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Côte d'Ivoire: Liberian refugees caught between two conflicts: a solution is urgently needed

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On the eve of a visit by United Nations Security Council delegation to West Africa, and as fighting intensifies around Liberia's capital, Monrovia, Amnesty International urges the countries of the subregion and the international community to do everything possible to protect Liberian refugees and all others caught in the middle of these two conflicts.

In a document published today, *Côte d'Ivoire: No escape. Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire*, Amnesty International appeals to the international community to implement a humanitarian evacuation programme that includes resettlement in other countries for these refugees, who do not know which way to turn to.

At the beginning of April 2003 thousands of people who, a few weeks earlier, had sought refuge from the Côte d'Ivoire crisis by fleeing to Liberia, crossed the border in the opposite direction after increasingly violent clashes in the region where they had sought asylum. These hasty and panic-stricken displacements illustrate the situation of tens of thousands of people -- Liberian refugees, Côte d'Ivoire nationals and people from elsewhere in the subregion -- caught in the middle of two conflicts, one in West Côte d'Ivoire and one in East Liberia, and who do not know where to go to for effective protection.

The lives of some 70,000 Liberian refugees, who had successfully sought asylum in Côte d'Ivoire after the war broke out in Liberia in 1989, have been shattered by the crisis that has shaken the country since September 2002.

"The Liberian refugees are the victims of atrocities committed by various parties to the conflict, who loot their possessions and ill-treat them, and sometimes forcibly recruit them into their ranks, while at the same time accusing them of supporting their opponents; they cannot return to Liberia, where the situation gets worse every day; and no other neighbouring country seems disposed to welcome them, because they are often perceived as trouble-makers," Amnesty International said.

The document published today includes accounts made by many Liberian refugees an Amnesty International delegation met in Abidjan in March 2003. These accounts show why they feel they cannot escape from the situation they find themselves in. One Liberian refugee told the Amnesty International

delegation: "Many Liberians now feel that they would even prefer to be put out to sea on a boat than to remain in Côte d'Ivoire".

The situation of Liberian refugees is of particular concern in the west of Côte d'Ivoire, where most of these refugees live, and where they have for months been the victims often of forced recruitment by armed opposition groups and government forces alike.

"Refugees, especially those living in Abidjan, have been victims of harassment, humiliation and sometimes arrest. Members of the security forces and certain segments of the Côte d'Ivoire population, encouraged by some xenophobic media, consider them to be accomplices of the armed opposition groups that appeared in the west of the country at the end of November 2002," Amnesty International asserted.

Unable to remain safely in Côte d'Ivoire, tens of thousands of desperate Liberian refugees have returned to their own country despite the war that is raging there. In addition to these Liberians, tens of thousands of Côte d'Ivoire nationals and people from other countries of the subregion have also fled to Liberia. Figures published by the UNHCR in March 2003 showed that about 100,000 people had fled to Liberia since the beginning of the Côte d'Ivoire conflict, although many of them have been forced to return to Côte d'Ivoire.

In these circumstances, Amnesty International believes that these population movements represent *de facto* 'refoulement'. Even if the Côte d'Ivoire and Liberian authorities do not directly expel these refugees and the civilian population fleeing the war zones, it is nevertheless obvious that the conflict is forcing these people to go to regions where their security is under serious threat.

Amnesty International therefore reminds the international community of its duty to assume responsibility for finding a solution to this problem. A major concerted effort by the international community is indispensable, especially in relation to fundraising for humanitarian action in the field, if this crisis, in which hundreds of thousands of people have lost everything, is to be resolved.

Unfortunately, the international community has been slow to react, despite the efforts of the UNHCR, the World Food Programme and UNICEF. The United Nations has launched several appeals for funds, but the sums collected have, so far piled against the enormous needs created by one of the most serious current humanitarian crises.

Amnesty International appeals to the Côte d'Ivoire government and armed opposition groups operating in Côte d'Ivoire to immediately cease attacks on Liberian refugees.

The organization also urges the international community to urgently find a comprehensive and long term solution to the crisis that ensures the effective protection of Liberian refugees and others who cannot stay in the subregion and who should therefore be resettled elsewhere.

Background

The Liberian refugee problem is only one aspect of the serious humanitarian crisis that has shaken Côte d'Ivoire since the armed uprising of September 2002. The conflict has caused the massive displacement of civilians, who have fled from areas where fighting is taking place. Hundreds of thousands of people -- Côte d'Ivoire nationals as well as other people from the subregion, especially Burkina Faso, Mali and Guinea -- have had to leave their homes to escape the atrocities committed by all parties to the conflict. The number of people displaced within Côte d'Ivoire itself is more than one and a half million according to the Côte d'Ivoire authorities.

Since the September 2002 uprising, about 50,000 Mali citizens and 150,000 Burkina Faso citizens have fled to Mali and Burkina Faso where they face serious reintegration problems, despite the efforts made by the governments and civil society in these countries. It is, therefore, the entire subregion

that faces a very serious humanitarian crisis.

For the full text of the report, please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf310122003>

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