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NEWS FROM U.S. COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES
June 28, 2002

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UPDATE FROM FIELD: SIERRA LEONE STRUGGLES TO ASSIST 8,000 NEW LIBERIAN REFUGEES; RELIEF AGENCIES NEED FUNDING AND COORDINATION

(FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE) --The arrival of some 8,000 new refugees from Liberia into eastern **Sierra Leone** in recent days has put a potentially dangerous strain on war-damaged Sierra Leonean villages along the border and threatens to sidetrack efforts to reintegrate tens of thousands of repatriated Sierra Leonean refugees into their home communities, according to an on-the-scene assessment this week by the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR), the public information program of Immigration and Refugee Services of America.

A two-person USCR team spent three days in **Sierra Leone's** border district of Kailahun this week, where 2,000 or more Liberian refugees have arrived since June 16. The same area is already struggling to absorb some 45,000 former Sierra Leonean refugees who are in the process of returning home after years of asylum in Guinea and Liberia. Thousands more new Liberian refugees have entered Sierra Leone farther south, in the Pujehun District, where Refugees International has just concluded an assessment of the growing emergency.

The simultaneous double influx of Liberian refugees and Sierra Leonean returnees into Sierra Leone's remote border areas poses a highly unusual challenge to humanitarian aid agencies as well as to local residents, many of whom already lack housing, medical services, water systems, and other basic services that were destroyed in Sierra Leone's civil war, which officially ended less than six months ago.

"We are struggling between the convoys of [returnees] coming from Guinea and the relocation of the new influx" from Liberia, a UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) official told USCR in Kailahun. "Local Sierra Leonean authorities are also very nervous at this stage of having another refugee influx. We know that the conflict in Liberia could quickly come to the borderline. People are concerned that the presence of [Liberian] refugees on the border could become an excuse for Liberia to come in [militarily]."

Liberian refugees who fled into **Sierra Leone** this week spoke to USCR at the border about heavy artillery shelling as Liberian government forces and rebels battle each other. The worst fighting in recent days appeared to be centered around the Liberian border town of Foya, in Lofa County, according to Sierra Leone military monitoring the border zone.

About 5 percent of the Liberian refugee children crossing into the Kailahun District of **Sierra Leone** have arrived with severe malnutrition, and virtually all the youngest arrivals are suffering at least moderate malnutrition, health workers in the border region told USCR. Some refugees have abrasions and swollen feet from running through the heavily forested bush to escape attackers and avoid Liberian combatants who often extort money at the border before permitting refugees to escape Liberia.

UNHCR staff in Sierra Leone and other international relief organizations are attempting to implement emergency contingency plans despite serious budget constraints. USCR is concerned that UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland is in danger of repeating its unfortunate pattern in the past decade of reacting too slowly to refugee crises in West Africa.

USCR makes the following recommendations:

1) UNHCR should move more aggressively at the headquarters level to commit greater staffing and financial resources to the Liberian refugee influx in Sierra Leone. The U.S. government and other international donors should immediately support those efforts. Failure to do so endangers Liberian refugees as well as efforts to stabilize Sierra Leone and its large returnee population at a sensitive time.

2) UNHCR in Sierra Leone should continue its wise strategy of transporting new Liberian refugees to camps away from the potentially dangerous and economically devastated border zone. UNHCR should improve its capacity to transfer new arrivals either by procuring more trucks or by borrowing from the large truck fleet at the disposal of the UN peacekeeping contingent in Sierra Leone.

3) UNHCR should immediately implement plans to establish a transit center in Sierra Leone's Kailahun District to receive new Liberian refugees and transport them from the border area within 48 hours after their arrival.

Approximately 40,000 Liberian refugees are in Sierra Leone, including thousands who have not registered with UNHCR or local authorities. Three-quarters have arrived since January. At the same time, some half-million or more Sierra Leoneans are in the process of returning home and rebuilding their lives after years of being uprooted as refugees or internally displaced persons.

The USCR fact-finding team will continue its assessment in the region through mid-July.

Founded in 1958, the U.S. Committee for Refugees is a non-governmental, non-profit agency dedicated to defending the rights of uprooted peoples worldwide.

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