



Australian Refugee Rights Alliance

"No Compromise on Human Rights"

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RESIDUAL LIBERIAN REFUGEE POPULATION IN BUDUBURAM,
GHANA

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This paper was inspired by the observations of Mr. Erinch Sahan who volunteered for the Population Caring Organization at Buduburam during February 2008.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of the 26,967 registered Liberian refugees in Ghana live in Buduburam Refugee Settlement.¹ The vast majority of the refugees are from Liberia, with a small number from Côte D'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Togo also residing in Buduburam. A significant part of the refugee population in Buduburam has been there since the early 1990s. Liberians make up 75 percent of the total population of registered refugees in Ghana.² UNHCR spent \$9.6m in Ghana in 2007 and expects to spend \$6.1m in 2008.³

In the past year, the UNHCR has done a great job in communicating that resettlement will no longer be offered as a solution to the Liberian refugees in Ghana. The unavailability of resettlement has been communicated both verbally and through signs and letters posted on information boards throughout Buduburam. Hence, the Liberian refugee population in Ghana is not holding out for resettlement to be offered to them. Instead they have requested, on multiple occasions, further repatriation assistance so they can go home and set up their lives in Liberia. As very few – possibly none – of the Liberian refugees in Ghana have been back to Liberia, they were worried to learn of food and accommodation shortages across Liberia. This fear culminated in sit in protests by the refugee women at Buduburam where they were asking the UNHCR to respond to their request for further repatriation assistance. Unfortunately, the UNHCR in Accra did not respond to a letter sent by the women prior to their protest. Consequently, the women felt it necessary to make their requests heard through a peaceful sit in protest on the football field of the camp.

In March 2008, about a month after the protests commenced, the Ghanaian authorities arrested over 600 of the women. They subsequently expelled 16 of the women, 13 of whom were registered refugees. They also conducted arbitrary arrests of men at Buduburam. The actions of the Ghanaian authorities have led to fear and anxiety among the refugees at Buduburam. Many are willing to repatriate to Liberia with further assistance from the UNHCR in doing so. However, there are those who fear for their lives in their home country and feel they cannot repatriate under any circumstance. Many of these refugees have been intimidated and pressured by the Ghanaian Refugee Board and security forces to leave Ghana. However, the situation in Buduburam can be solved with strong support from the UNHCR and the international community. With many of the Liberian refugees in Ghana willing to repatriate under more favourable conditions, the majority of the refugee population in Ghana can be repatriated and the situation can be solved permanently.

ADDRESSING THE SITUATION OF THE REFUGEES IN BUDUBURAM

Refoulement, Imprisonment of Protesters and Intimidation by Ghanaian Authorities

On 19 February 2008, the refugee women of Buduburam began a peaceful sit-in protest on the football field of Buduburam, which is adjacent to the main road coming from Accra. They had placards that read: 'Integration? No! Repatriation Plus \$1000? YES! YES!!', 'Geneva Help US' and 'Ghana Refugee Board, STOP THE OPPRESSION!' In short, the women were asking for greater assistance to go back to Liberia and an abandonment of policies of intimidation claimed to be employed by Ghanaian authorities. The men were absent from the protest so as not to provide the Ghanaian authorities with an excuse to employ violent measures against the protesters. A belief held by most of the protesters was that UNHCR was providing Ghana with \$1,500 for every refugee who accepts integration into Ghana. They, therefore, wanted to convey to UNHCR and the world that they did not want to accept integration and that this money could be better used by them to rebuild their lives in Liberia after having left the country nearly two decades ago.

On 17 March 2008, Ghanaian authorities stormed the camp and arrested 630 demonstrators.⁴ Subsequently, on 22 March, UNHCR was informed of the arrest of 70 Liberian men from Buduburam.⁵ Those arrested not only include Liberian refugees but also Côte D'Ivoriens. Of those arrested, 16 were deported, 13 of whom were registered refugees.⁶ It is likely that some of these refugees may face religious and ethnic persecution upon return to Liberia. As the women who had conducted the sit-in protest cannot be deemed to be a 'danger to the security of' Ghana, the Article 33(2) exception to the principle of non-refoulement articulated in Article 33(1) will likely not be applicable. Therefore, the expulsion of the refugees constitutes refoulement under Article 33 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). By conducting random and large scale arrests, over reacting to a peaceful sit-in protest by women and illegally expelling refugees from the Buduburam Refugee Settlement, the Ghanaian authorities have created a state of fear, panic and trauma amongst the refugees.⁷

Perception among refugees that Ghana received \$1,500 per refugee integrated

There was widespread belief among the refugees at Buduburam that UNHCR was offering \$1,500 to Ghana for every refugee who accepted integration into Ghana. This was articulated by the organisers of the sit-in protest as the reason they felt it was reasonable to ask for \$1,000 per refugee for repatriation. If UNHCR's alleged offer to the Ghanaian government is fallacious, the communication of this fact to the refugees by UNHCR would quell much of the distrust and tension that exists at Buduburam and could have prevented the protests. Further, it would help UNHCR in making the point to the refugees that they cannot expect to receive more than \$100 for repatriation.

