

UNHCR in Guinea

by Father John Agberagba

UNHCR is failing to provide protection to those seeking refuge in Guinea.

After recent attacks UNHCR is unable to account for some 150,000 of the half million refugees in the country. Having fled wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, refugees are caught up in Guinea's conflict as both rebels and the government attempt to recruit young refugees. The scale of the displacement crisis in Guinea suggests the need for the use of force. UNHCR should leave the provision of assistance to NGOs and governments in order to fulfil its primary objective - refugee protection.

UNHCR should stress the legal right of refugees to asylum status in Guinea. UNHCR should more aggressively pursue the policy of refugee protection by working with the Guinean government, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the international community to end military attacks on refugee camps and Guinean villages. Combatants and ex-combatants in camps need to be disarmed. Camps along Guinea's borders with Sierra Leone and Liberia need to be relocated further away from the frontier. A military police force, trained to understand the needs of refugees, should be deployed in camps as a matter of urgency.

The protection of refugees must go beyond facile rhetoric. Those who violate the rights of refugees currently do so with impunity. UNHCR should have more protection officers on the ground and collect evidence for the UN to use to prosecute the guilty.

None of the traditional solutions to refugee crises (repatriation, local integration or third country asylum) are viable. Ongoing conflict makes it impossible to return in safety to Sierra Leone and Liberia. After 14 years of hosting refugees, most Guineans have run out of patience. Public opinion has turned against the refugees, with many



Repatriation convoy crosses the Guinea-Liberian border.

convinced that they are supporting the rebel movement in Guinea. The huge numbers of people involved rules out the option of third country asylum. Developed countries are not willing to open their doors. While the US provides logistical support, France food aid and the UK military assistance, what the refugees really need is a safe country of asylum.

Peace agreements have come and gone but rebels have refused to hand over weapons. For too long the situation has been allowed to fester. The only option is a military one. What is needed is not 'safety zones' but the military defeat of the rebels so that refugees can go home in safety and dignity. UNHCR should have the courage to call on the UN, ECOWAS and the international community to use its muscle. The right to belong to a home is the most basic of human rights, the one on which all other rights are pinned. In places like Guinea

where orthodox approaches have failed we need the courage to use military force. In the case of the Kurds, Kuwaitis and Kosovars, the international community has shown it has the capacity to be proactive. Why is this option not pursued in Africa? In this new millennium do not all people have the right to live in a country of their own and not be condemned to life as wanderers?

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Since this was written, the newly-appointed UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, visited the region to assess the refugee crisis described by UNHCR as the worst in the world. He secured the agreement of protagonists to relocate the refugees to camps further within Guinea and to facilitate the safe return of refugees to Sierra Leone through rebel territory and by boat. An assessment by Human Rights Watch casts doubt on the effectiveness of this 'safe passage' strategy. See www.hrw.org/press/2001/04/refugee-0403.htm

UNHCR/K. Diagne