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No Relief From War in African Refugee Camps

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NICLA REFUGEE CAMP, Ivory Coast — There is no sanctuary here. Across West Africa, the bleak settlements of people fleeing war have become military recruiting grounds.

With a spreading web of interrelated conflicts raging through the region, rebel and government forces alike have been drafting refugees to fill their ranks. The new recruits include refugees fleeing to foreign countries as well as those displaced within their own. Bored, hungry, impressionable teenagers appear to be among those in greatest demand.

On the outskirts of the Liberian capital, Monrovia, a camp for internally displaced people has been so plagued by the conscription campaign of government militias that residents recently created a neighborhood watch group, aid workers in the camp said. When the telltale pickup trucks of militia forces are seen approaching the camp, word is spread and young men are sent to hide in the woods.

In southeastern Guinea, one refugee camp has been visited so frequently by Liberian rebel recruiters that the United Nations high commissioner for refugees has been forced to start moving its 33,000 residents into a settlement about 250 miles away.

Here on the foul western frontier of Ivory Coast, in a camp absurdly nicknamed Peace Town, refugees testify to being trained at the nearby Ivoirian military barracks and then dispatched to the front line to battle Ivoirian rebels. Those who signed up have done so voluntarily, camp residents said, though several young men interviewed here said they were repeatedly harassed and beaten up for refusing. Apparently, no salaries were promised. One teenager said he was given a one-time bonus of \$50; he spent it buying food near the front line, because, as he said, he got hungry before meals were ready. Another said he was simply given license to loot.

"A hungry belly don't ask for a certain amount," said Peter Targ-blor, a Liberian refugee and a schoolteacher trying to lure young recruits back to Peace Town.

"I left to go join the soldiers only because of the hardship," said Jeremiah Koohn, 17, a refugee who left Liberia to escape his own government's conscription of children.

Certainly, on some occasions, say aid workers, United Nations officials and refugees themselves, it is a clear case of involuntary conscription. Other times, force is unnecessary. Guilt, threats and the lure of a slightly less wretched life can be enough. The ennui and frustration of refugees themselves can be among the recruiters' best tools.

Such bleak prospects explained the nonchalance of a young man like Emmanuel Bangbay, 17, a refugee who described how he agreed on New Year's Day to fight on behalf of Ivory Coast government forces. "No work to do," said Emmanuel, who lost his mother on his way here from war in his native Liberia. "All my friends, they joined. Myself, I joined, too."

The recruitment of refugees is forbidden by the guidelines of the United Nations refugee agency. But it is not a war crime prosecutable under the Geneva Convention. If it were, few governments and rebel forces in the region would be immune from prosecution. It is also one of the refugee agency's toughest challenges. By definition, these camps are supposed to be oases from violence. Its residents are supposed to be under United Nations protection.

Privately, United Nations refugee agency officials say they lack the means to protect all refugees from forced recruitment and the services to keep them from joining of their own volition. When they can, they say, they move refugees away from war zones. "I cannot accept that a camp be used as a base for recruitment," the high commissioner, Ruud Lubbers, said today in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, on the last day of an eight-day tour of refugee camps in five countries across West Africa. But the United Nations cannot stop men and women from voluntarily leaving a refugee camp for the front line. "It is a sanctuary from war, but it is difficult to make it a prison," Mr. Lubbers said.

It is doubly difficult when a government that accepts refugees, and is by law responsible for security in refugee camps, is itself implicated in the recruitment effort. Ivory Coast government forces, for instance, are responsible for policing around Peace Town. They are also accused of playing a part in the recruitment of its residents.

Publicly, Ivory Coast government officials deny drafting refugees for its seven-month-old war, saying only that some Liberians have volunteered to fight alongside those who sheltered them all these years. But Mr. Lubbers said recently that in a private meeting, at least one government minister pledged to bring the problem to an end.

Likewise, Liberian rebels accused of recruiting from inside refugee camps in neighboring Guinea have long enjoyed the blessings of the Guinean government. The problem has been especially acute in a camp known as Kouankan, in southeastern Guinea. By day and night, armed men linked to rebels have marched past the Guinean police and left with recruits as young as 15, United Nations officials in Guinea said.

For months the Guinean government, one of the chief beneficiaries of American military assistance in the region, denied any knowledge of the practice. Only after months of pressure from the United Nations and its donors did the government respond. It allowed for the refugees in Kouankan to be moved to a camp far from Liberian rebel strongholds. No one knows how many have already been conscripted from the camp. United Nations officials negotiated with rebels for the release of 10 refugees.

Still, the problem has hardly disappeared. Even last week, armed men paid a visit to Lainé, a camp of 20,000 Liberians deep in the Guinean forest. For the first time, a United Nations official said, they were rebuffed by Guinean government gendarmes. Guinea still denies links to the Liberian rebels: few, including Mr. Lubbers, find that credible.

Refugee camps in West Africa are not always safe havens. In some, jailbirds mingle with ordinary refugees, scheming for bags of rice and buckwheat. In others, young girls are prey to traffickers and rapists. Former combatants lurk in almost every camp, United Nations officials and private aid workers acknowledge, though by law they are supposed to be segregated from civilians. On the southern edge of Guinea, refugees from Ivory Coast say men wearing ski masks and carrying machetes raid their tents at night and haul off clothes and food.

Peace Town has found itself in the middle of a war zone. Sometimes, residents say, they are awakened by gunfire. Sometimes, a truck pulls up in broad daylight and young men climb on board and leave. Everyone knows they are going to fight. Many are never seen again.

A refugee named Dao Kamara, 28, recalls the latest recruitment drive. Barely a week before the high commissioner's visit to this camp, a handful of men, dressed in military uniforms, came in and started firing in the air. Children ran to check out the commotion. By the time the soldiers left, three children had tagged along with them. The youngest, Mr. Kamara said, was 10.

Emmanuel Bangbay did not need much forcing. Nor was he promised any money, only a chance to steal what he could, he said, as he and a crew of Liberian youngsters trained at the Ivoirian military barracks nearby were sent to charge at rebel lines and send civilians fleeing from their homes. "Myself, I can hustle for my own money," Emmanuel boasted. "I see cycle, I take."

On one looting spree, Emmanuel stole a bicycle and a sewing machine. He made some money. And then he came back. The government, he realized, had no money to pay him. Besides, a fellow Liberian teenager from this camp had been killed.

Jeremiah Koohn found himself in the mouth of the very beast he had tried to flee. Two years ago he left his mother behind and ran away from home in Monrovia. The Liberian government forces were "catching children," as he put it, and sending them to fight.

A few months ago, he found himself on a front line in Toulépleu. A friend from the camp had suggested that he join the war. He, too, was taken to the Ivoirian military barracks, shown how to fire a Kalashnikov rifle, toss a grenade and hide for cover when the bullets started flying. He was paid the equivalent of \$50.

In the end, his bad eyesight saved him. Jeremiah came home before he fired a single bullet, he said. He could not see where he was shooting.

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