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# RI BULLETIN

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## A POWERFUL VOICE FOR LIFESAVING ACTION

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### **Liberia: Invest in Local Communities to Support Return of Internally Displaced**

Liberians who escaped violence during the 14 years of war have started to make the journey home. During the war an estimated 500,000 Liberians fled the conflict to live in internal displacement camps, and another 350,000 crossed borders into Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast. The exile of Charles Taylor in 2003 to Nigeria, the signing of the peace agreement, and the deployment to date of some 15,000 UN peacekeepers, one of the largest UN forces worldwide, have created an environment in which return is finally possible. As of the end of May 2005, an estimated 145,000 Liberians have registered for the return process with the United Nations and the UN World Food Program has verified that 70,000 have returned home.

During a recently-completed assessment mission to Liberia, Refugees International and the George Wolf Operating Foundation interviewed returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) in several regions of the country: the capital, Monrovia; the upper west county of Lofa, one of the areas hit hardest by the conflict; and Montserrado and Bong counties. In all of these areas of the country, particularly in IDP camps, Liberians expressed an eagerness to return home. In Lofa county, it was heartening to see a handful of those displaced by the conflict returning to their villages to rebuild homes, prepare their fields, and begin planting. Many of those returning were fathers and sons who told us, "We have gone on ahead of our families [living in IDP camps] to build our houses and start planting. Our families will join us when things are ready."

The return of the displaced to their homes in Liberia is encouraging, and donors and international agencies need to support the process of community rebuilding in areas of origin. Such support would involve concentrating on improving services in communities of return and providing basic items, such as plastic sheeting, cooking utensils, and blankets, in transit centers located close to the areas of origin.

The approach of the United Nations, however, as mandated by the Humanitarian Coordinator, has been to favor the strategy of offering return packages, including money for transportation, to displaced persons while they remain in camps. Camp-based distribution is easier logistically and donor representatives interviewed by RI insisted that this consideration was the main rationale. Staff of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) justify the preference for camp-based distribution by citing the desire of the displaced themselves to receive the materials prior to return, as well as pressure from the political side of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to accelerate the return process.

Political pressure was certainly a significant factor. According to an international official, "For over a year there was no real leadership in the UN for the return process. OCHA [the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] had developed a very general plan in July 2004, but when OCHA left due to internal disputes, the process was handed over to the Humanitarian Coordination Section (HCS), although no operational UN agency was given overall responsibility for IDP returns. A return plan was finalized in November 2004 by UNMIL, but action wasn't taken until January. At that point, UNMIL realized that the elections were coming in October and that the country had been secured through the disarmament

process. There was a real need to send people home. A joint visit by European and U.S. donors at the end of February put UNMIL under greater pressure to accelerate returns.”

The effect of favoring the camp-based approach has been to create a situation in which IDPs are waiting for delivery of materials in camps, which has been a slow process, when they could instead be engaged in rebuilding homes in rural areas. It has also created protection and logistical problems for the displaced as they attempt to travel home with all of their newly acquired goods. Donor representatives and non-governmental agency staff have stated that this approach was not their preference.

A May assessment mission by the Internal Displacement Division (IDD) of OCHA cited other major concerns with the existing return process. Their report questioned the voluntary nature of the return process given the requirement that displaced persons leave the camps within 10 days of receiving the resettlement package. The advent of the rainy season will present tremendous logistical and security difficulties for individual families having to rely on unregulated and overloaded private transportation with all their possessions in tow. According to OCHA, there is a risk of families becoming stranded on roads without shelter or finding no shelter in their home villages. To these issues, RI would add that deteriorating conditions in the camps were forcing the hand of some displaced families, who were feeling they had no choice but to return home.

Many displaced persons are being given very little notice to prepare transportation once their district has been chosen for return. At present the UN is planning only two weeks in advance for IDP returns and camp de-registrations. One woman in Maimu I camp told RI, “I’m very excited to go home to Zorzor tomorrow. I’m here to receive my final food distribution from WFP [UN World Food Program] and then I’ll take IOM [International Organization for Migration] transport with my family back home.” The camp manager looked at her ration card and informed her, that no, she would not be taking IOM transportation since she wasn’t authorized as a vulnerable person. She looked crestfallen, but was determined to find a way home. “I guess we will just wait for a truck that will agree to carry us.”

