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Ivoirian refugees in Ghana and Togo fear reprisal

ABIDJAN, 19 December 2013 (IRIN) - Fear of reprisal is preventing thousands of Ivoirians from returning to Côte d'Ivoire from Ghana and Togo, where they sought refuge following the violently disputed 2010-2011 presidential elections.

Of the 12,500 Ivoirians who fled to the two countries, only 710 have returned home, according to the state-run Service for the Assistance of Refugees and Stateless People (SAARA).

By contrast, increasing numbers of Ivoirians who fled to Liberia during the violence have been returning in recent months.

Many of those who fled to Ghana are from Côte d'Ivoire's commercial capital, Abidjan, and other urban areas. Among them are high-ranking stalwarts of ousted president Laurent Gbagbo's ruling party, as well as members of the once-powerful party youth wing and the university students' union. Those who fled to Liberia, on the other hand, were mainly from rural western Côte d'Ivoire and border villages.

"The [repatriation] process is more active in Liberia than in Ghana mainly because of the refugee profile in these two countries," Ann Encontre, UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) representative in Côte d'Ivoire, told IRIN.

"In Ghana, we unfortunately don't have the same involvement by the authorities and the community leaders of the host country and the country of origin, and former top officials [of Gbagbo's party] at times have a dissuasive influence over the refugees," Encontre explained.

SAARA coordinator Timothée Ezouan said: "The refugees have no motivation to return. We need to resolve the issues that complicate repatriation and clear the obstacles to their secure and dignified return."

Fear of abduction

Some refugees told IRIN that the main reason they have not returned home is fear of the Ivoirian army. The majority of its soldiers are former rebels who backed Gbagbo's opponent, Alassane Ouattara, who is now the president. The army, Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI), has been accused of committing abuses including arbitrary arrests and torture.

"When you return home, it's as though some people have been waiting to kill you. They wait for a while before they come for you. Some people will never return," said Bernard Kablan, a former student and resident of Youpougou, a pro-Gbagbo neighbourhood of Abidjan. He spoke to IRIN from Ghana.

"In September, three of us returned to Abidjan. On two nights, FRCI soldiers came to our house. The threat was real, and we decided to flee once more to Ghana. Under the circumstances, it is difficult to think of returning, although we know they can trace us to where we are now," Kablan said.

Adrien Koné, who said he was a staunch member of the youth movement, also said that he had to flee back to Ghana because of fears of reprisal from FRCI troops.

"In Abidjan, I had the feeling that I was constantly being followed. In the neighbourhood, people claiming to be FRCI had been informed of my return. I eventually stayed for only two nights before returning to Accra," Koné recounted.

Mercenaries

In a UN expert panel report earlier this month, Ghanaian officials said that Côte d'Ivoire had sent hit squads to abduct or kill pro-Gbagbo exiles and that the authorities had thwarted two such attempts.

The report also added that exiles in Ghana had allegedly hired Liberian mercenaries to carry out attacks in Côte d'Ivoire, and that Ivorian officials allegedly paid millions of francs to the mercenaries to call off the attacks.

But Ivoirian authorities denied the claims. "We don't give credit to what was reported. We don't operate that way, and we are waiting for more information on the report," government spokesman Bruno Nabagné Koné told reporters.

UNHCR's Encontre pointed out that such "reports and information, if not verified, can discourage some refugees from returning home. It is important that all the parties involved act in good faith and show commitment to the repatriation process as well as the true picture of what is happening on the ground."

In late November, UNHCR, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire authorities held a meeting in Abidjan to encourage returns.

"We decided to intensify our 'come-and-tell visits' campaigns in Ghana to better inform the refugees about the situation in their home country, with the focus being on security, traditional justice, land disputes, among others, as well as the reintegration and disarmament progress," said Encontre, noting that only comprehensive security sector reform and a disarmament and reintegration process would improve security.

Disarmament and reconciliation

Côte d'Ivoire is slowly recovering from the devastation of the disputed 2010 polls. Recently, for the first time since the conflict, Ouattara's and Gbagbo's party members met for talks. Still, the two sides remain at odds over reconciliation.

Gbagbo's party wants a national dialogue to discuss the issue of nationality, the 2010 polls, security and land disputes, among other concerns, but the government says that a national dialogue is not necessary, pointing out that it has invited its adversaries to be part of the government, but that Gbagbo's party rejected the overture.

Ouattara's call for ex-soldiers exiled in Ghana and other neighbouring countries to return home by 30 November or be dismissed was largely unheeded, with only one officer and two junior officers returning from Togo. Some exiled soldiers say they want a general pardon and the lifting of an asset freeze before they will return.

According to the UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire, which supports the disarmament process, 1,437 ex-fighters were disarmed in November in Abidjan, and hundreds of weapons and munitions were surrendered.

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