, and another 800,000 are estimated to have been displaced within the country. Women and girls endured physical and mental torture while young boys and men were forced to kill or be killed. Maiming, systematic amputation and other forms of violence became the daily currency of anger. In Sierra Leone itself, problems of underdevelopment and urbanisation have been compounded. Basic services are often non-existent: for example only about 30 per cent of primary health care needs are covered. In the neighbouring countries of asylum, Sierra Leonean refugees have continued to endure violent attacks allegedly perpetrated by rebel forces, as well as political and military instability.

In the wake of the peace agreement signed in Lomé by the Government of President Kabbah and the leaders of the Revolutionary United Front in July 1999, the international community clearly has a very important role in rebuilding the country. Massive support will be required to rebuild the country's institutions and rehabilitate infrastructure, basic services and communications. UNHCR's role will be instrumental in helping more than 450,000 refugees return to their homes. Most of this refugee population is currently in UNHCR-assisted camps in neighbouring countries (370,000 in Guinea, 90,000 in Liberia and the rest in Côte d'Ivoire and Gambia)

and it is expected that a large proportion will want to return home once their areas of origin are safe enough. Acting on its mandate, UNHCR will therefore systematically monitor the safety and welfare of returnees as they start arriving in remote areas of the country. UNHCR will coordinate their voluntary repatriation from the camps in neighbouring countries in two phases: facilitated movements until April 2000, and organised convoys thereafter.

The establishment of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) in October 1999 was a real breakthrough towards peace and stability. UNAMSIL will work within the framework of the Lomé Peace Agreement to help the Government disarm and demobilise ex-fighters, ensure the security and freedom of movement of UN personnel and, simultaneously, protect civilians from physical violence. The deployment of 6,000 UN military personnel (260 of them observers), the introduction of confidence-building mechanisms and the establishment of a presence in key locations throughout the country will enable humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR, to draw up accurate profiles of returnee areas and assess the needs of each community in detail. Once these have been determined, work can begin on initial reintegration assistance in the basic services sectors.

Based on currently available data, UNHCR estimates that it will require **USD 48,670,703** to carry out these tasks in 2000.

## The Situation of Refugees from Chad

Chad is still gradually recovering from several years of fierce civil war during the early 1990s. Since 1995, 12,000 Chadian refugees have been repatriated, most from the Central African Republic, but also from Cameroon and Niger. In addition, 35,000 internally displaced persons have returned to their villages.

UNHCR has been funding water supply, shelter, basic health services, and education in the Logone River region, the main area of return.

The projects promote self-sufficiency as the key to durable reintegration of the 10,000 returnees that UNHCR helped repatriate. Women and vulnerable groups are specially targeted. Educational efforts focus not only on the needs of primary schools, but also individual students.

Today, of some 55,000 Chadians remaining in exile in neighbouring countries, 15,000 benefit from a modest assistance programme. However, following the recommendations of a high-level

meeting held in the Chadian capital in May 1999, UNHCR plans to phase out assistance in the countries of asylum by the end of 2000.

As many as 17,000 of the remaining Chadian refugees who are interested in returning are likely to lack the means to do so. UNHCR intends to begin, before the end of 1999, to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of about 10,000 Chadians from Cameroon, 4,400 from Sudan, 1,300 from the Central African Republic, 500 from Nigeria and 200 from Benin.

UNHCR maintains a presence in the Chadian capital N'djamena: two international and five national staff, as well as one United Nations Volunteer. They ensure appropriate reception of the returnees and plan for coordinated reintegration at all levels. They are also responsible for modifying the existing reintegration programme in order to cope with growing numbers of returnees and their expanding communities. The budget required for the repatriation and reintegration operation in 2000 is estimated at **USD 3,050,000**.

## The Liberian Refugee Situation

The seven-year civil war in Liberia (1989-1997) created one of the largest humanitarian crises in West Africa in recent years and forced more than 700,000 people into exile – more than 75 per cent of the rural population. A peace agreement signed in August 1995 paved the way for the establishment of a transitional government and the preparation of free elections. After a gradual improvement in security and the disarmament and demobilisation of rebel forces, UNHCR began preparing for repatriation and reintegration in December 1995. But peace remained fragile and new fighting in April 1996 forced a postponement of the elections and repatriation.

A land-slide victory for President Charles Taylor in July 1997 triggered the spontaneous return of more than 130,000 refugees; but many others hesitated to return because of the lack of basic infrastructure in many areas. Since 1997, UNHCR's reintegration programme has supported local communities in their efforts to improve shelter and basic services in health and education, while enhancing the returnees' chances of gainful employment.

By early 1999, more than 75,000 Liberians had repatriated voluntarily with UNHCR's assistance. At the same time, the agency was still helping more than 260,000 Liberian refugees in Côte

d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. UNHCR estimates that more than 60,000 of them will have returned home by the beginning of 2000, by which time organised repatriation convoys will cease. Liberian refugees repatriating in 2000 will continue to receive repatriation packages in asylum countries. Initial reintegration assistance in Liberia will continue until June 2000.

Monitoring of returnees' safety and well-being in Liberia has been fraught with difficulties due to insecurity and sporadic violence in certain areas. Clashes in Monrovia in September 1998 and in Lofa County in April 1999 drove 28,000 Liberians to flee to Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. A security incident in August 1999 in Lofa County – one of the main areas of return – showed that peace and stability there are still elusive. These events raised concerns not only about the protection of returnees, refugees and humanitarian workers in the area, but also about the planned phase-out of UNHCR's assistance to Liberian refugees in asylum countries. Although UN personnel, NGOs and refugees have been evacuated from the area, repatriation to other parts of the country (Bong, Grand Gedeh, Maryland, Monteserrado and Nimba) is considered safe. In 2000, UNHCR requires **USD 22,013,975** to complete repatriation and provide an adequate level of reintegration assistance to sustain return.