

# **Conflict and Population Dispersal: The Refugee Crisis in the Mano River Tri-State Area<sup>1</sup>**

C. Magbaily Fyle\*

Refugee situations have in the past few years become a prominent factor in the politics of African States. Unlike parts of Africa where refugee problems sometimes emanate from natural disasters like drought and famine, the situation in the Mano River Tri-state area (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) arose out of warfare due to political conflicts.

Refugee problems of this nature are inextricably rooted in the political economy of the region in question, in spite of persistent attempts, particularly by the western media, to analyse these in terms of ethnicity. On a more global perspective, viewing the refugee problem as forced emigration, Windgreen comments that emigration can only be stopped by addressing the heart of the matter, which he associates with wide disparities in resources between the north and the south (Windgreen 1990). Narrowing it down to Africa, one evaluator insists that:

the refugee problem is inseparable from the problem of economic development in Africa, both in preventing situations that create refugee flows and in dealing with either of the permanent solutions available — settlement and repatriation (Adelman 1994:1).

The issue of preventing situations which create refugee flows is not only economic, but political. For reactions to control and manipulation of resources by repressive governments often becomes a key issue in whatever political

---

\* Sierra Leonean historian, USA.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express appreciation to the College of Humanities of the Ohio State University for a seed grant to explore the refugee situation in the Mano River Tri-state area.

conflicts that flare up in any region, particularly in Africa. Gaim Kibreab suggests that:

Governments that are legitimate and that rule by consent rather than force are a prerequisite to ending refugee flows and allowing repatriation (Kibreab 1994:XIII).

Once created, the task of addressing a refugee situation also dwells squarely on the political economy. Most commentators agree that the role of aid agencies has been inadequate, for these have been addressing the symptoms rather than the disease. All analysts agree that providing assistance to refugees while neglecting the host communities, as the agencies had been prone to doing, has severe limitations for success (Kibreab 1985; Adelman 1994; Roulet 1990:37). It is also generally agreed that no progress could be made while refugee problems are tackled simply through humanitarian assistance (Roulet 1990:37).

All of these factors relate to the refugee predicament in the Mano River Tri-state area, where the three states of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone came together in the 1970s in a union for economic cooperation named the Mano River Union. A backdrop to this union, often emphasised by the political leaders, was the cultural and historical 'unity' in this region (Fyle 1991). This paper proposes to demonstrate that this cultural unity characterised a unique situation in the absorption of refugees, particularly at the initial stages of the conflicts, prompting comments by observers that:

Even in a continent where, despite the poverty of host countries, refugees have generally been welcomed by their neighbours, the hospitality shown to Liberian refugees was virtually unprecedented (Ruiz 1992).

But first we address the factors giving rise to the refugee situation in the region; the changing configuration of the political conflict, further exacerbating the refugee problem; and the initial reception of these refugees based on kinship and cultural ties. As the refugee emergency became more overwhelming and prolonged, inevitable tensions began to emerge between refugee and host communities, tensions only heightened by aid agencies which concentrated on humanitarian aid to refugees, largely to the neglect of the host communities which had borne the initial brunt of the problem.

With these strained relations, various coping strategies were adopted by host communities and refugees alike, and some of the groups at the short end of the stick were women, whose vulnerability in such refugee situations became more starkly obvious.

### **The Source of the Refugee Problem: Political Conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone**

The problem started by December 1989 with a rebellion in Liberia from its northeastern border with the Ivory Coast, where Charles Taylor put together a force aimed at unseating the government of Samuel Doe in Monrovia (Reno 1993). Taylor, in large part, represented the Americo-Liberian minority which had ruled Liberia since its independence in 1947, and which had been overthrown in 1980 by the military-turned civilian leader, Samuel K. Doe. This was obviously an attempt to recover the position of privilege the Americo-Liberians once enjoyed.

By March 1990, UNHCR officials were reporting some 84,000 Liberian refugees in neighbouring Guinea which, with the Ivory Coast on the other side of the Liberian border, were the initial haven for those fleeing the wars.<sup>2</sup>

The failure of talks between Charles Taylor and the other factions in the Liberian war by June 1990 led to a ferocious spread of the conflict to the capital, Monrovia. This led to a more urban character in the refugee population which also now started reaching Sierra Leone in large numbers. Estimates of 86,000 Liberian refugees having crossed the borders into Sierra Leone were being given by October 1990 (Crisp 1990:8).

