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AFRICA Fact Sheet

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

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INTRODUCTION

As of January 1999, there were 6.5 million people of concern to UNHCR in Africa, out of an estimated 21.1 million worldwide. The Africa figure includes 3.3 million refugees, 2.1 million internally displaced and 1.1 million former refugees who have recently returned home. In January 1998, the global number of people of concern to UNHCR was 22.3 million, of whom 7.2 million were in Africa.

Among the 10 largest return movements in 1998, seven were to African countries. These were: Liberia

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Sierra Leone	193,800
DRC	62,400
Somalia	48,100
Mali	27,000
Burundi	23,600
Angola	21,800

Top 5 African refugee countries of origin:

Sierra Leone	410,900
Somalia	401,300
Sudan	372,900
Eritrea	342,300
Burundi	299,400 <i>(this does not include 200,000 Burundi who have been in Tanzania since the 1970's and who are not assisted by UNHCR)</i>

Top 4 refugee-hosting countries in Africa:

Guinea	413,700
Sudan	391,500
Tanzania	343,900 <i>(does not include 200,000 unassisted Burundi from the early 1970's)</i>
Ethiopia	262,000

West Africa

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata traveled to the region in February for a first-hand look at the refugee crises which have dominated the region during much of the decade. Her mission began in **Guinea**, which presently hosts more than 400,000 refugees from its two war-torn neighbors, Liberia and Sierra Leone. There, leaders told Mrs. Ogata that the country is feeling the strain of this hospitality. They said they worry about the damage caused to the environment and expressed concern about a rise in cross-border attacks on villages and refugee camps near the frontier with Sierra Leone.

The High Commissioner traveled to Freetown, the **Sierra Leonean** capital which was overrun in January by Revolutionary United Front rebels and retaken by West African peace keeping troops only after several weeks of intense fighting. Mrs. Ogata visited dozens of victims of rebel mutilations in the capital's main hospital. In discussions with President Kabbah, she said that UNHCR would not be able to promote repatriation to Sierra Leone until stability returned to the country and aid staff could regain access to areas outside of main towns.

REVERSE

Liberian refugees continue to return home. By the end of May, more than 109,000 had repatriated with UNHCR's assistance and almost twice that number were believed to have gone home under their own power. In contrast to Sierra Leonean exiles, who greeted the High Commissioner with loud chants for peace at home, Liberian refugees spoke more warily about return, concerned about finding jobs and rebuilding homes after as many as seven years in exile.

Closing her trip in **Côte d'Ivoire**, which has for years hosted Liberian exiles, the High Commissioner repeated her gratitude to the countries which continue to shelter large numbers of refugees. She called attention to the need for international support for the reconstruction process, both through programs to help refugees when they have returned home, and initiatives to rehabilitate areas which have taken in refugees for years.

In other news in the region, UNHCR has confirmed to authorities and operational partners its plan to wind down its Liberian repatriation operation by June 2000. UNHCR decided to promote repatriation to the country at the end of September 1997, when around 480,000 Liberians were refugees in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea. Convoys will operate until the end of December 1999; by that point, Liberians in all the countries of asylum will have had the chance to return home with assistance. The agency will continue reconstruction projects in Liberia itself for another six months.

The number of Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea and Liberia has remained largely unchanged despite the siege of Freetown in January. Together, the neighbors host approximately 405,000 refugees--300,000 in Guinea and 105,000 in Liberia.

UNHCR is participating in the cease-fire discussions between President Kabbah and the RUF, on humanitarian issues. One of the most immediate concerns is to regain access throughout the country for humanitarian workers. Despite ECOMOG's presence in Freetown and several other towns, many reports are reaching aid workers of continuing violence and attacks targetting civilians in the countryside. A first agreement, signed May 18 by the warring parties, provided for such 'safe and unhindered' passage.

Rebels from the RUF have carried their campaign of terror over the border, raiding villages and nearby refugee camps in Guinea. To improve security UNHCR began the transfer on April 12 of around 50,000 Sierra Leonean refugees from vulnerable camps near Gueckedou to sites further from the frontier. By mid-May, almost 10,000 refugees had been moved and two sites closed. Transfers are hampered by poor road conditions and the short supply of trucks.

Refugee camps and villages in the Forecariah area were repeatedly raided in April and May, prompting UNHCR to approach authorities there, too, about shifting camps. An agreement was reached in early May to move 30,000 refugees from seven sites.

In **Guinea-Bissau**, the stand-off between President Vieira and the military junta again came to a head on May 6. Calm returned to the capital after two days of artillery and automatic weapons fire. No new refugees were reported in neighboring countries.

During the conflict between the two groups in 1998, up to 400,000 people were displaced within the country. Several thousand residents also fled the country, and UNHCR is still caring for around 900 refugees in Senegal, 720 in the Gambia, 600 in Cape Verde and 1,800 in Guinea (Conakry). UNHCR is hoping to begin repatriating volunteers before general elections currently scheduled for the end of November.

