

SIERRA LEONE Liberian asylum-seekers aboard the Victory Reefer

Dozens of refugees from Liberia aboard the *Victory Reefer* have been refused entry to neighbouring Sierra Leone to seek asylum. About 41 asylum-seekers are reported to have been effectively forced to return to the Liberian capital, Monrovia, which they had fled almost two weeks earlier to escape escalating violence in Liberia's civil war.

The refusal by Sierra Leone means that the approximately 41 passengers are in danger of being forcibly returned to a situation where their lives may be in serious danger. There were reports last week of at least 18 people being killed in the streets of Monrovia, including unarmed civilians, and of captured fighters being tied up, mutilated and dismembered before being shot. Civilians face serious human rights abuses including deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture and ill-treatment.

Amnesty International is concerned that the Sierra Leone authorities have broken their commitments under international refugee law, including Conventions of both the Organization for African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations (UN), to allow all asylum-seekers access to their territory to have their claims to asylum assessed. The past practice of West African governments of giving asylum to large numbers of refugees from the Liberian conflict -- Sierra Leone already hosts 4,700 Liberian refugees, Côte d'Ivoire 305,000, Guinea 410,000, Ghana 15,000 and Nigeria 4,000 -- appears to have been reversed.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The *Victory Reefer* arrived in the Sierra Leone capital, Freetown, on 11 May with about 1,000 people on board fleeing war-torn Monrovia. The boat anchored outside the port for three days until it was given permission to dock on 14 May. About 900 Sierra Leoneans aboard, around 100 Liberians and a few Ghanaian and Guinean nationals were given permission to disembark. About 40 Liberians aboard, mainly women and children, were refused permission to disembark. According to one press report, a 12-year-old Sierra Leonean girl is still aboard the ship; when the girl's grandmother arrived to claim her she was told by the authorities that she was too late. (The Sierra Leoneans had previously fled Sierra Leone's own civil war which began in 1991 and had taken refuge in Monrovia which had been relatively unaffected by Liberia's civil war apart from brief periods in 1990 and 1992. With the announcement of a cease-fire this year, Sierra Leoneans have begun to return home).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed serious concern about Sierra Leone's decision. "It is most disappointing and distressing that people were not given a proper chance to present their cases", UNHCR country representative, Nini Akiwjumi, was quoted as saying.

Although the Sierra Leone authorities have not given reasons why the 40 Liberians were not allowed to land, they have in the past expressed fears that Sierra Leone's moves towards peace may be threatened if former armed fighters from Liberia are allowed in as refugees. According to another informant, Liberians with relatives in Sierra Leone on board the *Victory Reefer* were allowed to stay, but the 40 mainly women and children without relatives were turned away.

Sierra Leone's decision follows that of another of Liberia's neighbours, Côte d'Ivoire, on 15 May to close its doors to all refugees from the Liberian conflict, saying that the country could not cope with any more refugees. Another 2,000 people fleeing the Liberian conflict on board the *Bulk Challenge* had been refused entry on 9 May to Côte d'Ivoire and after three days of being shunted in and out of a Ghanaian port were finally allowed to land in Ghana to seek asylum on 14 May (see EXTRA 65/96, AFR 05/01/96, 14 May 1996, and update, AFR 05/02/96, 15 May).

Liberia's capital, Monrovia, has been the scene of sustained armed fighting between a number of armed factions over the past six weeks. Scores of people, including civilians, have died and tens of thousands of residents have had to seek temporary shelter in the compounds of foreign embassies. Although there is the possibility of a cease-fire in the next few days, there have been several very short-lived cease-fires in the past month and a half; last week a two-day cease-fire was broken by some of the most brutal fighting seen in the capital. News from other parts of the country indicates that hostilities in the civil war which began in 1989 have resumed elsewhere in the country and that nowhere can be deemed to be safe.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing grave concern that about 41 people aboard the *Victory Reefer* fleeing the Liberian conflict have been refused permission to land and seek asylum in Sierra Leone and have been forced to return to Monrovia where they may face grave human rights abuses;
- pointing out that the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, to which Sierra Leone is a party, states: "No person shall be subjected by a Member State to measures such as rejection at the frontier, return or expulsion, which would compel him to return to ... a territory where his life, physical integrity or liberty would be threatened";
- reminding the Sierra Leone authorities that Monrovia, and the rest of Liberia, are not safe and that civilians face deliberate and arbitrary killings, torture and ill-treatment. (if possible, say that last week there were reports of 18 deaths, including civilians, in the streets of Monrovia);
- Calling upon the authorities to rescind their decision and publicly invite the *Victory Reefer* to return to Sierra Leone;

if possible also:

- Say that although Sierra Leone has expressed concern in the past about the risk of armed fighters entering the country posing as refugees, Sierra Leone has a responsibility under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees to allow all asylum-seekers in so that their claims can be assessed and genuine refugees identified and protected;
- Express regret that despite Sierra Leone's history of giving protection to about 5,000 Liberian refugees, it is now denying asylum-seekers' human rights.

APPEALS TO:

- Mr Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, President of the Republic, State House, Independence Avenue, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Faxes: +232 22 22 5615

Telex: 3230

Telegrams: President Kabbah, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Salutation: Your Excellency

Mr Maigore Kallon, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation,
14 Gloucester Street, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Faxes: +232 22 22 5615

Telegrams: Minister Foreign Affairs, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Salutation: Dear Minister

Mr Kemoh Salia Gbow, Minister for Internal Affairs, Department of the Interior,
State Avenue, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Faxes: +232 22 22 5615

Telegrams: Minister Internal Affairs, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

The Editors of the following newspapers:

- *The New Citizen*, 5 Hannah Benka-Coker Street, Freetown, Sierra Leone
- *For di People*, 1 Short Street, Freetown, Sierra Leone
- *Expo Times*, 1 Short Street, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Diplomatic representatives of Sierra Leone accredited to your country.

Please bring this to the attention of the refugee coordinator in your section.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 20 June 1996.