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UNITED NATIONS
HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR REFUGEES

Ynglingegatan 14, 6th Floor
113 47 Stockholm Sweden

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FACSIMILE MESSAGE

To: The Danish Refugee Council Att. Ms. Mette Honore	Destination Fax No:
From: Karin Davin, Protection Assistant UNHCR Stockholm	Return Fax No: 46 8 457 4887 Tel: 46 8 457 4877 Email: davin@unhcr.ch
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Subject: Returnability of asylum seekers from Sierra Leone

Dear Mette,

Reference is made to your request for updated information on UNHCR's position with regard to return to Sierra Leone.

Please be informed that we have received the following information from our Headquarters in Geneva, which is dated May 2000.

As reported by the international media and UN sources, Freetown seems to relatively calm. As a result, UNAMSIL has returned to the capital and all its international civilian staff who had been relocated to Banjul, Gambia, have also returned. It should be recalled that since the beginning of May, a climate of insecurity sparked by attacks and the detention of UN peacekeepers has caused thousands of people to seek refuge in Freetown, joining other IDPs who had been there before. The World Food Programme has been registering the newly arrived IDPs who number about 35,000 bringing their total in Freetown to an estimated figure of 80,000 IDPs whom WFP is trying to take care of by delivering food. Their number is reportedly decreasing since some of them have started going As reported by the international media and UN sources, Freetown seems to be relatively calm. As a result, back to their villages.

As regards the activities of RUF rebels, the security situation is relatively calm even though few incidents involving pro-government forces and RUF in recent days have been reported. There has been in Freetown indeed an attack on one of the President's advisors leading to the death of two people. There are also unconfirmed reports that RUF is regrouping in some areas. Meanwhile on 21 May, 54 of the detained UN personnel were released and on 22 May another 29 were transported to Monrovia in Liberia, and are expected to be shortly handed over to Sierra Leone. At this juncture, 233 people have been released from detention, leaving another 255 UN personnel still

in RUF hands while an investigation into the killing of some men wearing UN uniforms is on-going. According to today's reports, the remaining UN detainees were released this weekend.

Today Sankoh, the RUF leader is still in custody with the government of Sierra Leone. His whereabouts have not been disclosed nor has the government come forward with any information on what actions to be taken in relation to serious abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law perpetrated in areas under RUF control after the July 1999 Lome Peace Agreement which have resulted in a sizeable increase in IDP in Sierra Leone as well as in the flow of refugees in Guinea (about 2000 new arrivals since the beginning of May). Some 40,000 including 6,000 new IDPs have received assistance so far. However, the lack of security in the eastern and northern parts of the country has caused the halt of food distribution by WFP to about 30,000 people. NGOs have also halted their assistance to some areas. So, the food situation might deteriorate further due to the security situation and to the heavy rains, which are starting very soon.

With regards to the social and economic infrastructures, it is needless to say that they have been completely destroyed following nine years of fighting to such an extent that education institutions, health centers, sanitation structures and other social facilities do not exist or, at least are not fully operational, both in the capital city of Freetown and in the countryside making living conditions very hard for the local population. It is obvious that under the prevailing circumstances returnees would face enormous difficulties to resume a normal life in Sierra Leone. Hence UNHCR has not started implementing its mass voluntary repatriation programme yet. In the meantime, UNHCR kindly requests countries of asylum or residence to allow Sierra Leoneans to stay in their territory, at least on humanitarian grounds, until such time that they could repatriate in safety and dignity.

We hope that the above can be of use to you.

Regards.

Karin Dan