

Africa: Refugee crisis in Guinea produces a humanitarian disaster

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Around a quarter of a million refugees, trapped in the southern region of Guinea that protrudes into Sierra Leone and Liberia, are facing a catastrophe. Though it has been given virtually no coverage in the Western press, the United Nations' refugee agency UNHCR describe the situation as currently its most severe humanitarian crisis.

Whilst a majority of the refugees in the camps are from Sierra Leone, having fled the decade-long civil war there, there are also Liberians fleeing from the conflict which has now begun again in that country, and around 70,000 Guineans who have been displaced by fighting.

The refugees are trapped between Guinean government forces and those of rebel Guinean dissidents. Hundreds of refugees have been killed and many more injured in attacks carried out by both sides. Prevented from moving south into Sierra Leone by the rebel forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the refugees cannot move into safer areas of Guinea because the government there accuses them of harbouring rebel dissidents.

Some refugees have not been able to receive food aid for the last five months because of the escalating fighting. A BBC report described a "hellish situation" at one of the refugee camps, with "terrified people having fist fights over dwindling food supplies," while "armed militia men allied to the Guinean government side in the war, swaggered around the camp taking some of the already insufficient supplies."

According to press reports, over 30,000 Sierra Leonean refugees at the Nyaedou Refugee camp near Gueckedou pleaded with UNHCR representatives to take them home, saying that they would rather die in Sierra Leone than in Guinea.

Although the UNHCR provides some food supplies

to Nyaedou with difficulty, it is unable to reach much of the area. Last year the head of the local UNHCR office was killed and another staff member abducted. Many aid workers have also had to pull out.

The refugee disaster takes place as the United States and Britain step up their campaign to demonise Liberian President Charles Taylor as the primary cause of the region's problems. A United Nations report issued in December 2000 accuses Taylor of supporting the RUF, providing them with logistical support and allowing them to use Liberia as a staging post for their attacks into Sierra Leone. Taylor was also accused of breaking UN sanctions by dealing in diamonds mined in the RUF-controlled areas of Sierra Leone. The report was discussed by a UN Security Council meeting on January 25, where a draft resolution was drawn up. This called for a fresh arms embargo, a ban on the export of timber and diamonds from Liberia, restrictions on international air flights to and from Liberia and a limit the travel aboard by Liberian government officials. Whether the full resolution, which is backed by the US and Britain, will be passed by the UN next month remains to be seen. France in particular protested against the ban on timber, mindful of its own interests in the region.

The move to outlaw Liberia is being championed particularly by Britain, which sent troops into Sierra Leone last May to boost government forces against the RUF rebels and provides backing for the UN "peacekeeping" mission. At that time, the capture of 500 UN troops, who were taken hostage by the RUF, revealed the peace deal to be a shambles. Indian and Jordanian contingents in the UN force then withdrew, after it became clear that no Western countries were willing to send troops. The present size of the UN force in Sierra Leone is only half what was laid down by the

UN mandate, and the situation remains precarious, relying on a shaky ceasefire negotiated with the RUF last November.

Britain has continued to put the RUF under pressure by keeping 600 of its own troops in the country at any one time, with 300 presently involved in training the Sierra Leone army. By September this year, a total of 8,000 British troops will have undertaken operations in Sierra Leone, forming a pool of soldiers who are familiar with the conditions and terrain there. Britain's Ministry of Defence (MoD) stated that it was monitoring the security threat and was ready to act if the situation deteriorated. Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said: "Our rapid reaction capability remains available to the United Nations, we expect to exercise periodically in Sierra Leone to demonstrate how we can deploy quickly if necessary".

Press statements last November made it clear that US and British pressure on the RUF and the Liberian regime was in the full knowledge that the conflict was likely to shift into Guinea.

The US has initially sent 10 Special Forces soldiers to provide training for Guinean troops. As a *Washington Post* article of November 6 last year explained: "U.S. and Guinean troops say the training is necessary to ensure that Sierra Leone's rebels cannot move their bases into Guinea if they become pressed by the British, UN and Sierra Leonean forces supporting the government there."

Despite the humanitarian rhetoric used by the US and Britain to justify their interventions in this region of Africa—focusing on the brutality of the RUF and Taylor's support for them—their reckless actions have largely contributed to the present refugee crisis. Whilst Taylor claims to have broken off all relations with the RUF in order to escape the threatened UN sanctions, and the RUF say it is engaged in a ceasefire, RUF militia, as well as militia based in Liberia opposed to the Guinean regime, have moved over the border into Guinea.

According to the Sierra Leonean newspaper the *Concord Times*, Guinean dissidents have made regular visits into RUF-controlled territory in Sierra Leone, recruiting RUF mercenaries for \$200 a month with the promise of a \$10,000 bonus at the end of the mission. The identity and origin of all the militia groups fighting in Guinea remains unclear. The BBC, for example,

report at least five different outfits being involved.

The Guinean regime, notorious for its brutal treatment of internal opponents, is now targeting refugees as much as the RUF and dissident forces. A report produced by Human Rights Watch (HRW) pointed out that in a radio broadcast, the Guinean President, Lansana Conte, whipped up hostility to the refugees, demanding that they "go home", and calling on Guineans to "defend their country and round-up all foreigners." HRW reports that, "for several days, armed groups of civilian militias, police and soldiers broke into refugees' homes, beat, raped and arrested them and looted their belongings."

Guinea and Liberia are now hurling mutual recriminations, denouncing each other for supporting the other's rebel groups. Tensions are escalating throughout the region and threaten to spill over into full-scale war. Guinea has broadcast "confessions" from two men claiming to be RUF rebels. One of them stated that Charles Taylor was the leader of the Rally of Democratic Forces of Guinea (RFDG), one of the dissident groups fighting the Guinean regime. Charles Taylor is quoted as saying: "I am the first major rebel in West Africa. Let Conte not play rebel business with me."

Meanwhile something of the real interests behind Western involvement in this region were revealed in the decision of the Sierra Rutile Company, owned by the US mining company Nord Resources Corporation, to restart operations in Sierra Leone. The *Concord Times* points out that the main profits from mining in Sierra Leone do not come from diamonds but from the rich deposits of rutile (titanium oxide). The local population complains that the community development, land rehabilitation and crop compensation promised by the company have failed to materialise.



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