

## **Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division (IDD)**

### **Mission to Liberia (3-10 October 2004)**

The IDD mission team (consisting of Mark Cutts and Simon Bagshaw) focused on the inter-agency response to the IDP situation in Liberia. The mission took place together with a mission from OCHA Geneva and New York (consisting of Joel Boutroue, Zuhail Ayoub and Alf Blikberg), to review the status of the integration of the OCHA office into the UNMIL structure. OCHA will be reporting separately on this.

#### **Return and reintegration of IDPs**

Despite all the problems – which have been well documented – a huge amount of progress has been made in bringing peace and stability to Liberia since the peace agreement of August 2003. The disarmament and demobilization component of the DDRR programme is nearing completion and UNMIL has made it clear that it is now moving into a new phase of its operations, during which there will be a particular focus on rehabilitation and reintegration activities (for ex-combatants as well as returning refugees and IDPs), community development, the restoration of State administration nationwide, strengthening of the rule-of-law institutions, recovery and reconstruction.

Enormous opportunities exist now for resolving the massive crisis of displacement that has plagued Liberia for so many years. IDPs desperately want to return to their villages and communities of origin. Despite this, planning for IDP returns has been slow and problematic, with the result that the level of returns this season may be considerably lower than might otherwise have been the case. According to current planning figures, which may need to be revised, there are more than 450,000 IDPs in Liberia, including some 280,000 in 24 formal camps, 20,000 in spontaneous settlements and an estimated 150,000 with host families.

Only 5 of the 15 counties in Liberia have so far officially been declared “safe” by the respective County Resettlement Assessment Committees (CRACs), composed of representatives of the Government, UN agencies, NGOs and IDPs. In spite of this, over 150,000 Liberians are estimated to have returned spontaneously to their places of origin since the peace accords of August 2003 – the majority of these being refugees, rather than IDPs, and most of them having returned to counties not yet declared “safe”.

The majority of the IDPs in the camps are from Bomi county (which has been declared “safe”) and Lofa county (which has not yet been declared “safe”). In the case of Bomi, IDPs do not generally cite security concerns as an obstacle to returns. Meanwhile, in the case of Lofa, most IDPs in the camps say they are reluctant to return before the completion of the disarmament and demobilization programme. UNMIL is hoping to complete the disarmament and demobilization programme country-wide by the end of October.

There is a significant presence of humanitarian agencies in Bomi. Few agencies, however, have a presence in Lofa, which is one of the most devastated parts of Liberia. Although Lofa has not yet been declared “safe”, more than half of the 150,000 spontaneous returns mentioned above have been to this county. ICRC has a large and effective reintegration programme for returnees in Lofa, and some NGOs, such as MSF and ACF, have also been providing much needed assistance. Still, there are enormous unmet needs in Lofa, and huge potential for further returns if the necessary assistance is provided.

In the camps, expectations amongst the IDPs are extremely high concerning the return packages that they may receive if they wait. They have been told by both Liberian government officials and agency staff that return packages will be provided, and as a result of the different signals that they have been receiving many of them seem to have unrealistically high expectations of what these packages might contain. The packages which were conceived as an incentive for IDPs to return, have in many cases become a reason to wait.

An organized IDP return operation for some 100,000 IDPs is due to start on 1 November. IOM is organizing the transportation, and UNMIL has agreed to make trucks available for this operation. A WFP food pipeline break meant that the food component of the return package was not available in October – contributing to the delay of the IDP-assisted return operation until November. In the case of non-food items, UNHCR is making packages available for 100,000 people. Most of these are already in stock in Liberia and the rest are expected to arrive in the country in December.

The IDD mission was concerned to find that the IDP return packages exclude seeds and tools – the two items most in demand. FAO has received some funds (including from UNHCR) for limited distribution of seeds and tools, but overall this sector remains severely under-funded.