No UN agency has been assigned the role of overseeing the process of return travel for the displaced. During a visit to a refugee transit center in Lofa county, RI was struck by the numbers of stranded trucks carrying IDP families. No one within the UN system was responsible for helping them. In many cases the displaced were forced to abandon vehicles and continue on foot. A UNHCR representative told RI, “An IDP vehicle was involved in an accident a few weeks ago. We intervened to provide shelter to the families overnight, and to ensure that those injured were taken care of. But actually it isn’t part of our mandate. We don’t have the manpower to oversee both IDP and refugee returns.”

An initial return plan had included IOM transport for all registered internally displaced persons to their home counties, and the provision of food rations and basic supplies in these areas, but the Humanitarian Coordination Section of UNMIL decided that this process was too costly and time consuming. The chosen path, however, may prove to be even more costly, if a significant percentage of the displaced use their supplies while still in camps and spend their travel allowances without actually reaching their homes.

With so much emphasis on providing return packages in a timely manner to the displaced in camps, little is being done to ensure that areas of return are ready to receive returning people. Although UNHCR and their NGO partners have begun to reconstruct schools, health centers and build wells in some counties, shelter and sufficient agriculture remains a problem in all of the counties that RI visited. Except for UNHCR, UN agencies did not appear to have sub-offices outside of Monrovia. With Liberia entering into the reconstruction phase, it is vital that the entire UN humanitarian and development system step up efforts to transition from relief to development and ensure that communities are provided with the support they need to rebuild without making distinctions between the returning internally displaced, returning refugees, and those who stayed behind. Liberians at the village level all require support in rebuilding their own communities. In many cases the most vulnerable are not internally displaced persons or refugees,

who have received at least some assistance, but Liberians who suffered in place and managed on their own without the benefit of international aid.

**Refugees International therefore recommends that:**

- The Humanitarian Coordination Section of UNMIL and the operational agencies of the UN system in Liberia implement the recommendations of the Internal Displacement Division May mission to Liberia. In particular, the Humanitarian Coordinator should clearly assign responsibilities for the return and reintegration process, and establish an effective structure to monitor it.
- In consultation with the UN Country Team and the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the Humanitarian Coordinator designate one lead operational agency to take responsibility for assuring that the protection and material needs of the internally displaced in Liberia are met.
- The Acting Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) find a source of funds to address the 64,000 unit shortfall in the non-food supplies component of the resettlement packages. Donors provided funding to UNHCR based on OCHA's estimate of the numbers of eligible IDPs, while UNMIL based actual eligibility on the register of the World Food Program, which included 64,000 additional people. They have been promised return packages by the UN, and they should be provided.
- Internally displaced persons who reside in more remote counties be given the option of transit on IOM trucks, rather than using private transportation, to the extent they are available.
- The Humanitarian Coordinator obtain the support of UNMIL to transport the personal belongings and return packages of IDPs. The Humanitarian Coordinator refused to take up a previous UNMIL offer of trucks to facilitate IDP return due to NGO reservations regarding the use of military trucks for a civilian return operation. RI believes that such concerns are not warranted given that UNMIL is not a belligerent and given the urgent need for safe and secure transportation for the displaced.
- UNMIL utilize its existing capacity to rehabilitate the principal roads to areas of IDP return and that the SRSG consider ways to find additional resources to augment this capacity.
- International agencies significantly increase the implementation of basic infrastructure projects in communities expected to experience a large influx of returning displaced persons, with a focus on rehabilitating roads, rebuilding water and sanitation facilities, and providing health, education and other basic services. At a minimum, communities must be provided with the tools they need to rebuild their homes and with seeds in time for them to take advantage of the new planting season.

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*Refugees International Advocates Mamie Mutchler and Sally Chin and Dan Wolf of the George Wolf Operating Foundation recently completed a two-week assessment mission in Liberia.*