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NATIONS UNIES
HAUT COMMISSARIAT
POUR LES REFUGIES

SIERRA LEONE (44)



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UNITED NATIONS
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63

FACSMILE MESSAGE

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Dear Mr. Christiansson,

Reference is made to the telephone communication of this morning between yourself and our legal intern Ann Linnarsson concerning the present situation in Sierra Leone.

Please be informed that we have received following recommendation from our Headquarters in Geneva, which is dated 14 June 2001.

It is true that UNHCR has recently "facilitated" the voluntary repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees from Guinea, but this should not be confused with "promotion" of voluntary repatriation, since conditions in Sierra Leone are not yet conducive for such an exercise; indeed, in some instances such "voluntary repatriation" looked more like humanitarian evacuation due to force majeure, i.e. military activities in refugee-hosting areas had made it all but impossible for the refugees to continue to remain in safety in their country of asylum;

It is also true that the RUF appears to have accepted to disarm its militias on the basis of the 1999 Lome Peace Agreement and recent political negotiations with the Government of Sierra Leone; However, twice before the RUF made this undertaking, only to break it soon thereafter, and in any event it will take some time for this new position to filter down to the rank and file due to the rather disorganized state of the rebel movement. While disarmament has started taking place in parts of the country, it has yet to materialize in the heartland of the RUF in the Eastern Region. On issues such as disarmament, the release of child combatants and freedom of movement of

civilians, the position of the RUF high command is not always shared by local commanders. The official position of the RUF is therefore not necessarily implemented on the ground in the way intended (UNHCR BO Sierra Leone experienced this at first hand during a mission to Kainahun district this week). It would therefore be premature at this stage to take as a given that the RUF will disarm and allow the ECOWAS peacekeeping force to take control of the territory it holds, particularly the gold and diamond mining areas in the Eastern Region;

Large parts of the country continue to be controlled by the RUF. Human rights abuses continue to be perpetrated by the RUF and, to a lesser extent, also by pro-government irregular militias (Kamajors and others). The vast majority of returning refugees are becoming internally displaced persons upon return, as they are unable to return to their areas of origin. IDP camps are overstretched, as are UNHCR temporary settlements for returnees who are unable to return home. The total IDP population (both registered and unregistered) is estimated at over one million (i.e. about a quarter of the population).

In light of the above, and taking into account lessons learned in the past in such a volatile environment, UNHCR believes that it is too early to conclude that the situation in Sierra Leone has consolidated to the point of warranting the return of rejected asylum seekers. Accordingly, the Office takes the position that States are kindly requested to refrain from returning rejected asylum seekers from Sierra Leone to their country of origin at this stage.

We hope that this information will be helpful. Best regards.

