
RI BULLETIN

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Liberia: UNMIL strategy needed for internally displaced unable to return home

The United Nations has stepped up efforts to return Liberians displaced by fourteen years of conflict to their home counties. As of June 3rd, the UN had provided final assistance and return packages home to 187,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) out of the 280,000 in formal camps. One of the first IDP camps to be “closed” was EJ Yancy in Bong County. Although technically the camp is not closed, all of the displaced who were registered with the World Food Program have received their final food distribution in camp, accepted a return package including a transportation allowance, and agreed to demolish their huts. Yet more than 1,200 residents remain in the camp and would like to stay, preferably with international assistance.

Refugees International visited the camp in June and spoke to representatives of the 1,200 IDPs still living in the camp to find out why they were intent on staying there despite efforts to send them home. James, a father of three, explained, “We did accept the return packages. It seemed pretty clear that if we did not accept the packages now, we would never receive them. We were also told that if we did not destroy our huts, our neighbors would not be provided with return packages and they would stop the distribution. The two houses next to ours were destroyed by force to encourage everyone to leave. We were pretty afraid ours would be next.”

Most of the displaced persons remaining at EJ Yancy are from Gbarpolu County. Although the border of the county is only a few minutes drive away from the camp, the trip home can take several days on foot and involves crossing a river. Poor road conditions and the lack of a bridge crossing the river at the closest access point to Bong County mean that the county is inaccessible to transport from that route. Even for vulnerable individuals, transportation by the International Organization for Migration is only provided by canoe to the opposite side of the river. From there, the elderly, ill, handicapped and pregnant are expected to find their own way home on foot carrying their possessions with them.

The UN has declared Gbarpolu County “ready to receive.” Disarmament of ex-combatants has taken place, but IDPs warn of continued violence. According to a June 15 press briefing by the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Maj. General Tahir had received reports of shootings in the county, but investigations by the transitional government did not confirm the reports. Even if the county is declared safe, it is not necessarily ready for return in terms of availability of basic infrastructure, shelter, water pumps, schools and health posts. Several high school students at EJ Yancy told RI, “We want to stay here until the end of the term. If we leave now, we will lose an entire year of school, and for those of us about to graduate, we would not receive our diplomas. An exception should be made for students. In Gbarpolu there are no high schools.”

RI raised the concerns of the displaced persons living in EJ Yancy with members of the Humanitarian Coordination Section (HCS) of UNMIL. IDPs had reported threats from local Liberian authorities that

they would be evicted. The local landowner had already dismantled the latrines and water pumps, and all international organizations had left the camp. IDPs reported thefts of zinc roofing and general insecurity.

The HCS was able to confirm with local authorities that IDPs would not be evicted, but HCS staff did not have a plan for the consolidation or integration of IDPs left in the camp. Instead they referred RI to the work of a Task Force on Camp Closure and Consolidation, established after an assessment by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Internal Displacement Division. The Task Force recently reported its initial findings to UNMIL's IDP Consultative Forum and a final report detailing its recommendations will be available within the next few weeks.

In the meantime, 300 internally displaced persons from EJ Yancy, afraid of evictions and forced hut demolitions, moved a few hundred yards down the road to a farm owned by a local school board member, Mr. Beysah, who was enlisting support from international humanitarian organizations to provide water pumps and sanitation. Clearly a pre-existing plan for camp consolidation and closure would have prevented the doubling of efforts to serve the same community. The work of the camp closure Task Force should be expedited and solutions found for locally integrating displaced persons who may not be able to return home at this time or are unwilling to do so.

Therefore Refugees International recommends that:

- UNMIL emphasize that returns of IDPs to their home counties are voluntary, and clarify the options left for IDPs remaining in camps, such as consolidating in other camps and integrating locally. OCHA's Internal Displacement Division raised similar concerns in their May assessment mission and their recommendations should be implemented as soon as possible. Specifically, UNMIL's Task Force on Camp Consolidation and Closure should develop without further delay "[a]n agreed policy on resettlement options for those IDPs who choose not to return but prefer to integrate locally following camp closure. This must address the legal status of IDPs remaining in shelters on private land and should include provision for legal advice to IDPs and landowners to ensure security of tenure and fair rents."
- While the Task Force on Camp Closure and Consolidation is still in the assessment phase, the IDP Consultative Forum ensure that basic steps are taken to consolidate IDPs in existing camps who have not yet been slated for return, or who have decided not to leave during the rainy season. For example, the recommendations of the IDD unit should be implemented immediately calling for "[a]n agreed, coherent and consistent approach to, and plan for, camp consolidation that addresses the process for relocating IDPs remaining in partially emptied camps into central areas of the camps and away from the periphery; the transfer of IDPs from less populated camps into larger camps to ensure more cost effective maintenance of basic services."
- Until a final policy on camp closure and consolidation has been agreed, UNMIL ensure that basic infrastructure necessary to the survival needs of the IDPs not be removed. Water pumps and latrines should remain accessible and not be handed over to local landowners or authorities.
- Hut destruction not be a mandated part of the return process until an agreed policy for camp consolidation and closure has been reached.

Advocates Mamie Mutchler and Sally Chin conducted an assessment mission to Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire in May and June.