East Africa and the Horn

On March 12, UNHCR and officials in **northwest Somalia** agreed to restart the repatriation of refugees from Ethiopia. Hargeisa had suspended the return operation in November of last year after almost 60,000 refugees

had come home from camps in Jijiga since late 1997. Despite the agreement, however, the operation is still stalled. An eventual take-off now hinges on procedures for absorbing returnees and administering program funds.

The 1999 operation is to begin from Hartisheik camp in northeast **Ethiopia**. 10,000 Somalis are expected to repatriate from there with another 15,000 following in subsequent months from six other sites. Over 40% of the returnees will go back to the cities of Hargeisa, Boroma and Burao. UNHCR has warned authorities that if the repatriation does not resume during June, Hargeisa staff will have to be used elsewhere.

Hostilities between Ethiopia and **Eritrea** flared up again in February of this year, resulting in large-scale displacement of local populations in both countries. U.N. agencies in Asmara have appealed for \$31 million to aid 350,000 affected Eritreans. An estimated 300,000 Ethiopians have also been forced from their homes. No solution to the conflict has been found despite numerous mediation attempts by the OAU, the U.N. and individual states.

Civil disturbances in the El-Geneina region of **Sudan**, similar to incidents witnessed in 1998, brought more than 14,500 refugees in late February to **Chad**. A UNHCR team dispatched to Adre, on the eastern border with Sudan, found that the majority of the group were women and children. Many were able to flee with livestock.

The recent arrivals have settled in the same area as the approximately 10,000 Sudanese refugees who crossed last year during ethnic clashes. UNHCR made deliveries of food, seeds and agricultural tools and the group has since been able to provide most of its own food. With this year's influx, UNHCR has sent two additional staff members to Chad.

Several repatriations are likely to take place in east Africa during the second half of 1999. Among them, a movement of Ethiopians from **Kenya** — 1,470 refugees in Dadaab camps have so far registered — and conversely, of Kenyans from Ethiopia. Around 5,000 Kenyans from the Wajir district have been refugees in Ethiopia for four to five years: many are now asking for help to go home and they are scheduled to repatriate by the end of October.

The Great Lakes Region

Between January and April around 14,000 **Rwandans** returned to the northwest of the country from North Kivu, in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, according to Rwandan authorities, who indicated that several thousand more could follow. The returnees told UNHCR in Rwanda that they left the country during 1994 and in subsequent rounds of violence in 1996 and 1997. They said local officials in eastern DRC have warned them to go back home, and that the relative calm which now prevails in northwest Rwanda has encouraged them to do so. Rebel authorities in the DRC have warned of renewed military sweeps in the area.

UNHCR staff in Gisenyi have helped the returnees to go back to their communes of origin and have distributed blankets, plastic sheeting and other material to the groups. UNHCR has been asked to establish additional transit facilities and to assist with transportation on both sides of the border.

In early May, UNHCR reopened its office in Goma, in rebel-held North Kivu. One international staff member was sent to North Kivu with another to follow. The office in Bukavu, in South Kivu, is also likely to be reopened. One of the aims of the staff will be to monitor the situation of Rwandans who remain in the area.

The stream of Congolese from eastern DRC to **Tanzania** is perhaps the most regular flow of refugees anywhere on the continent at present. Almost daily since August of last year, boats have ferried hundreds of refugees away from the conflict opposing Kinshasa and rebels to the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika. Refugees are paying boat owners for passage.

The number of new Congolese refugees had quietly reached 62,000 by the end of May. Arrivals are generally in good health but consistently say that they are caught in the middle of ongoing skirmishes. A U.N. mission to South Kivu in March confirmed the refugees' accounts of destroyed villages and massive population displacement.

The DRC has simultaneously become an asylum country for refugees from **Angola** and the **Republic of Congo**, where civil conflict has pushed tens of thousands of people to the relative safety of DRC's western Bas Congo province.

Fighting which began in late 1998 in Congo's Pool region, southwest of Brazzaville, pitting government forces against the Ninja militia (who support the former prime minister), has caused an estimated 35,000 refugees to flee south to the DRC. UNHCR set up a camp for the new arrivals at Luozi in April, but the majority of the refugees have elected to remain in villages near the border. Refugees told UNHCR that thousands of Pool residents were being held hostage by the Ninja, who use them as protection and labor.

In April, after being petitioned by refugees to help in their return, UNHCR signed an agreement with the governments of the two Congos to provide transport for those wanting to repatriate. UNHCR emphasized that it could not encourage repatriation to the Republic of Congo at this time. But by helping people wanting to go home, they would be able to bypass the still-dangerous Pool region by travelling first to Kinshasa by rail, and from there to Brazzaville by boat. UNHCR moved 5,000 Congolese from the Bas Congo in this way during April and May.

