



International Rescue Committee Position Paper WEST AFRICA: ON THE EDGE OF HOPE

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IRC in West Africa

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) began operations in West Africa in 1991, when the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone created a flood of refugees to Guinea and Ivory Coast in addition to massive internal displacement. Currently, IRC has on-going programs in four countries in West Africa: Ivory Coast, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, with activities that address both the emergency needs of returnees and internally displaced people and their post-conflict development needs.



The IRC assists a family uprooted by violence in Ivory Coast. (Photo: Gerald Martone/International Rescue Committee)

Nature of the Conflict

For more than 16 years, interrelated conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast, compounded by periodic instability in Guinea, have plagued West Africa, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands and displacing millions across the region. At the height of the conflicts, Guinea hosted nearly 1,000,000 refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone, more refugees per capita than any other country in Africa. In addition, nearly 500,000 Sierra Leoneans and an equal number of Liberians were internally displaced within their war-ravaged countries. Currently, 120,000 Liberian refugees remain in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. An estimated 500,000 people are internally displaced in Ivory Coast, along with 25,000 Ivorian refugees in Liberia and Guinea.

Continued Instability: Although much of the fighting has ceased and the disarmament and demobilization processes have been completed in Sierra Leone and Liberia, security in the region remains tenuous. According to the recent May/June 2006 issue of the **Foreign Policy**, all four West African countries are among the Top 20 most fragile states in the world. Indicators of fragile states include uneven development, economic decline, human rights abuses, collapsed or failing internal security mechanisms, and refugee or displaced populations.

Dire economic circumstances, pervasive corruption and continued exploitation of natural resources by elites contribute to the unstable environment. While Liberia is often the international community's main focus and measure for calm in the area, deteriorating security in Ivory Coast and Guinea could destabilize the region rapidly, eroding any progress that the international community and nascent national governments have made in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Effects of the Conflict

Recruitment of Child Soldiers: As stated in a December 2005 report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, “West Africa as a region is one of the most seriously affected by the practice of child soldier recruitment in the world. According to estimates, more than 8,000 children are still fighting in the region and more than 20,000 are involved in demobilization and reintegration programs (DDR) or waiting to be demobilized.” The rehabilitation and reintegration phases of the disarmament process within the region has been under-funded and slow to start, further exacerbating the economic situation of demobilized combatants and encouraging ex-combatants to reenlist in the innumerable militias in the region. Child recruitment into armed groups and forced labor continues within all four countries.

Abuse and Sexual Violence: Rape, child abuse, trafficking, torture, mutilation, sexual exploitation and forced prostitution have been common practices during West Africa’s protracted conflicts. Women and girls are subjected most often to these horrific forms of violence and abuse, whether they remain within their communities or flee from war. For the IRC Sierra Leone program, 85% of the female survivors of sexual assault the IRC serves are girls under the age of 15. Sexual violence is regarded within West Africa as one of the largest obstacles to the creation of more accountable and democratic societies, according to government and nongovernmental agencies.

The official end of hostilities in Sierra Leone and Liberia has not dramatically altered war-time patterns of sexual violence. The absence of a functioning government in Ivory Coast has created a security vacuum and an enabling environment where perpetrators of sexual violence and exploitation act with impunity.

Education: Traditionally, education in emergency situations is not a priority and is more associated with long term development. However, the IRC played a key role in providing primary and secondary education to refugee and internally displaced children in all four countries, establishing formal schools in refugee camps and providing non-formal educational activities for youths without access to schooling. More than 81,000 school-aged girls and boys participated in IRC’s formal and informal educational programs during the 2005 school year and continue to this year in West Africa. Unfortunately, not all school-aged children had access to IRC’s educational services, and thousands of children remain illiterate and undereducated in all four countries.

Education plays a crucial role in saving lives by providing physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection. It sustains life by providing security and a sense of normalcy, and by instilling dignity and purpose.



The IRC supports educational activities in camps for displaced people throughout West Africa, like the school attended by this boy in Liberia. (Photo: Gerald Martone/International Rescue Committee)

Being in a safe learning environment lessens the chance that a child will be recruited into a fighting group, join a gang, or become a victim of sexual violence or exploitation.

In order to decrease the risks of further disenfranchisement, emphasis should be placed on sustainable livelihoods, vocational training, flexible education, functional literacy and reintegration into society. Young people need to be given a stake in future development. The chances for long-term peace increase significantly if girls and boys have access to schools.