Repatriation

Most refugees at Buduburam, although concerned about security in Liberia, would like to return to Liberia rather than risk further arbitrary arrests and deportation by the Ghanaian authorities. However, many have nothing to go back to and will have no place to stay upon returning to Liberia. The length and magnitude of the Liberian civil war have destroyed their homes and ruined roads to their villages. Hence, it is not viable for them to return to Liberia and leave behind the homes they have built in Buduburam without some economic security.

UNHCR has made the offer of \$100 for every registered refugee who repatriates. However, many feel that they are going back to a country in total ruin and need more than \$100 to survive after they return. Further, the limitation of 20kg per refugee is seen by many as a significant impediment to accepting repatriation. Many have been in Buduburam for over 15 years and have accumulated important belongings. The 20kg limitation has been a highly contentious issue at Buduburam and an increase in the weight limit for belongings that the refugees will take with them in repatriating to Liberia will likely have a significant impact on the number of refugees who accept repatriation.⁸ Further, with the deadline for UNHCR funding of \$100 per refugee expiring on 30 June 2008, the situation is likely to evolve quickly.

Refugees who are unable to repatriate

Although repatriation can be a viable solution to many, amongst the 27,000 refugees at Buduburam Refugee Settlement, there are some who hold well-founded fears of persecution if they return due to their 'membership of a particular social group or political opinion'. For instance, there are direct family members of former political leaders seeking refuge in Ghana, who fear that they will be killed upon returning to Liberia or Côte D'Ivoire. This includes daughters of the late Liberian President, Samuel Doe. There are also refugees who held positions in past administrations, such as the bodyguards and butlers of the late President Doe. One other example is Mr. Beausio Hyacinthe Sahin (ref. no: 10000901), who was blacklisted by rebel soldiers in Côte D'Ivoire and fears reprisals upon his return with his family. Mr. Sahin has been provided with a letter⁹ from the Ghanaian Refugee Board that advises him to return to Côte D'Ivoire, asserting that conditions have now returned to normal. Although the civil war has ended in their country of origin, there are many others at Buduburam who have well-founded fears about repatriation to Côte D'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, the Ghanaian government is invoking the 'cessation clause' and forced expulsion of these refugees seems likely.¹⁰

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Due to the actions of the Ghanaian government in March 2008, the refugees at Buduburam feel victimised and intimidated. Consequently, many are willing to accept repatriation, provided that they are likely to be able to provide for themselves upon repatriation. However, the belief among the refugees that UNHCR is providing \$1,500 per refugee for integration has made many feel that UNHCR has the means to provide a similar payment for repatriating refugees. There are, however, some refugees at Buduburam who, due to well-founded fears of persecution, cannot return to Liberia, Côte D'Ivoire or Sierra Leone no matter how much is offered for repatriation. These refugees are currently being pressured to repatriate by Ghanaian authorities and should receive further support from UNHCR.

Recommendations

1. If claims of an offer of \$1,500 per integrating refugee to the Ghanaian government are false, to communicate this effectively to the refugees at Buduburam.
2. Ascertain why the UNHCR in Accra failed to communicate effectively with the women who conducted the sit in protest and ensure procedures are in place to avoid similar failures in the future.
3. Investigate claims of arbitrary arrests by Ghanaian authorities following the sit-in protests at Buduburam in March 2008 and work with the Ghanaian government to prevent future acts of intimidation.
4. Increase the weight limit for belongings that repatriating refugees can take with them.
5. Investigate the claims of refugees who cannot accept repatriation and offer resettlement to the most vulnerable of those who remain at Buduburam, especially in light of Ghana recently indicating it intends to invoke the 'cessation clause'.

ABOUT ARRA

ARRA: Australian Refugee Rights Alliance is a consortium of Australian Non Government Organisations attending the UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs and the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. Its members advocate for change at the international level.

¹ UNHCR, 2008, 'Ghana: deportation to Liberia' *UNHCR Briefing Notes*, 25 March 2008 available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/47e8f5722.html>.

² UNHCR 2008, *UNHCR Global Appeal 2008-2009*, UNHCR: Geneva p.170.

³ *Ibid.*, at 172.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Open letter from the Liberian Refugee Women at Buduburam Refugee Camp, 2008, 'Liberian Refugee with concerns Buduburam Refugee Camp' 9 June.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Letter dated 15 November 2004

¹⁰ Population Caring Organization (2008) 'The Liberian Refugee Women Protest Situation Report', 26 March, p.3. (available on request)