Despite tension at the border and ongoing peace talks in Arusha, hundreds of **Burundi** refugees are repatriating each week from Tanzania. Between January and April, 4,978 Burundi repatriated. Former residents of the eastern provinces of Muyinga, Ruyigi, Rutana and Cankuzo have felt secure in going home, even while clashes between rebels and the army further to the south intensified. A tripartite meeting on the repatriation planned for late March was postponed after Bujumbura sent Dar es Salaam a *note verbale* on the clashes.

Southern Africa

In another effect of the war in the DRC, UNHCR staff in **Zambia** have remained on alert for a large influx of Congolese since registering the first arriving refugees in early March. More than 25,000 refugees crossed into Zambia in the six weeks that followed.

About 11,000 have been transferred to a camp 200 kms from the border. Most of these said they had left their home villages in South Kivu months before, and had been driven progressively south by the advancing front line. The balance, from towns much closer to the border, have preferred to shelter with Zambian villagers, in hopes of returning quickly.

A long-anticipated rebel attack on the larger DRC town of Pweto has UNHCR and NGOs stockpiling food and emergency material in the vicinity. A second transit center has been readied for possible new arrivals.

Angola's backslide into full-blown civil war has continued. UNITA rebels have laid siege to major towns like Kuito and Malange, and the number of people forced to take to the roads in search of safety has reached the 1.5 million mark. With most of the country cut off from assistance, only 385,000 of the those displaced by the fighting are getting any international aid.

In the north of the country government forces recaptured the town of Mbanza Congo after losing it a month earlier to UNITA. Local authorities have told UNHCR that almost 6,500 of an estimated 20,000 Angolans who had fled to the DRC in late January, along with 15,000 displaced people, have since returned. Although

Mbanza Congo is one of eight offices UNHCR was forced to evacuate as the war swept through the provinces, staff are working to ensure that the Angolans will receive some desperately needed help on their return.

Botswana, Namibia and UNHCR's regional office for Southern Africa signed a tripartite communique on 25 May for the voluntary return of Namibian refugees from Botswana. Around 2,500 Namibians from the Caprivi Strip sought safety in Botswana beginning in October of last year. The group, which included armed elements and secessionist leaders, have been granted asylum by Botswana.

The accord provides for a general amnesty to all those who repatriate. UNHCR, which has reopened an office in Gaborone, is to have unhindered access to the refugees, and will make certain that all returns are voluntary. UNHCR staff in Namibia will monitor the welfare of returnees — a first repatriation convoy with 61 Namibians on board left the Dukwe refugee settlement on May 25.

UNHCR and **South African** NGOs have launched a campaign to combat xenophobia in the country. Prompting the effort were the results of a study co-authored by UNHCR and the country's Human Rights Commission and National Consortium on Refugee Affairs, which cites the killings of 30 refugees and asylum-seekers over the past two years. The public awareness campaign seeks to reverse the perception that refugees are illegal immigrants who take scarce jobs.

OTHER TOPICS

Africa Refugee Day

In her statement marking Africa Refugee Day on June 20, the High Commissioner urged governments and the public to renew their pledges to the 30-year-old OAU Refugee Convention, calling the document a model of generosity and wisdom. UNHCR is making the 30th anniversary the central theme of Africa Refugee Day activities this year.

The Convention — its full title is the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa — was signed on 10 September, 1969. The June 20 observance marks the date when the Convention entered into force five years later.

The Convention represented a significant contribution to international refugee law. Among the features it introduced were an extended refugee definition, the principle of voluntary repatriation, and the concept of burden sharing, whereby a nation experiencing difficulties in offering asylum to refugees can appeal to other member states for help.

In addition to the 34 states which initially adopted the Convention, many more have since signed on. UNHCR will be working throughout 1999 to promote its effective implementation.

OAU Commission visits refugee sites

The OAU's Commission on Refugees fielded visits to four countries on the front line of refugee crises. Delegations travelled to Angola, the DRC, Tanzania and Zambia in the first half of 1999 to look into solutions for uprooted populations and to demonstrate the solidarity embodied in the OAU Refugee Convention. The Commission also donated US \$75,000 to each of the countries' refugee programs. Members called for greater international support for nations shouldering the burden of an open-door policy for refugees.

Resettlement: pressure on quotas

Events during the first half of 1999, especially the massive exodus from Kosovo, have put resettlement places at a premium. With the continuing Humanitarian Evacuation Program for tens of thousands of Kosovar Albanian refugees, there is pressure on the resources of traditional resettlement countries.

Already, a majority of the resettlement places set aside each year for emergency cases have been used up. This may have a significant impact during the remainder of 1999, in instances when UNHCR needs to move a refugee quickly from a country of asylum. UNHCR has alerted its traditional resettlement partners to this concern.

During the first quarter of the year, 2,376 refugees were resettled from Africa to third countries. Over the same period last year the number was 1,468.

For 1999, the projected number of resettlement places for African refugees is around 14,000.

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