

Sierra Leone (44)

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COUNTRY REPORT: Sierra Leone

2002

More than 185,000 Sierra Leoneans were refugees and asylum seekers at the end of 2001. These included approximately 100,000 in Guinea, at least 60,000 in Liberia, about 10,000 in Gambia, some 2,000 in Nigeria, about 2,000 in Ghana, more than 2,000 in Côte d'Ivoire, nearly 2,000 in Mali, an estimated 1,000 in various other African countries, and some 8,000 new asylum seekers in Western industrialized countries.

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An estimated 600,000 or more Sierra Leoneans remained internally displaced. Tens of thousands of displaced persons returned to their homes during the year, while an estimated 80,000 Sierra Leonean refugees repatriated.

About 15,000 refugees from Liberia lived in Sierra Leone at the end of 2001, including nearly 10,000 new arrivals during the year.

Pre-2001 Events An armed insurgency since 1991 has left tens of thousands of civilians dead and triggered massive human rights abuses by combatants on all sides, particularly by rebels known as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The rebels gained international notoriety for their practice of cutting off civilians' hands and ears.

Peacekeeping troops from West African countries entered Sierra Leone in the mid-1990s but were unable to stop the violence. Rebels and former government soldiers captured two-thirds of the capital, Freetown, in early 1999 before West African peacekeeping troops pushed them out. RUF rebel forces continued to hold about half the country, including lucrative diamond mines in the

country's eastern region.

Although earlier peace accords had failed to halt the fighting permanently, all sides agreed to a UN-brokered power-sharing agreement in mid-1999 known as the Lome Accord. The agreement granted amnesty for rebel atrocities and elevated RUF's leader to the vice presidency. The accord also called for the release of all abductees, the disarmament of some 45,000 combatants, and the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

UN peacekeeping troops entered the country to enforce the new agreement and quickly encountered ambushes by rebel forces, which took some 360 UN peacekeeping soldiers hostage and killed 11. Thousands of disarmed former combatants took up weapons, and the war resumed. Troops from the United Kingdom arrived to defend Freetown and to support military action against RUF.

The Sierra Leonean government and RUF rebels agreed to a cease-fire in November 2000. When rebel troops used the cease-fire to launch attacks into neighboring Guinea, the Guinean government retaliated by mounting a military offensive into rebel-held areas of Sierra Leone in the final weeks of 2000, reportedly causing enormous damage in border areas.

The renewed violence during 2000 forced an estimated 200,000 Sierra Leoneans to flee their homes, adding to hundreds of thousands of others uprooted in previous years. By the end of 2000, estimates of the total number of uprooted Sierra Leoneans varied enormously, from 900,000 to as many as 2 million.

2001 Politics and Violence The year began with heavy military clashes and ended with a renewed cease-fire and extensive disarmament by RUF rebels and pro-government militia.

RUF rebels suffered military setbacks in early 2001, enabling UN peacekeeping troops to deploy gradually deeper into RUF territory by mid-year. Rebel leaders and the government signed a new cease-fire agreement in May. Disarmament of combatants gained momentum in some areas, and the Sierra Leone-Guinea border reopened.

“Security concerns are still paramount in large areas of the country,” UN officials declared in June. Pockets of fighting between rebels and pro-government militia erupted in July, accompanied by atrocities against civilians. A UN report warned that “large-scale violence against women [was] found to be pervasive in Sierra Leone and...remains a source of major concern.”

The UN peacekeeping force gradually expanded from 10,000 troops to its authorized level of 17,000 soldiers and cautiously deployed into strategic diamond-mining areas in the heart of rebel territory. Isolated attacks and atrocities by RUF and pro-government militia occurred late in the year, but failed to derail the peace process. RUF released nearly 4,000 child soldiers.

Some 45,000 combatants had disarmed by year's end, according to official UN statistics. Programs to demobilize soldiers and prepare them for normal civilian life lacked full funding from the international community, however. The UN Security Council authorized preparations for eventual establishment of a Special Court for Sierra Leone to bring major human rights violators to justice.

As 2001 ended, Sierra Leoneans began to prepare for national elections in 2002. “The repatriation of refugees and the resettlement of displaced persons [are] essential to...credible elections,” a national pre-election conference concluded.

A report by the UN secretary general in December warned that “continued vigilance” was needed to ensure that the peace process remained on track.

Internally Displaced Persons At least 600,000 Sierra Leoneans were displaced within their own country at the end of 2001. Some sources estimated the number as high as 1.3 million.

The size of the displaced population was uncertain because extensive rebel-controlled areas of the country had been inaccessible to international relief agencies for many years. Many uprooted families lived without outside help and never registered with government officials or aid organizations. The vast majority of displaced Sierra Leoneans had lived an uprooted existence for many years.

"The refugee and internally displaced person crisis [in Sierra Leone]...is one of the most serious humanitarian and political crises facing the international community today," the UN secretary general reported.

The country's problem of population displacement was particularly complex during 2001. Military clashes early in the year forced thousands of residents to flee from border areas in the west. An estimated 70,000 Sierra Leonean refugees repatriated under duress from Guinea and Liberia because of violence in those countries, yet many of them immediately became internally displaced in their home country because they were unable to return safely to their farms and villages. (See Repatriation to Sierra Leone below.)

Relief efforts struggled to keep pace with the demand for temporary shelters. Overcrowded displacement sites bred poor health conditions, particularly water-borne diseases, and a health survey of displaced populations early in the year discovered abnormally high death rates among infants.

Sierra Leonean authorities and aid agencies attempted to disperse displaced families from overcrowded sites. As security improved during the second half of the year, officials redoubled efforts to transport displaced persons to their homes when the government declared their home areas to be safe. (See Reintegration Conditions below.) Many displaced families refused to return to their homes regardless of government assurances, however.

