



More Liberians

By Sulaiman Momodu

As the Boeing 757 aircraft takes off on a regular UNMIL flight from the Kotoka International Airport in the Ghanaian capital, Accra, panic-stricken children on board break into screaming, amusing adult passengers. The Liberian refugee children, most of them born in exile, knew no other place as home but Ghana. Now, however, they were leaving their friends and school behind, as they returned to Liberia, the place their parents called their home. “I am happy to be going back. There is no place like home,” says Sarah, a mother of six.

Sitting rather pensively as the plane cruised towards her home country, Etta, another mother of six, says she left Liberia nine years ago. “I don’t have anything as I return, but I tell God thank you for sparing my life and my children,” says the single mother, with three of her children born in refuge sitting by her. Sarah and Etta are among thousands of refugees returning home in the ongoing repatriation of the so-called “residual caseload.”

The process started in April this year after demonstrations in Accra by the Liberian refugees demanding resettlement to a third country in Europe or America, or US\$1,000 per person to return home.

Tripartite meetings among the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Governments of Ghana and Liberia reached an agreement on repatriating the refugees to Liberia. The regular flights operated by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) transport the refugees free of charge but the UN refugee agency pays for the expenses when the flight is chartered.

As the plane lands after a two-hour flight at Liberia’s main Roberts International Airport, they suddenly find themselves transformed from refugees to returnees. And as they step on Liberian soil, some of them, especially the children, are not impressed. They immediately draw parallels between Ghana and Liberia. “Is this the airport?” one queries.

On arrival, the returnees are welcomed back home by Liberian government officials, UNHCR and partners. They are then transported to the transit centre where they spend the night before heading to Monrovia and other destinations to start life anew.

Organized voluntary repatriation of Liberian refugees that lasted four years ended in June 2007. Most of the logistical support used for the repatriation exercise such as trucks has since been diverted to other countries facing emergencies. Deputy Executive Director of the Liberian Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement

Commission (LRRRC) John Saah Nyumah says throughout that repatriation process, the biggest operational challenge was Ghana with “only a very discouraging figure of about 5,000 refugees returning home out of a registered caseload of 35,000.”

There are also an estimated 15,000 unregistered Liberian aliens in Ghana, but Nyumah says this group will be looked into at the end of the return process. For the ongoing exercise though, as of October, more than 8,700 persons had returned from the West Africa sub-region, including 8,176 persons from Ghana, 237 from Nigeria, 170 persons from Guinea, and 102 from Sierra Leone. Return has also been facilitated from Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia and Senegal. UNHCR Field Officer Henok Ochalla says so far the process is going smoothly, adding that they work in close collaboration with the UN mission’s Humanitarian Coordination Section, Office of the Director of Mission Support and Movement Control (MOV-CON).

Although the current return process was schedule to end in October lasting about six months, following another tripartite meeting to review the process, it has been extended to March 2009. “At the end of March 2009, there will be another review,” says Nyumah. During the large scale repatriation, refugees were given



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food rations but for the residual caseload, the food component is absent. “We used to take refugees to their communities of origin or choice. Now we give US\$100 per adult and \$50 for children below 18 years to facilitate their return from Monrovia,” explains the deputy LRRRC boss. The grant is given in the country of asylum and is the last thing that refugees receive before boarding the plane. Some of the refugees return home with skills acquired in exile and have been making meaningful contributions to the rebuilding process of Liberia. “I feel great that God has kept me up to this time to return to my country,” says James, who was schooling in Ghana. “We now have peace, but no one can build that peace, but us the Liberians.”

In September, a road convoy through Côte d'Ivoire, lasting about a week, was piloted. Unlike the flight which accepts only 50 kg of luggage, the road convoy enables refugees to return with 80kg luggage per person. In addition to air and land, return by sea is also being looked into. Some of the challenges of repatriation include jump-starting the reintegration programme. “For the return to be sustained, donors should assist with the reintegration programme. People need to have skills to earn a decent living. This is a security concern,” stresses Nyumah. According to UNHCR, since October 2004, more than 120,000 refugees have

voluntarily returned home but several thousands are still in exile. ♦