
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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Liberia: Ivoirian Refugees Left for Six Weeks Without Food

Despite the United Nations' assessment that host communities in Liberia were unable to provide sufficient food to support the influx of approximately 6,000 refugees from Côte d'Ivoire, the Office of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP) have failed to register refugees correctly and distribute food for six weeks. The UN interagency approach in Liberia, especially in regards to responding to the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs), has been plagued with infighting and lack of communication. While the failures in providing proper support to IDPs may be explained by the absence of clear mandates and a confused and bureaucratic planning process, the UN failure to provide for Ivoirian refugees is more difficult to understand. UNHCR and WFP have sufficient staff and resources, and a clear mandate to help these people.

A nurse from an international NGO who traveled with RI to eastern Liberia along the Ivorian border stated that the signs of malnutrition were obvious among the refugee population; pregnant women appeared anemic and weak, nursing mothers were very thin and the young children were exhibiting signs of malnutrition.

Refugees said that they had fled to Liberia to avoid violence from the civil war in Cote d'Ivoire. "We came over because we are afraid of Côte d'Ivoire right now. We saw government forces moving tanks to the front lines. We saw that they are using soldiers who have persecuted us in the past. We came to Liberia to be safe," said a representative for a group of about 200 refugees living in a transit shelter site in Butuo, in eastern Liberia. "We know from past experience that they have abducted our young girls when they come through," said one mother, "I do not want that to happen to my daughters."

The majority of the refugees are being sheltered by Liberians who have recently returned home after being displaced by conflict within Liberia. "We help these people because they are our brothers. We know them and have done business with them," declared the mayor of Butuo. "But our people are suffering too. Many of us just returned to Nimba county. We do not have enough food." Household size has swelled from an average of 6-8 to 12-20 to accommodate the refugees. "We have had many visitors [among them the Force commander and the Humanitarian Coordinator of UNMIL, the UN peacekeeping mission in Liberia], but still no one is helping us with food," the mayor says. "Why should they visit us but not bring us anything?"

The road conditions to reach Butuo are difficult. One road was already impassable due to washed out bridges. Refugees International found that two bridges along the alternative route had been damaged by large trucks; local youth were trying to help fix them. Whereas in a better coordinated effort, these bridges would be repaired and maintained through a food for work program, no external assistance was being provided to improve the local infrastructure. “We don’t want politics here. We need bridges and development!” said one local man.

In an interview with RI, the UNHCR representative in Monrovia justified the slow registration of Ivoirian refugees by stating that conditions in the border regions of Cote d’Ivoire were calm. He accused the refugees of coming into Liberia just to get food. Since no food has been distributed, this seems an odd justification for their presence on Liberian soil. According to UNHCR, however, as of Dec. 17 everything is in place for WFP to begin food distribution. UNHCR completed a verification exercise on December 14 and presented the results to WFP. In the view of UNHCR’s representative, the food distribution to Ivoirian refugees should be imminent.

The WFP representative, however, outlined four conditions for WFP involvement in food distribution to this population: 1) refugees must be further from the border so distributions won’t attract more Ivoirians; 2) all recipients must be verified as Ivoirian citizens; 3) food recipients must have refugee identification cards; 4) the refugees must be consolidated into fewer locations. Further, he echoed the UNHCR analysis that the Ivoirian side of the border was safe for return.

RI was struck by the lack of initiative and concern shown by the UNHCR and WFP representatives when faced with direct testimony of a population in need. By not feeding the refugees, UNHCR and WFP are forcing them back across the border in search of food and putting them in danger. Refugees told RI that a number of people had drowned crossing back across the river into Cote d’Ivoire.

“A hungry man is an angry man,” said a representative of the Liberian Red Cross in the area. Confusion about WFP’s plans have increased refugee frustration. According to the Liberian Red Cross, the WFP was set to distribute food to pregnant women and other vulnerable people last week, but the distribution never took place. Still, the refugees remain hopeful. “People have had to return across the river to seek food,” the Red Cross worker said. “They are unaware when food is coming. What will happen to them if they are not here when you bring the food?”

Therefore, Refugees International recommends that:

- UNHCR and WFP immediately dispatch a joint assessment team to Butuo to determine the extent of the needs of the Ivoirian refugees there and organize immediate distribution of food from available stocks there;
- WFP organize a distribution to replenish the food stocks of the host community;
- WFP clearly announce and explain its policies to both refugees and internally displaced people in eastern Liberia
- UNHCR determine the feasibility of establishing regular services to refugees in Butuo and either initiate programs there or offer to move the refugees to an established camp in Saclapea;
- WFP support the repair of bridges on the road to Butuo by initiating food for work schemes.

Advocates Sarah Martin and Fidele Lumeya have just completed an assessment of the humanitarian situation in Liberia.