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Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

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SIERRA LEONE:**UPDATE ON COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION****1. Overall developments**

The peace process in Sierra Leone is being consolidated, with the Sierra Leone government officially declaring the end of the civil war on 18 January 2002, following the completion of the disarmament and demobilisation process. The curfew was lifted and checkpoints dismantled. In late February the State of Emergency was lifted, paving the way for presidential and parliamentary elections on 14 May. Some 2,276,500 Sierra Leoneans have registered to vote (compared to 1,500,000 in 1996). 23 political parties and 7 presidential candidates are contesting the elections, including the Revolutionary United Front Party (formerly the rebel movement, Revolutionary United Front).

2. Facilitated voluntary repatriation operation

UNHCR continues to facilitate voluntary repatriation and has not yet begun promoting voluntary repatriation. The facilitated repatriation operations from Guinea and Liberia began in December 2000 and February 2002 respectively as emergency operations akin to evacuations, due to the deterioration of security in these countries of asylum. They have since stabilised into more normalised voluntary repatriation operations in safety and dignity, although the situation in Liberia continues to remain precarious. Facilitated repatriation has also begun from other countries of asylum in West Africa. Under the facilitated voluntary repatriation policy, UNHCR assists refugees who have made free and informed decisions to return.

3. Plans for promotion of voluntary repatriation

Following the elections, UNHCR will make an assessment of when to move to the promoted voluntary repatriation phase. Two main criteria from the Sierra Leone Voluntary Repatriation Plan of Operation remain to be met before UNHCR will begin to promote voluntary repatriation. The first concerns stability after free and fair elections. The second is for the entire country to be safe for resettlement of IDPs, so that returnees can go directly to home areas instead of temporary sites.

4. Safety of areas for resettlement of IDPs and returnees

The Sierra Leone government has developed a "Resettlement Strategy" which provides for the determination of the safety of the country on a chiefdom by chiefdom basis. Declarations of safety are made by an inter-agency National Resettlement Assessment Committee, which reviews recommendations made by District Resettlement Assessment Committees. UNHCR is a member at both the national and district levels, with the latter dependent upon our presence in the concerned district. Criteria set out in the "Resettlement Strategy" are used to review the security situation in the chiefdom.

To date all chiefdoms in 12 out of the 13 districts (i.e. 95% of chiefdoms) have been declared safe by the National Resettlement Assessment Committee.

Kailahun District (area of origin of 38% of Sierra Leonean refugees and displaced returnees) is the one district in which only 6 out of the 14 chiefdoms have met the criteria for safety. Issues of concern in this area involve the volatile nature of the border with Liberia and the effectiveness of the police to maintain law and order in an area of substantial RUF influence. It is also important to note that UNHCR has reserved the right in the Plan of Operation to make its own decisions on safety of chiefdoms with regards to assisted return to the chiefdom of origin. We have exercised this prerogative in various chiefdoms in the Kono District (area of origin of 22% of Sierra Leonean refugees and displaced returnees), where we continue to monitor the effectiveness of the police in maintaining law and order and the restoration of district and local administration.

5. Disarmament

Disarmament has been completed throughout the country, with a total of 75,000 combatants (167% of the planned figure) undergoing the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme. Overall the process went relatively smoothly and was completed much quicker than most anticipated. The main interruption of the process was in Kailahun District, which has been the strong hold of the RUF. Here the process did not start as planned and at one time was disrupted. However, these issues were resolved and disarmament was completed in Kailahun in the first part of 2002.

In April 2002 a UN team came to assess the success of the disarmament process; we are presently awaiting feedback on their assessment. Please also note that actions are being taken to collect arms, which were not turned in during disarmament. Following the completion of disarmament, the police began a community arms collection exercise to collect weapons. Upon completion of this exercise, cordon and searches are to be conducted and individuals illegally possessing arms will be held accountable under the law.

These activities also need to be assessed in view of valid suspicions that many former fighters have crossed over into Liberia with their arms. The crisis in Liberia is and has historically been a significant factor for stability in Sierra Leone. With the continuing instability in Liberia, one needs to exercise caution when assessing the peace process in Sierra Leone. This is further supported by Amnesty International, which has recently documented the recruitment of former RUF fighters into the rebel forces in Liberia. Thus the potential for renewed fighting in Sierra Leone remains a possibility. With the continued presence of UNAMSIL peace-keepers, this currently seems slight but it still cannot be ruled out in the future, especially when UNAMSIL troops are withdrawn (likely by 2003).

6. Re-establishment of government authority

As implied above, the RUFP is no longer controlling parts of the country. (Until disarmament, most of the country - especially areas of origin of refugees - was under RUF control.)

The entire country is now nominally under government authority, which is gradually being re-instated. The political will is strong but enormous challenges remain to be surmounted for civil authority to be restored.