The refugees in Sierra Leone, up to the end of 1990, were evenly spread between the eastern and southern provinces, areas closer to the Liberian/Sierra Leone border, and also the Sierra Leone capital, Freetown. There, in Freetown more urbanised and affluent refugees preferred to congregate. Sierra Leone, unlike the Ivory Coast, has English as an 'official' language, the same as Liberia.

One result of negotiations to solve the Liberian war came to involve the participation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which set up a composite force called the Economic Community Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) to enter the Liberian war in an attempt to end it. Charles Taylor came to see this force as interference as it seemed to him that the activities of ECOMOG were directed against him.

---

2 *West Africa*. 12-16 March 1990. There seemed to have been a smaller number initially in the Ivory Coast. 3,000 being reported in January 1992 (*West Africa*, 27 January-2 February 1992). By the end of 1994, however, UNHCR sources were being quoted for 150,000 in the Tabor region of Ivory Coast (*Jeune Afrique*, No. 1871, 23 February-1 March 1995).

Sierra Leone constituted part of the ECOMOG force and Sierra Leone's territory was being used extensively as a springboard for ECOMOG activities. This made Sierra Leone an object of Charles Taylor's hostility. Taylor warned that he would take the war into Sierra Leone. This warning, apparently not taken very seriously, became a reality as Taylor put together a force led by an ex-corporal of the Sierra Leone army named Foday Sankoh. Thus, at least initially, the Foday Sankoh invasion was an extension of Charles Taylor's 'expansion' (Reno 1993). First reports of this invasion of Sierra Leone from the Liberian border reached Freetown in March, 1991 (Fyle 1994:133). Government reports by June 1991, indicated that 'over 60,000 Sierra Leoneans had fled their homes into Guinea.'<sup>3</sup>

The Foday Sankoh invasion hit across the eastern border from Liberia into the Kailahun and Pujehun districts of Sierra Leone, and in a few months into the Kenema and Kono Districts, all in the east and southeast of the country bordering Liberia. This was precisely where most of the Liberian refugees had settled following Charles Taylor's rebellion in Liberia. When these areas of Sierra Leone were attacked by Foday Sankoh's forces, it was reported that 'almost all the Liberian refugees who were living in Sierra Leone fled that part of the country... when... rebels invaded Sierra Leone' (Ruiz 1992:31). The Liberian civil war and invasion of Sierra Leone from Liberia by Foday Sankoh, therefore, created a common refugee crisis particularly in the area where these two countries, as well as Guinea, have common borders. Liberian refugees, into Sierra Leone now followed Sierra Leone refugees into the Guinean territory.

A summation of the refugee problem in Guinea was made by Methodist mission officials from Sierra Leone visiting the hosting areas in Guinea in March 1992:

At the time of our visit there were (from UNHCR sources) 500,000 refugees in Guinea: Of this number over 400,000 were Liberians. At the time of visit also there were newcomers from Sierra Leone numbering some 13,000 daily because of the December attacks on Kono by rebels.<sup>4</sup>

Kono and Kenema are the main diamond mining districts in Sierra Leone, a very valuable prize and by late 1992, the Foday Sankoh rebels had extended their area of control to include the Kono mining areas.

3 *West Africa*, 10-16 June, 1991.

4 Methodist Church, Sierra Leone (MCSL) Rev. Moses Kainwo to UNHCR, Freetown, visit to Refugee camps 19 February-4 March, 1992.

As the Sierra Leone army mounted an offensive against the Foday Sankoh rebels, many areas of Sierra Leone's eastern provinces were liberated. The diamond areas of Kono were declared 'free and safe for people to return to their homes' by October, 1993.<sup>5</sup> But even as these reports of areas being liberated were received, the situation in Sierra Leone appeared to degenerate into renewed attacks on liberated areas, large scale plundering and looting, and a spread of rebel attacks into other areas of Sierra Leone, seemingly unconnected with the Foday Sankoh offensive.

There had by this time (late 1993) apparently been a weakening or severance of the links between Foday Sankoh and Charles Taylor of Liberia. In fact reports by early 1994 suggested Foday Sankoh had faded from the scene. But the rebel war in Sierra Leone seemed to intensify.

### **Transformation of the Sierra Leone Rebel War**

In trying to evaluate the apparent transformation of the civil war spurring a more serious refugee crisis from the Sierra Leone end, a more informal approach to evidence collecting became necessary. Much of the information on which this analysis is based comes from a recent visit to Sierra Leone (March 1995). Numerous interviews were done, radio and television programmes in Freetown on the ongoing war evaluated, and newspaper accounts considered. The conclusion about the evidence is that much of the information pertinent to understanding the situation, even where known to the government, is kept away from the regular news channels.

