

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 34/003/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 037
20 February 2003

Côte d'Ivoire: Liberian refugees at imminent risk

Amnesty International is calling for an urgent international response to the desperate plight of some 40,000 Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire.

"Liberian refugees are at imminent risk of being killed as they are caught up in the violence which has shaken Côte d'Ivoire since last September," Amnesty International said today.

Liberians constitute the largest refugee community in Côte d'Ivoire, having fled internal armed conflict in their own country. They are now at risk of being killed in the country where they sought refuge.

"Liberian refugees are being indiscriminately associated with the armed opposition in Côte d'Ivoire," Amnesty International said. "They are being killed both by Ivorian security forces and groups of civilians, some of them armed by the government."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has emphasized the particular vulnerability of Liberian refugees and has sought viable solutions to protect them. Repeated requests to other countries in West Africa to accept them and for the Ivorian government to facilitate their removal to safer locations in the country and to provide adequate security have, however, gone unheeded.

Many of the Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire, particularly those of the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups, would again be at risk of being killed, tortured or ill-treated by Liberian security forces if they returned to Liberia where the conflict has recently intensified and spread to parts of the country previously unaffected by fighting. Despite the risks of returning to Liberia, an estimated 43,000 Liberians have already had no option but to return to an uncertain fate.

The plight of those remaining in Côte d'Ivoire continues to worsen daily as anti-Liberian sentiment increases due largely to the common perception of Liberians as a destabilizing force and supporters of the armed opposition in Côte d'Ivoire which has been joined by Liberian fighters crossing the border into Côte d'Ivoire. Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire have, however, also been harassed by armed opposition groups.

"The Ivorian authorities must take immediate measures to end attacks on Liberian refugees and cooperate fully with UNHCR in finding safer locations for Liberian refugees," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is also calling on the international community to provide urgent additional funding to UNHCR so that it is able provide protection to Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire.

"The responsibility for protecting these refugees must be shared by the wider international community," Amnesty International said. "Other countries in West Africa, some of which already host large numbers of refugees, must be helped to cope with a likely further influx of refugees."

"Countries in the region must keep their borders open so that Liberian refugees in immediate danger in Côte d'Ivoire are allowed to cross borders without restriction," Amnesty International added.

Safe resettlement places should be made available in third countries for those groups considered to be particularly vulnerable, including Liberian refugees, who have no prospect of other durable solutions to their plight.

French forces deployed in Côte d'Ivoire, as well as those from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have a specific mandate from the United Nations (UN) to protect civilians. UN Security Council Resolution 1464 (2003) of 4 February 2003 authorized necessary steps "to ensure . . . the protection of civilians immediately threatened with physical violence within their zones of operation, using the means available to them".

"Troops deployed in Côte d'Ivoire, both from France and other West African countries, must vigorously implement their mandate to protect civilians, including Liberian refugees who are particularly at risk, Amnesty International said.

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