Authorities also transferred thousands of uprooted people away from urban areas and into specially designated "host communities" that agreed to give houses and farmland to displaced families in exchange for community-development assistance. Relief workers expressed concern that some communities selected to host displaced people were unable to absorb the added population.

Despite these efforts to ease the impact of assisting the country's large uprooted population, vast numbers of internally displaced persons remained in urban areas or in crowded

displacement sites. In some cases, relief workers cut food distributions to displaced families to push them to return home or transfer to less-crowded sites.

By year's end, about 130,000 internally displaced persons lived in 19 official camps, while an additional 120,000 displaced people reportedly lived in designated host communities. Vast numbers of other displaced persons lived on their own, unregistered and uncounted.

Repatriation to Sierra Leone The unexpected repatriation of some 80,000 refugees into a country destabilized by war and widespread internal displacement created a difficult challenge during 2001.

"The context in which refugees are returning could not be worse," a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs concluded in March.

Although the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) judged Sierra Leone to be unsafe and unprepared to absorb large numbers of returnees, about 30,000 refugees returned from Guinea as part of an organized repatriation program meant to help refugees escape hostilities in Guinea. An estimated 50,000 or more refugees repatriated spontaneously, without assistance, from Guinea and Liberia.

In early 2001, UNHCR considered the option of arranging "safe corridors" through RUF areas to repatriate Sierra Leonean refugees seeking to leave Guinea. After intense opposition to the plan by international relief organizations, UNHCR dropped the strategy. Instead, up to half of all returnees repatriated by boat along the coast of West Africa.

About 80 percent of all registered returnees immediately became internally displaced in Sierra Leone because they could not reach their homes safely, according to a UN estimate. Returnees typically had six choices: some settled in existing camps for displaced persons; thousands lived in transit centers; tens of thousands moved into host communities or "settlement sites" designated by the government; some found shelter with friends or relatives; some returned to their homes in safe areas; and an unknown number chose to go home

to rebel-controlled territory.

Aid agencies established three transit centers near Freetown where up to 8,000 returnees at a time were supposed to stay for a short period before continuing to other destinations. Many returnees refused to leave the transit centers, however, because the centers offered reliable services and proximity to economic opportunities in Freetown.

“The capacity of transit centers in the Freetown area has reached saturation point, and many returnees are reluctant to move on, thereby obstructing the admission of new arrivals,” a UN report complained.

The government, after negotiations with local chieftains, temporarily settled about 15,000 returnees in 30 northern villages and placed 6,000 returnees in 20 southern villages by mid-year. By year’s end, more than 40,000 returnees temporarily resided in designated host communities or transit centers.

The struggle to find temporary shelter for returnees slowed progress on long-term reintegration projects. UNHCR warned that “massive reconstruction is required” and expressed alarm that large-scale returns to unprepared communities might bring “pre-existing tensions to a boil.”

UNHCR opened five new offices in returnee areas and appealed to international donors for a nine-fold increase in its budget for Sierra Leone, to \$18 million, to carry out community-based reintegration programs such as construction of schools and health clinics, and road repairs.

Reintegration Conditions A UN report in late 2001 cautioned that “the return to normalcy will not be accomplished quickly” in Sierra Leone. An annual UN study ranked Sierra Leone as the world’s least-developed country, and nearly a decade of warfare and isolation had left many areas in ruins.

Humanitarian workers conducted preliminary assessments of western and eastern regions previously controlled by RUF rebels. One assessment mission reported “massive destruction of almost all the villages” in one area and “deplorable” water and sanitation conditions.

World Vision found that nearly 90 percent of all buildings were damaged or destroyed in eastern Sierra Leone's Kono District.

An assessment of 135 rural villages by CARE found 2,600 of 3,200 houses "completely destroyed." CARE also found that two-thirds of the destroyed homes in those villages were under reconstruction—a sign that reintegration was underway. Some 40,000 displaced persons accepted transportation in trucks and buses to return to home areas declared safe by the government, receiving a two-month food supply and other nonfood items. The government formed a National Recovery Committee.

UN health workers estimated that 60 percent of the country's health clinics did not function because of damage, lack of medicines, or because medical personnel had fled. Massive population displacement in rural areas meant that crop yields were expected to supply only 30 percent of the country's food needs. Refugees International warned that many uprooted single women would probably encounter problems reclaiming their land because of local property laws and customs.

UN humanitarian agencies urged international donors to provide \$20 million to support aid and initial recovery efforts in Sierra Leone.

Refugees from Liberia A two-year registration program determined that 7,000 Liberian refugees lived in Sierra Leone in early 2001. Most had fled to Sierra Leone during the early 1990s because of civil war in their own country.

UNHCR concluded that about 45 percent of the long-term refugees could probably return home without persecution, but the agency's repatriation program in Liberia was suspended because of general poor security there. UNHCR determined that 50 percent of the refugees had a legitimate fear of persecution and were likely to remain in Sierra Leone for the long term.

About 1,500 refugees were considered to be candidates for naturalization in Sierra Leone, while about 500 refugees were candidates for eventual international resettlement, according to UNHCR.

Nearly 5,000 new refugees fleeing widening

violence in Liberia arrived in government-held areas of Sierra Leone during 2001. Thousands of additional refugees were believed to have fled into rebel-controlled territory. Some refugees reportedly traveled through Sierra Leone's border region for several days on their way to safer areas of Liberia.

About 2,000 new Liberian refugees settled into temporary sites housing Sierra Leonean returnees. UNHCR began to build a new camp with a 10,000-person capacity in eastern Sierra Leone's Kenema District to accommodate the refugee influx.

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