An appreciation of this transformation of the Sierra Leone civil war can only properly be obtained in terms of a socioeconomic analysis. What Shelley Drayton analyses about ethnicity as a tool for 'resistance to economic oppression or the correction of a perceived inequality' (Drayton 1995:12) rings true if one substitutes 'civil war' for 'ethnicity' in the Sierra Leone case. The close affinity to a class conflict is evident here, where, according to Magubane,

the concept of class addresses itself to the most fundamental aspect of contemporary human life — the distribution of resources in society and the power relations which are implied by this distribution (Magubane 1985:170).

In many respects, the invasion of Sierra Leone, started on the eastern frontier, on the instigation of Charles Taylor, degenerated into a struggle by have-nots against the haves, the latter being seen as the dominant elements from whose

5 MCSL, Refugee/Displaced People's Newssheet, February 1994.

ranks the rulers are drawn. When the war first started, the rebels led by Foday Sankoh were making a coordinated advance, taking over and controlling territory in the east of Sierra Leone, their success albeit enhanced by surprise and the unpreparedness of the Sierra Leone forces.

But as government troops proceeded to counter the rebel attack, the rank and file soldiery, poorly paid and seeing little of the power benefits which usually went to the upper echelons of the army, were the very ones who had to be given arms to lead the resistance. This had one spillover effect in a successful military coup in April 1992, ushering a military government in Sierra Leone (Fyle 1994).

But these new military rulers now came to be seen as the privileged. The remaining underprivileged soldiers continued on the war front in an area essentially about the wealthiest in Sierra Leone (diamonds in Kono and Kenema, cocoa and coffee plantations in Kenema and Kailahun districts). These government fighting forces soon realised the benefits of reaping their own profits from plundering the very communities they were sent to defend. For them it became a two-pronged objective, sometimes conflicted, of repelling the rebels and also performing the same acts of plunder the rebels were accused of. These soldiers thereby began acquiring wealth in a few months which they realised they would never have obtained in a whole working life as regularly paid soldiers.

Right from the earlier periods of offensive, it had become apparent, according to reports of visitors to the area, that 'local people have informed us that much of the looting, if not all, was carried out by Sierra Leone security forces, which is most unfortunate'.<sup>6</sup> The situation came to involve Liberian soldiers reportedly members of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and also Guinean soldiers on the frontier with Sierra Leone and Liberia. One intelligence report summed up the situation thus:

Guinean soldiers are doing business with NPFL rebels along the rivers dividing Guinea and Liberia... Rebels sold building materials, utensils, furniture, water pipes looted from Sierra Leone and brought to Guekedou market (in Guinea) for sale daily. All the stores are full with stolen properties from Sierra Leone. The Foulahs, Mandingoes, Mende and Kissis made a representation to the mayor of their plight in seeing their furniture... etc., but nothing came out of it...

---

6 MCSL. Report of Refugees/Displaced People's Committee for 1991.

All security men (in Sierra Leone) have agents across in Liberia to bring expensive items which they bought next to nothing. The slogan they have is that others went to ECOMOG and returned rich, they should be rich too at the frontier.<sup>7</sup>

A later report by the end of 1993 also indicated that the soldiers were finding all possible ways of enriching themselves from the war. It informed:

Many refugees go down to the waterside (on the border) to see their relatives/friends on the Sierra Leonean side of the river and make efforts to get them to join them in the camps (in Guinea). However, before they are able to cross, the Sierra Leone soldiers ensure the people pay by making them cut cocoa, coffee, palm nuts etc. and carry same to the waterside where they are sold to Guinean traders. When the people (refugees) get to the Guinea side the Guinean soldiers demand sums of money ... from the refugees (already in Guinea) before letting their relatives/friends join them.<sup>8</sup>

Thus by the time the Foday Sankoh front fell apart and lost the Charles Taylor support, it had become clear to the Sierra Leonean soldiers that plundering settlements, obviously from the more prosperous elements in such settlements, was far more profitable than going back to barracks to their regular wages. Many soldiers therefore became rebels, properly armed, and banditry under cover of military attacks by uniformed soldiers became the norm.

Many of these government forces turned rebels had included urban hoodlums in the society, particularly in Freetown, who had been hastily trained to beef up the government forces on the war front. This had been a policy of the civilian government ousted by the military coup of 1992, perhaps meant to counter the disgruntled lower ranks of the soldiers of the regular army, whom they feared might be tempted into a putsch.