While a continued focus on the IDP camps and spontaneous settlements is needed, a far greater focus is needed on reintegration and rehabilitation programmes in areas of potential return if IDPs are to leave the camps and return to their villages. The ICRC model in Lofa county, which includes distribution of seeds and tools, is seen by many to be an excellent one which would easily be replicated elsewhere if the necessary funds were made available.

Although some reintegration and rehabilitation activities in areas of return are taking place, the bulk of the international humanitarian community continues to focus primarily on the camps in the area around Monrovia, where many IDPs continue to live in appalling conditions. In some cases, resources that could have been used in the communities of return (which would have had a direct impact on the level of IDP returns) have been badly used (e.g. for expensive transit centers).

A clear and decisive strategy for the phasing out and consolidation of IDP camps is needed. Without this, the IDP camps are likely to be there for some time to come and resources that could be used for reintegration purposes will be used instead to feed and sustain IDPs in camps for yet another year.

## **Protection concerns**

In the IDP camps, rape of young girls and other forms of gender-based violence and abuse remains rampant. Forty cases of rape in the camps have been reported to the UNMIL Human Rights and Protection Section since July, of which the oldest victim was 13 years old. The actual number of rape cases is considered to be much higher, as most cases are never officially reported. While this is a widespread problem in Liberia, it is particularly bad in the camps because of the crowded living conditions (most rape is committed by members of the family or extended family) and as a consequence of the distribution of aid (leading to abuse of power).

The response to the problem of gender-based violence and abuse in the camps remains inadequate, as is widely acknowledged by humanitarian agencies that have a presence in the camps. Local community-watch teams (comprised of IDPs and trained by NGOs and UNHCR) have been used in some camps and have proven useful. More such teams, linked with women's groups, are needed. They can ensure that some type of monitoring and policing system is in place where the government authorities do not have the capacity. Important work is also being done in some camps by IRC and Save the Children – with UNICEF support – to sensitize camp populations and to respond to the medical and psycho-social needs of victims of gender based violence and abuse. Such activities should be strengthened and extended to all IDP camps. More resources are also needed to improve the capacity of the national police and judiciary to investigate allegations of violence and abuse and to bring perpetrators to justice.

A number of interlocutors felt that more could be done to strengthen the UN's management of protection in general. They complained that in cases where protection problems are brought to the attention of UNMIL, either directly or through the Protection Core Group (the main inter-agency forum dealing with protection issues), there is often inadequate follow up, or there is a lack of feedback on action taken which only serves to undermine confidence in its effectiveness.

With the organized IDP return operation due to start on 1 November, increased human rights presence and monitoring capacity in areas of return will also be essential. The UNMIL Human Rights and Protection Section currently has only 29 of the planned 48 staff in place in Liberia (13 internationals and 16 national staff). UNMIL has asked the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to expedite the recruitment of the remaining human rights officers.

## **Coordination and management**

The Liberian Government has been engaged to varying degrees at different stages of the planning process, in particular through its participation in the Joint Planning Team (JPT) and the Results Focused Transitional Framework Working Committee on Displaced Populations (RWC3) that was responsible for the drafting of the national community resettlement and reintegration strategy (see below). In addition, representatives of the Liberian Refugee, Resettlement and Repatriation Committee (LRRRC) participate in the meetings of the IDP Committee.

Committees and sub-committees with baffling long acronyms have been established at every level to assist in coordinating activities related to IDPs in Liberia. Monrovia is committee-city. In spite of this, coordination of the inter-agency response to the IDP situation at the strategic level has been poor. This is largely due to the fact that for many months earlier in the year OCHA and UNHCR were unable to agree on who was doing what in relation to IDPs. It is also a result of the rapid turnover of staff and what turned out to be a messy drawn-out process of trying to integrate OCHA into the UNMIL structure. In addition, a number of interlocutors felt that the Humanitarian Coordinator, as DSRSG, “wears too many hats”, making it difficult for him to devote a lot of time to leading the overall response to the IDP situation.

