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Chad: Central African Refugees Neglected as Displacement Continues

While international attention is focused on the crisis of Darfur refugees in eastern Chad, the plight of tens of thousands of refugees from the Central African Republic (CAR) fleeing ethnic violence into southern Chad has gone largely unnoticed.

From June to December 2005, more than 12,000 refugees arrived in Chad, adding to a pre-existing refugee population of 30,000. In the last few months alone, close to 5,000 have continued to come to Chad, escaping fighting between rebel groups and the governmental Republican guard. The majority of these people share the same ethnicity as ex-president Patassé, and have therefore been specifically targeted by the present Bozizé government for attacks.

According to one of the few agencies present in northern CAR, there are also more than 30,000 internally displaced persons hiding in the forests in northern CAR, living off grasses and roots. There is little to no UN presence in northern CAR, as the area is considered too dangerous for international staff. Very few other humanitarian agencies are operating in the area, leaving the population extremely vulnerable.

In March 2006, Refugees International (RI) visited the Chadian villages of Began and Bedakassan, on the border with CAR. Thousands of refugees were waiting there to be screened by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and transferred to the refugee camps of Amboko and Gondje, near the southern town of Goré. Many of the refugees RI met had been waiting at the border for several weeks, living under trees and receiving no assistance from the aid community. One angry man told RI, "My family and I have been here for two months. We live like animals and sleep under trees. Here, at the border, we are too close to the CAR and are scared. We want to be transferred to the camps now."

An ally of the Bozizé regime, the Chadian government has also been reportedly reluctant to react quickly to the new refugee influx, thereby impeding the work of aid agencies. Under-funded and understaffed, the UN lacks resources to handle this crisis. UNHCR only has two staff members dealing with protection issues for the Amboko and Gondje refugee camps, the prisons, and the border and is unable to screen and transfer refugees in a timely fashion.

As a result of these delays, local impoverished Chadian communities have had to share their scarce resources with the newly arrived, causing a shortage in both food and drinking water. This situation has created serious tensions between refugees and the host communities. Chadian communities resent the fact that humanitarian agencies have not implemented projects aimed at assisting them in building lasting infrastructure. With little hope of their living conditions improving, many Chadians reportedly try to pass themselves off as refugees to benefit from assistance. This alleged Chadian "infiltration" in refugee camps has caused Chadian officials to insist on greater involvement in the screening process, resulting in further delays at the border.

The situation in the refugee camps of Amboko and Gondje, close to the southern town of Goré, is also very worrisome; the conditions there do not meet Sphere standards. There are few organizations working in the camp. Of the UN agencies, only UNHCR and the UN World Food Program are truly operational and they are unable to fully respond to all the needs because of budgetary constraints. The presence of international non-governmental organizations is also

limited; the majority of those operating in the region are UNHCR implementing partners and are therefore subjected to the same budgetary constraints as the UN agencies.

The water and sanitation situation of the camps raises serious concerns. According to a non-governmental organization operating in these camps, many latrines in both camps are unusable, because platforms have not been installed. They also have not been dug deep enough, and are filling up after only six months. Many people, particularly women, were using the forests as latrines. Water is also an issue. When RI visited Amboko, the water system had broken down for three days, forcing aid agencies to truck water from Gondje. The minimum standard requirement for water is 15 liters per person per day; refugees were able to access less than 5 liters per person per day. In the words of one refugee: “We need water for everything. For the past three days, fights have erupted while people were queuing for water. This situation can not go on for much longer.”

The distribution of basic supplies has also been unsatisfactory. UNHCR did not budget for soap for the upcoming distributions, and diarrhea has been an increasing problem. As for food, in March 2006, WFP reduced food rations by 30% for refugees that have been in Chad since 2003, as it did not have the stocks to deal with new arrivals. These reductions will remain in effect for four to five months while WFP waits for restoration of the food pipeline. WFP had based its calculations on the assumption that there would be 28,000 refugees in Amboko and Gondje; in March, they were already 30,400, with thousands waiting at the border and many more possibly arriving from CAR. It is imperative that the UN agencies plan for the potential arrival of more CAR refugees and that donors respond to the growing crisis.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The government of the Central African Republic and the rebel movements operating in the north immediately cease their attacks on civilians;
- ❑ The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights undertake a mission to assess the human rights situation of citizens in the CAR;
- ❑ The Chadian government provide newly arrived refugees with the land they need to achieve self-sustenance and consider the humanitarian needs of refugees regardless of its political alliance with the Bozizé government;
- ❑ Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) funds be allocated for the humanitarian needs of CAR refugees in Chad;
- ❑ Other donors provide the UN and non-governmental organizations with the resources they need to respond to the growing needs of CAR refugees in southern Chad;
- ❑ UNHCR increase the number of Protection staff assigned to southern Chad to reduce to a minimum the period the refugees spend waiting to be screened and transferred;
- ❑ UNHCR establish and implement projects to assist the local Chadian population, especially that of border villages;
- ❑ UNICEF, UNDP and other UN agencies establish and implement projects for CAR refugees in southern Chad;
- ❑ International non-governmental organizations, particularly those with expertise in protection, consider setting up operations to assist CAR refugees in Chad;
- ❑ UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations consider responding to the needs of the internally displaced in northern CAR;
- ❑ UNHCR assure that implementing partners meet the Sphere standards in the delivery of assistance and management of refugee camps, and hold accountable partners who fail to do so;
- ❑ UNHCR and WFP prepare for the potential arrival of more refugees from CAR in their contingency planning.

Advocates Sally Chin and Kristele Younes visited southern Chad in late March.