

COTE D IVOIRE: Over 30,000 cross into Liberia and Guinea - UNHCR

ABIDJAN, 9 Dec 2002 (IRIN) - Continued fighting in western Cote d'Ivoire in the last week drove more than 30,000 people into neighbouring Liberia and Guinea and caused the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to lose contact with more than 45,000 refugees in that part of the country.

In a news release on Friday the agency said since fighting broke out last week in the western towns of Man and Danane at least 27,000 had fled into neighbouring Liberia through 12 border crossing points.

It noted, however, that more returnees of Liberian origin may have reached their final destinations without being officially registered.

"It certainly took us by surprise," Moses Okello UNHCR Representative in Liberia said. "Because our scenarios were based on the prevailing situation of one rebel movement taking up arms in Cote d'Ivoire and negotiating with the government. We could not have foreseen the emergence of new movements and new pockets of fighting as was seen last week in the west of the country," he added.

On 28 November two new rebel groups - Ivorian Popular Movement of the Great West (MPIGO) and the Movement for Peace and Justice (MPJ) captured the western towns of Man and Danane. In the successive two days they had captured Toulepleu and Touba in the same region, but government forces launched massive attacks to dislodge them particularly from Man and Toulepleu.

According UNHCR, most of those registered were Liberians escaping the violence, with more than 2,600 Ivorian nationals joining them. UNHCR in Liberia sent 23 trucks to the border area to move new arrivals to safety.

Most of the new arrivals, UNHCR said, were heading for eastern Liberia's counties of Nimba, Grand Gedeh and Bong. For others with nowhere to go, UNHCR would look for long term solutions.

The agency already set up three transit centres in Nimba and Grand Gedeh counties and was negotiating for a fourth one farther south in Mariland county.

"At this point, apart from providing essential water, health and shelter services, we are concentrating on our transport capacity," Okello said. "We also get many requests from people asking to be transported to Nimba and Lofa counties. Some are joining relatives in [the capital] Monrovia," he said.

Of the new arrivals there were those of mixed nationalities he noted. "We have 78 Sierra Leoneans who are being taken to Monrovia today [6 December] for repatriation, as well as 73 Guineans who will be assisted home. There are also small numbers of people of

other origins, such as Ghanaians, Nigerians and even two Americans who lived in the troubled region and had to flee along with the others," Okello said.

In Guinea, some 2,800 people who fled the Ivorian conflict had registered at the border crossings since 29 November. They include 1,151 Guineans, 853 Ivorians and 741 Liberians, UNHCR said. Most of them are in Lola prefecture, just across from western areas of Man and Danane.

The agency said the recent arrivals were reported to be very tired some having walked six to seven days. There were currently staying near the border in temporary shelters or with host families. UNHCR was working to transfer them to the southern Nonoh transit centre and Laine camp near Nzerekore as soon as possible.

The agency said also it had lost contact with the remaining Liberian refugees hosted in the western Cote d'Ivoire area some 45,000 before the exodus as telephone lines had been cut and access to the fighting zones forbidden.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has been addressing the needs of the affected population and recently completed the registration of 41,600 beneficiary families, including 51,000 children below five years of age in the Ivorian central town of Bouaké.

In its weekly emergency update on Friday WFP said a general distribution started on 3 December and would continue for 10 days in 28 sites in the Bouaké area.

The one-month rations, totalling 400 mt of rice, would only cover 10 percent of the total nutrition needs, as most people do have complementary sources of food. The distribution was undertaken in collaboration with CARE, Action Contre la Faim (ACF), as well as staff from the Catholic Mission and Conseil National Islamique (CNI), it added.

Meanwhile, mediator of the Ivorian crisis Togolese President Gnassingbe Eyadema arrived in the Ivorian capital, Yamoussoukro, on Monday to hold discussions with the Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, news organisations said.

While in Togo, the main rebel group - Mouvement Patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI) on Sunday threatened to pull out of the talks with the Ivorian government.

"The MPCI is clear, we cannot talk with a genocidal regime, we can only fight it," BBC quoted the movement's secretary general, Guillaume Soro as saying.

"We are waiting until Monday night to see if all this complicity has ended... Otherwise, we, at the MPCI, will decide that we can no longer deal with the regime," he added.

MPCI's threat came after reports last week by the French military that it had discovered a mass grave in Pelezi some 70 km from Daloa in western Cote d'Ivoire.

The executive secretary of the Economic Community for West African States Mohammed Ibn Chambas was quoted by news organisations as saying on Sunday the body would launch an investigation on the reported killing of 120 people which the rebels are holding the government responsible of.

The Ivorian defence ministry on Saturday called on youths between 20 and 26 to volunteer to go and fight in the western part of the country.

Army spokesman Col Jules Yao Yao said that loyalist troops clashed on Sunday with rebels of MPCl in the eastern village of Koutouba some 450 north of the commercial capital Abidjan.

BBC also reported that rebels had taken the town western of Bolequin, but failed to seize Guiglo, 120 km from the Liberian border.

The crisis in Cote d'Ivoire started as a mutiny on 19 September and saw the country divided in two with the south in the government's hand and the north in the hands of MPCl.

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