A fundamental problem seems to be a structural one common to many IDP situations and by no means confined to Liberia. For the Humanitarian Coordinator to provide effective leadership in responding to IDP situations, he or she must be properly supported. This requires dedicating a team of full-time staff with the requisite seniority and expertise on IDP issues to help the Humanitarian Coordinator manage and lead the inter-agency response. It also requires that the Humanitarian Coordinator’s office lead and fully support the efforts of this team, to obtain the necessary funding and to ensure that IDPs are given the attention that they deserve.

The IDP Unit in the Humanitarian Coordination Section of UNMIL has in recent months consisted of one IDP Advisor and two national staff. Working with the Joint Planning Team and focusing on coordination amongst agencies and with national authorities at the operational level, they have done an excellent job in making practical arrangements on the ground for the upcoming return operation. A consistent problem, however, has been the lack of leadership at the strategic level and a lack of sufficient funding – linked, of course, to the lack of an overall Action Plan.

While the mission team was in Liberia, a new UNMIL senior staff member on secondment from UNHCR arrived, to assist the Joint Planning Team in planning for IDP returns. It is not yet clear what his position in UNMIL will be in the longer term, but his arrival was timely and will hopefully contribute greatly to improved coordination of IDP return and reintegration issues. The IDD mission has recommended that the IDP Unit in the Humanitarian Coordination Section of UNMIL should be strengthened.

Although the Liberian Government has a strategy for the return and reintegration of IDPs, the IDP assisted-return operation is about to begin and the international humanitarian community still has no common overall IDP Action Plan. This makes it difficult to identify gaps, prioritize activities and approach donors and agencies with a clear message to address unmet needs. The IDP Procedural Roadmap spells out that the development of a common Action Plan, based on a clear assessment of needs, is the starting point for an effective response to IDP situations. The Humanitarian Coordinator and Country Team members agreed that there is a need for an Action Plan for the return and reintegration of IDPs in Liberia and the IDD is now assisting the Joint Planning Team in preparing one.

### **Summary of recommendations:**

- A common overall Action Plan for IDP return and reintegration in Liberia is needed. This should spell out agency roles and responsibilities and anticipated gaps in the response for which additional resources and capacity are needed. It should be a working document and should be regularly updated.
- In proactively leading the response to the IDP situation, the Humanitarian Coordinator should be supported by a strong IDP Unit, which should consist of a minimum of four staff working full-time on IDP issues.
- More needs to be done urgently to address the alarming levels of child rape and other forms of gender-based violence and abuse, particularly in the IDP camps. For example, increased support and training of community-watch teams is needed. In addition, more funding is needed for community service activities for those who do not want to address their assaults to the local authorities or to a criminal justice system but who need immediate health care and counselling. The work which is being done in some camps with UNICEF support to raise awareness and respond to the medical and psychosocial needs of victims of gender-based violence and abuse should be extended to all camps.
- There is a need for a far greater presence of human rights monitors and protection officers in areas of return. The UNMIL Human Rights and Protection Section still has only 29 of its planned 48 staff. With the IDP assisted return operation about to begin, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights should be requested to expedite the recruitment of the remaining human rights officers, for immediate deployment. Agencies/NGOs with a protection mandate or expertise should also be encouraged to expand their activities in areas of return.
- More focus is needed on community-based reintegration and rehabilitation programmes in areas of return. In particular, additional seeds and tools should be procured for returning IDPs. Project proposals to promote sustainable return should be drawn up as soon as possible and should be presented to donors for funding.
- More funding is needed for return and reintegration activities. Such activities will benefit not only IDPs but also returning refugees, ex-combatants and resident populations, thereby contributing to the stability of communities and, in the long run, the consolidation of peace and security throughout the country.
- As IDPs return, concerted efforts should be made to phase out and consolidate the remaining camps. A clear and decisive strategy is needed for this.

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