

LIBERIA: LIBERIAN REFUGEES SHOULD BE GRANTED ASYLUM.

Thousands of refugees fleeing the conflict in Liberia continue to be refused the right to seek asylum in other West African countries and further refugees from Liberia may in the coming days face similar threats to their basic human rights, Amnesty International said today.

The Organization of the African Unity (OAU) specifies in its Convention of refugees that "No person shall be subjected by a Member State to measures such as rejection at the frontier, return or expulsion, which would compel him to return to... a territory where his life, physical integrity or liberty would be threatened."

"Ghana, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and other West African countries are a party to this convention and risk breaking the rules they themselves have made." Amnesty International said.

However, some 150 Liberian refugees aboard the ship Victory Reefer who arrived off the coast of Sierra Leone on 11 May remain either on board or at the quayside, as the authorities refuse them access to shore and the right to seek asylum. Only Sierra Leone nationals were allowed to disembark on 14 May when the boat was finally allowed to dock in Freetown.

Similarly, a boat containing some 88 Liberian refugees arrived at the Sierra Leonean capital, Freetown on 21 April, but was kept at sea for three further days before the Liberians were allowed to disembark.

More than 1,800 Liberians fleeing from the war in their country left the capital, Monrovia, on 5 May destined for Ghana. Four days later they were sent back to sea when the authorities in Côte d'Ivoire refused to allow the passengers to disembark to seek asylum. Their ship, the Bulk Challenge, had been forced to dock for emergency repairs, and some women and children were allowed on shore. Despite appeals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and non-governmental organizations, the Ivorian authorities refused to allow other refugees into the country.

On 15 May the Ivorian government stated that it is closing its doors to all refugees from the Liberian conflict. The Foreign Minister was quoted as saying: "We have no lessons to learn from anyone about humanitarian matters". While acknowledging their humanitarian support for the 305,000 Liberian refugees already there, it is essential that Côte d'Ivoire respects its international obligation to identify and protect other Liberians who are forced to flee serious human rights abuses in Liberia.

The Bulk Challenge continued to the Ghanaian port of Takoradi where, on 12 May, the Ghanaian authorities refused to allow passengers to seek asylum. On 14 May they were finally allowed to disembark after the UNHCR and foreign governments stated they would offer assistance. The previous day, the Ghanaian authorities had stated their intention to return the Liberians to Monrovia, claiming that the West African Peace-keeping Force, ECOMOG, could guarantee their safety in the capital.

These delays constitute restrictive measures and amount to a form of detention in inhuman conditions. As such, they further violate the rights of these refugees and may deter future refugees who are forced to flee the conflict from seeking asylum.

The recent exodus of several thousand people from Liberia - who include many other nationalities, especially from other West African countries - is a direct result of the resumption and intensification of the country's civil war after the breakdown of an August 1995 peace agreement. Inter-factional fighting in Monrovia which started in early April 1996 has resulted in scores of deaths and the wounding and maiming of many more people. The civilian population has been terrorised. Looting and robberies at gunpoint have been common and it is probable that many people have been deliberately and arbitrarily killed. Fighting has also intensified in other parts of Liberia in the civil war which started in 1989.

The international human rights organization is appealing to all countries to fulfil their responsibilities under international law to ensure that no one is forcibly returned to Liberia where they may be at risk of grave human rights abuses, including deliberate and arbitrary killing, torture and ill-treatment.

"The refugees should be admitted to seek asylum without any discrimination on grounds of their political opinion, nationality or country of origin. It is a fundamental right," Amnesty International said.

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