Logistical means at the government's disposal are also limited and impede their effectiveness. Of particular concern to UNHCR has been the ability of the police to maintain law and order in main areas of return. Not only is their level of presence inadequate, they also face serious mobility and communication constraints. This is further compounded by the non-existence of the judiciary system in the majority of the country.

7. Humanitarian situation in main areas of origin

The level of destruction in the main areas of origin (the districts of Kono and Kailahun) is vast and significantly hinders the return of civil servants and the re-establishment of their offices. The humanitarian situation in these areas is very serious, with lack of adequate basic services such as water and sanitation, health care and education to keep pace with large-scale spontaneous return.

Mass influxes of Liberian refugees into Kailahun is also exacerbating the competition for scarce resources. Because of the insecurity in border areas of Kailahun, UNHCR and partner agencies in their assistance programmes still have to tread a fine line between providing sufficient community-based humanitarian assistance to relieve suffering while trying to ensure that such assistance does not become a pull factor for refugees to remain in these insecure areas.

Two of the worst affected districts in Sierra Leone during the war were Kono and Kailahun. With much of the fighting and rebel occupation concentrated in these two areas, which were the last districts to disarm¹, population displacement has been massive – producing 60% of all Sierra Leonean refugees². Infrastructural damage and general deterioration from neglect was also enormous. For example, in Kono over 90% of schools were severely damaged or destroyed, along with 50% of health centres and 90% of all water and sanitation facilities³.

	Pre-war population ⁴ (indicative expected)	Expected returns (IDPs)	Expected returnees (refugees)	Expected return (refugees/ IDPs)	% of SL refugee caseload in sub-region
Kailahun	341,000	38,130	51,929	90,059	38%
Kono	499,000	24,758	29,829	54,587	22%

It should also be noted that although war-time destruction was colossal, populations in these areas were in many ways marginalised and suffering for decades before. Apart from a few urban centres where resources were concentrated, the districts were particularly impoverished and under-developed. The Ministry of Health and Sanitation estimates that out of required Peripheral Health Units there were only 7% functioning in Kono and 18% in Kailahun in 1991. Later post-war studies such as Sierra Leone's Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (May 2000) also show alarming trends in health and welfare - 9% level of malnutrition to wasting level in the Eastern Province (Kono, Kailahun and Kenema) with a general 20% level of literacy.

In order to arrive in time for the planting season (May), to register for elections (April), to reclaim land and property, to escape insecurity in countries of asylum and just to get on with a more hopeful life, returnees and IDPs are coming back in their thousands to towns and villages where little is available in the way of basic services. For returnees, the major immediate reasons for flight – war and insecurity – are being addressed and prospects for return are good, although, arguably, addressing the root causes of the war need further attention in order to avert a return of the situation to 'pre-war' status.

In response to the situation described above, UNHCR and other humanitarian actors in Sierra Leone are undertaking an exercise of re-prioritisation of activities. Through many sectors medium-term objectives of sustainability are being put aside and the focus again turning to short-term, quick-fix interventions. School projects are again focusing on temporary

¹ Kono in November 2001, Kailahun in January 2002.

² As registered by UNHCR. Does not include spontaneous estimates.

³ National Recovery Committee District Assessment Nov. 2001 Similar figures believed to be resulting from Kailahun but report not yet produced.

⁴ Central Statistics Office (CSO) projections August 2001

rehabilitation and water and sanitation agencies are gearing up with emergency type measures. Emphasis is placed on involving populations and giving them the responsibility to choose how resources are used. The current dilemma is perhaps how best to respond quick enough with the limited resources available in a way that is non-contradictory to future development and sustainable peace.

8. Current human rights situation

No grave breaches of international humanitarian law and human rights have been reported in 2002. However, with renewed access to formerly RUF-controlled parts of the country, human rights groups have discovered the existence of mass graves in Port Loko, torture houses in Kailahun and Kono and further evidence of large-scale amputations and abuse. The United Nations and the government of Sierra Leone have signed an agreement for the establishment of the Special Court, which came into effect in April 2002 and is expected to become operational in late 2002, in order to try those most responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. An interim secretariat has been established for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in order to deal with lesser crimes and promote reconciliation between survivors and perpetrators. Although serious human rights abuses are no longer common, in formerly RUF controlled areas where the government is still in the process of re-establishing authority, ex-combatants continue to exercise influence, with many abducted girls who were forced into marriage not yet released and recent reports of the RUF issuing arrest warrants and levying customs duties.

9. Return of rejected asylum seekers

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 should continue to refrain from returning rejected Sierra Leonean asylum seekers to their country of origin until UNHCR begins to promote voluntary repatriation. Provided durable peace and stability prevail after the elections, UNHCR will announce the date for commencement of promoted voluntary repatriation, likely after the rainy season in late 2002.

UNHCR Freetown, Sierra Leone
6 May 2002

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