Efforts Toward Peace and Hope

With the end of the violence in 2002 and successful democratic elections, Sierra Leone now enjoys a fragile peace. Most refugee and internally displaced families have returned to their pre-war homes to face the challenge of rebuilding their lives and their communities.

Liberians have great faith in their newly elected president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, and the country appears on course to a lasting peace and an enduring democratic political culture. But the road to sustained economic and social development will be long and hard, for Liberians must confront a fragmented society, rampant corruption, a culture of impunity and a dysfunctional public sector.

Charles Taylor's recent arrest marks a major step toward justice for those responsible for the tens of thousands of crimes committed in Sierra Leone and the region. As the United Nations Security Draft Resolution of April 2006 states, "Recognizing that Charles Taylor facing the charges against him in the Special Court for Sierra Leone will contribute to achieving truth and reconciliation in Liberia and the wider sub-region."

Repatriation: Given the promise of stability offered by the newly elected government in Liberia, thousands of Liberian refugees must make a decision about their future. The road back is difficult, as the majority of their towns and villages have been destroyed and lack basic health, education and social services. In addition, some families will choose to remain in the countries that have hosted them for so many years. These countries will need to embrace these displaced people and help them become fully integrated and active citizens in their adopted homes.

Guinea, one of the world's poorest countries, faces a volatile situation. A fragile peace has taken hold in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the number of refugees remaining in Guinea has decreased substantially and will continue to decline significantly during 2006. It is crucial that Guinea address domestic unrest and economic and political inequality before encountering further violence or social destabilization.

Ivory Coast remains in limbo between peace and war. There is no overt humanitarian emergency, but the country's political stalemate is deteriorating its ability to respond to the needs of its people. Should the stalemate continue, or should violence escalate, Ivory Coast could cause massive regional instability, violence and large-scale humanitarian crisis. With the delay of the elections and the appointment of a new prime minister, there is hope that the peace agreement signed in Pretoria may proceed. If peace prevails, Ivory Coast may succeed in the demobilization of child soldiers, community reconciliation and the return of internally displaced families to their communities.

The International Rescue Committee Urges...

The United Nations and U.N. Security Council to:

- Maintain the mandate and numbers of U.N. peacekeeping forces in Liberia and Ivory Coast;
- Allow the U.N. peacekeeping forces in Liberia to maintain a quick-reaction force to intervene in Ivory Coast and/or Sierra Leone should any external situation threaten to destabilize the region;
- Ensure that adequate resources and training is available to local security forces so that they can uphold the rights of all citizens;
- Prioritize the West Africa peace and stability process so that it remains before policymakers and funding countries and mechanisms;
- Guarantee that adequate security is guaranteed for the Special Court, and the country in general, to respond to any general public disturbances associated with any future transfers, imprisonment, and trial of former Liberian President Charles Taylor at the Special Court in Freetown.

The International Donor Community to:

- Increase resources for economic livelihood programs skills-training initiatives and alternative education for returnees, especially youths, and focus on income generation and skills building to reduce the dependency of women and children;
- Prioritize education and vocational training programs for the future generations that will lead West Africa.
- Ensure that children (and adults) affected by displacement and/or repatriation experience as little disruption as possible to their education;
- End the recruitment of boys, girls and women into militias by providing the resources to continue the demobilization and reintegration programs;
- Ensure that programs are funded for victims of sexual violence, and that quality services, judicial reform and increased awareness of basic human rights remain the cornerstone for the future of West Africa.

The Governments of West Africa to:

- Prioritize reform of the judicial systems so that the culture of impunity is replaced by rule of law and the promotion of human rights;
- Embark upon comprehensive decentralization programs to improve local governance, increase accountability and transparency to the public, and where elected local officials have the authority for service provision, revenue generation and access to economic development activities;
- Ensure that displaced populations and refugees have access to reliable information to make informed decisions about return.

Humanitarian Agencies to:

- Place the necessary safeguards to prevent family separation during the return process, form reception committees in return communities, and create follow-up plans to monitor reintegration;
- Prioritize the reestablishment of basic services for returnees in receiving communities, especially in rural areas.
- Maximize coordination of humanitarian efforts related to infrastructure improvement in Liberia and Sierra Leone to avoid duplication.

You can learn more by visiting the Web site of the International Crisis Group at:

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1144&l=1>

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