

November 9, 2006

Contacts:
Maureen Lynch and Dawn Calabia

Cote d'Ivoire: Support Local Integration for Liberian Refugees

The fifteen-year UN program for Liberian refugees in Cote d'Ivoire is in its final phase since successful elections in 2005 installed a new national reconciliation government in Liberia headed by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assisted 3,000 Liberians in Cote d'Ivoire to return home last year, and will continue repatriations until the end of 2006. International resettlement, the dream of many Liberians, has ended with the United States closing even family reunification cases not opened by September 2006. UNHCR and the Ivorian government are planning additional efforts to encourage returns to Liberia by bringing high level Liberian officials to visit the camp and invite the refugees home, encouraging more go and see visits, and using radio broadcasts from Liberia to describe improving conditions and opportunities for returnees.

Cote d'Ivoire is a rare host country that encourages refugees to stay and integrate locally. UNHCR estimates some 37,000 registered Liberian refugees remain in Cote d'Ivoire, although some Ivorian officials insist the number is closer to 50,000, primarily in the western part of the country near the Liberian border. Earlier this year in the south, the Tabou refugee transit center was closed and its 2,400 Liberian refugees were dispersed and integrated into nearby villages.

With local integration a real option, the challenge for the government of Cote d'Ivoire, UNHCR and the international community is to work together to ensure that the transition for Liberians from "refugee to resident" is accomplished safely, quickly and sustainably. The government of Cote d'Ivoire must assure timely issuance of Ivorian identity documents to the refugees to grant them long-term legal

residence and the right to work, to move freely about the country, to educate their children, to access health care, and if they desire and fulfill the requirements, to attain Ivorian citizenship.

UNHCR's monitoring and protection activities must continue with the integrating refugees. Community service programs need to be developed in consultation with the refugees, the host government and the local communities, with the support of international donors, to provide the refugees with a reasonable period of time to gain the skills and experience needed for self-sufficiency. UNHCR's own evaluations have urged that such programs be designed realistically so that the refugees know the extent and timing of the support. Combined with their own efforts, these programs can secure their rights and meet their needs --- particularly for food, shelter, medical care and education --- which in turn will permit them to live in peace and dignity with their Ivorian neighbors.

The security and economic situation for the refugees is tenuous. Nicla in Guiglo is the only remaining camp with some 16,200 refugees. Last January, Guiglo suffered widespread unrest. Mobs attacked and burned UN and non-governmental organization offices in what was believed to be retaliation for UN Security Council pressure on the government of President Gbagbao for political concessions. Today, UN peacekeepers from Benin reside in Guiglo, relocated opposite the 7,000-person camp for internally displaced people overseen by the International

Organization for Migration. All UN civilian and NGO staff now live in Duekoue. The Ivorian government and local officials are currently working with UNHCR to transition Nicla camp in 2007 into an Ivorian village, to be called Zaaglo, the name of the surrounding agrarian community.

Some 4,000 Liberian urban refugees, some of whom arrived in the early 1990s, still reside in Abidjan, a city swollen by the conflict that split the country in two and displaced hundreds of thousands in 2002. In recent years, the refugees, like the internally displaced people, have had difficulty accessing schools for their children and coping with a declining economy and increasing prices. UNHCR has provided limited assistance to vulnerable urban refugees, principally counseling, social services, some income generation efforts, health care, and children's education. Regrettably, these small income generation and self-sufficiency efforts for urban refugees, budgeted at a mere \$32,000, were eliminated this year due to UNHCR budget cuts. One humanitarian worker told RI, "If refugees are given opportunity, they can do wonderful things."

Some of the Liberian refugees have been caught up in the ongoing Ivorian political crisis which leaves the government in control of the south and the dissident Force Nouvelle holding the north. Meanwhile, the battle over who is Ivorian rages and some seek to limit economic and political participation to those with Ivorian ancestry. Ethnic and political strife now wrack a once prosperous and peaceful country, which before had welcomed immigrants and workers to build the country's wealth, particularly through farming cocoa, coffee and rice. With ethnic politics linked to a declining economy, life is difficult for the Liberian refugees, who may be labeled foreigners with suspicious loyalties, despite years of residence, or be falsely accused of links to Liberian mercenaries, employed by various parties to the conflict.

Refugees International commends the government of Cote d'Ivoire for its welcome to refugees and urges it and UNHCR to put measures in place to prevent this urban refugee population and other Liberian refugees from becoming victims of xenophobia or intolerance because of their nationality.

While plans have been made to continue Caritas-provided refugee health services in Guiglo during the first six months of 2007, with a government health ministry doctor initially funded by UNHCR seconded to the clinic, RI heard of no

similar planning for health care, education, or livelihood skills in 2007 and beyond for urban refugees or those in the Tabou area. The continued small international investment required for protection, livelihood training and basic needs for these Liberian victims of war and persecution must be viewed as a vital and worthwhile investment that can best ensure the rights of the refugees and their peaceful integration with local Ivorian communities.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The government of Cote d'Ivoire issue identity documents in January 2007 to those refugees seeking to integrate. These documents should ensure long-term legal residence, the right to freedom of movement, to work, to access education and health care, and if they so desire, a right to seek Ivorian citizenship under the relevant laws and decrees.
- ❑ UNHCR work with the Ivorian government to ensure the prompt issuance of the relevant identity documents and increase its capacity to monitor the integrating refugees with experienced international protection staff.
- ❑ UNHCR begin consultations with the Liberian refugees, the host community, government officials and other UN agencies on the extent and length of community services and other programs needed to ensure a peaceful transition and the attainment of self-sufficiency.
- ❑ The United Nations agencies continue to work together to ensure that the refugees can meet the basic needs of the elderly, the sick, widows, and children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and other causes.
- ❑ The US government continue to provide support for the protection and integration needs of the Liberian refugees in Cote d'Ivoire and seek the support and cooperation of other donors and the Ivorian government for these purposes.

Senior Advocate Maureen Lynch and Dawn Calabia recently returned from an assessment mission to West Africa focused on statelessness.