

IASC Weekly Meeting
9 February 2005
Notes



1: Debriefing on the refugee and returnee situation in the Mano River countries and Cote d'Ivoire
(by Raouf Mazou, Head of the Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia Unit, UNHCR)

Mr. Raouf Mazou, Head of Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia Unit in UNHCR, gave a debriefing on the refugee and returnee situation in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire.

Mr. Mazou has accompanied Mr. Ruud Lubbers, High Commissioner for Refugees, on a mission to the four countries from which he just returned.

The main objectives of the mission were to get a sense of the current political climate and socio economic situation in the four countries, to examine the returnee situation and to look at regional cooperation efforts and opportunities for stability, security and development. The High Commissioner met with each Head of State, members of the governments, Refugee representatives, NGOs and the UN Country Teams.

In the first part of the briefing, Mr. Mazou gave an overview of the general political and socio-economic situation of the four countries.

In Guinea, a new Prime Minister has been appointed in December 2004, and he is believed to have the trust of most relevant actors. However, the economic situation remains very problematic, with an extremely high level of poverty. Also, as Guinea perceives its neighbouring countries as a possible threat to its own security, the security related expenditures are high. So far, there is still no DDRR programme in place.

The level of poverty is also very high in Sierra Leone, with around 70% of the population living with 1 USD or less per day. The country is faced by serious economic problems and additionally suffers from a high level of corruption.

Regarding security situation, UNAMSIL has moved from providing security to guaranteeing security. While it is generally felt that the army and police are in the position of providing security, the Government is facing serious budgetary constraints to ensure the regular payment of salaries. Although the peace process has advanced, the key pillars of the state (judiciary, police, provision of basic services) are still weak.

Liberia can generally be described as a failed state, as the transitional government is weak and not much trusted in being able to manage the transition until the elections, which are due in October. While disarmament and demobilization of the DDR programme seems to have worked relatively well, the reintegration of ex-combatants is not going well.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the key concern is that the belief in the unlikelihood of an armed confrontation has disappeared since the attacks in November 2004. The efforts of South African President Mr. Mbeki for peace mediation are appreciated but it is not sure if they will succeed. It also remains unsure whether a referendum will take place before the October elections.

Generally, the humanitarian situation in Côte d'Ivoire is deteriorating. As some 100 schools are closed, about 700 000 children have no access to education.

Regarding the return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs, Mr. Mazou particularly looked at the reintegration of Sierra Leonean refugees as well as the return of Liberian refugees and IDPs.

Some 272 000 Sierra Leonean refugees have returned, 180 000 of them with UNHCR's assistance. The refugees remaining in the neighbouring countries will most likely settle locally.

While some 6000 Liberian refugees have been repatriated in an organized manner since October 2004, there is a general agreement that a large number of refugees have returned spontaneously. Most of the counties have now been declared safe for return.

Although the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is also a forum for socio-political interactions, the Mano River Union could offer a good forum for the regional management of security, stability and development as the three countries have a lot in common.

The High Commissioner will share the key findings with appropriate actors.

As a conclusion, the need for mass information activities for Liberian refugees as well as the need for continuous support to Sierra Leone was highlighted.

Although the overall situation is preoccupying, it could improve with sufficient international assistance.

After the briefing, participants primarily discussed the return situation in Liberia. Facilities in the camps as well as in the return areas need to be improved. While most counties have been declared safe for return, the quality of and access to social services is very low and requires improvement. In this context, the general need for increased donor activities to stabilize the country was highlighted. Also the lack of an OCHA presence and the coordinating role of UNMIL's humanitarian section were discussed.

As deep concern was expressed over the possibility of further violence in Côte d'Ivoire, the importance of on-time preparedness was emphasized.

2: Briefing on the latest developments in the EU, following the Tsunami

(by Sergio Piazzi, Chief of External Relations, OCHA)

Mr. Sergio Piazzi, Chief of OCHA's External Relations, briefed on the latest developments on humanitarian affairs in the EU, following the Tsunami.

After the Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami, the EU took the opportunity to review its response system to emergencies, including delivery of humanitarian assistance.

A large number of EU citizens have lost their lives in the disaster, and it was realized that the EU, as a collective entity, was not able to provide assistance to their own citizens affected.

Since then, high-level discussions have taken place on how to improve the EU's capacity to react to disasters, both natural disasters and man-made crises. On 7th January 2005, an extraordinary meeting of the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) was held in Brussels to assess the situation, to look at ongoing actions, including the EC's civil protection mechanism, ECHO's reaction, support to the UN and NGOs, and to already consider longer-term actions. It was decided to formulate a European Union Action Plan to better coordinate all the available resources at all levels and in all areas to deal effectively with the consequences of

such events then and in the future. At the following meeting of the GAERC on 31 January, this European Union Action Plan was adopted by the ministers. The Plan contains initiatives to be taken immediately, as well as actions to be taken in the future. Under Chapter D "Reinforcing of the Union's Response Capacity" longer-term measures are listed, including the improvement of the existing instruments and the establishment of new structures. Regarding the improvement of the existing instruments, both autonomous EU operations as well as a collective response by the EU within the framework of an operation conducted by another organisation are considered. The paper recognizes the great diversity of instruments and resources, and emphasizes the need to build up inter-operability between the different countries, as well as between military and civilian instruments.

As instruments to be newly established, the Union considers to develop a EU rapid response capability and to set up a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps. Discussions are currently held at the foreign ministers level about how to establish such a corps.

Mr. Sergio Piazzi, who is going on mission to Luxembourg as well as to London, offered to give a follow-up briefing after his return to maintain this issue on the agenda.

Following the briefing, participants further discussed the Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps and expressed concern about the feasibility of its coordination. It was highlighted that the duplication of structures and teams needs to be avoided under all circumstances.

In the context of these initiatives to improve the EU capacity to respond to humanitarian crises, there was also reference to the proposals of France's President Mr. Chirac and of UK's Secretary of State Mr. Benn, that move in the same direction.

3: IASC Standard Briefing

(by Sergio Piazzi, Chief of External Relations, OCHA)

- The IASC Task Force on Assistance to Tsunami affected communities will meet this afternoon, Wednesday, 9 February, at 17h00 in Room 3 of the Palais des Nations.
- Next Wednesday, 16 February, a meeting of the IASC Task Force on Gender will take place in the WHO. The Chairs of the Task Force will send out the invitation and agenda to its members shortly.

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List of Participants



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