By the end of 1993, these new rebel groups had grown in number, attacking settlements and setting up roadblocks to attack and rob passing vehicles. Over and over again, participant observers distressed by these attacks reported that they were done by soldiers, sometimes clearly identified as regular government troops. That these new rebels always wore Sierra Leone military uniforms is well known. This in fact is why they have been able to do so much havoc to various communities. For when they initially appear,

---

7 Embassy of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Conakry Guinea K/1/B/vol.2. Information Agent Report to Mr. Joko-John, August 1992 (parenthesis mine).

8 MCSL, Refugees/Displaced People's Newsheet, February 1994.

they easily lull unsuspecting defenceless communities into a sense of security, giving the impression that they were there to protect such settlements. Even a small rebel group could therefore have a clear advantage to attack and destroy such settlements. As time elapsed, the underprivileged, no longer only soldiers, began to realise the power they had against the system, against authority and the privileged. These have-nots included the unemployed, even university graduates who had gone without jobs a couple of years after graduation!

Some of these new rebel groups emerged with the Sierra Leone military government's attempts to set up what were called civilian defence committees from local residents in various communities. As these committees became armed by the government, many of them joined the ranks of 'rebels', sometimes constituting themselves into new rebel groups scattered all over the country.

The main rebel force reportedly terrorising the south central area of Sierra Leone by early 1995, which has evidently attacked establishments like the rutilite mines of Mobimbi, the bauxite mines of Mokañji and other settlements in the Moyamba district, is said to be led by a woman. Released captives from rebel-attacked areas have been interviewed by the government. Television broadcasts of such interviews show these people as identifying this female leader as belonging to one of the communities in the general area. None has as yet named her. Thus can be seen as pervading the entire society. Many reports also identify the new rebels as drawn from regular members of rural communities in the region, now armed with guns and attacking towns and villages they know only too well.

The growing realisation, then, of the power of the indigent to 'control' or at least defy the privileged who control the system, has aggravated the desire of the destitute to redress the syndrome of the 'correction of perceived inequality'. It is obviously that power which needs to be channelled into a true democratic system. The fact that the penurious have come to realise they have this power is indeed political education! Equally so, it also would now be much easier to bring home to the rural population the connection between government policies, which could cause a civil war, and their daily lives, and therefore the imperative of their participation in politics, with issues as the relevant consideration.

The proliferation of rebel groups without any clear ideological goal beyond acquiring material resources is why it has been so difficult to understand and solve the Sierra Leone civil war. The cry in the past few months is that there are rebels without a face, unwilling to negotiate, and no one seems to be



fully certain who leads them. The name Foday Sankoh has come to mean a convenient cover. As commented one *New York Times* rapport, 'confusion over the rebels has grown even thicker, with various people making short-wave radio calls to foreign embassies, the United Nations and even the Government, all claiming to be the rebel leader.<sup>9</sup> This merely represents ambitious individuals trying to capitalise on the degenerate situation.

Apparently, the military government is largely aware of these developments. Releasing information about these grim realities to the public would call into the question the credibility of the army itself, not to talk of the possibility of encouraging further defections among the rank and file soldiery.

More recently, one of the major problems with the military defence against the rebels is defection of soldiers sent to combat rebel attacks. But the unreliability of such forces sent against the rebels cannot be personalised or sectionalised as some analysts have attempted to do. It is not based on ethnicity or loyalty to any particular region or idea, except the use of a new found power to acquire material resources. Arguably, some of these soldiers sent to defend the country at the point of departure would be loyal and dependable citizens, but on reaching the war front, reflecting on their material situation and being tempted by their new power, they could readily succumb.

And the rebels are reportedly using this weapon as propaganda. Reports from people living in war affected areas tell of government soldiers being lured into the new residences of their former colleagues-turned-rebels. Admiration is expressed to them about what material goods these new rebels have acquired in a few months, compared to what their state would have been had they remained loyal government soldiers. Reports indicate this propaganda has been working.

### **Settlement of Refugees**

The continuing situation of warfare has only aggravated the refugee crisis. Aid agency sources for the statistics of the refugee population, though presenting a grim picture, are often underestimations, as not all areas where the refugees flee to are accessed by these agencies. By April 1994, for example, reports reaching the Sierra Leone embassy in Guinea from the Kankan region (Guinea), speak of 36,000 Sierra Leonean refugees there. The refugee leader laments:

---

9 *New York Times*, February 16, 1995 A10.

...always I receive many refugees here coming from the war in Sierra Leone.... Since we're living at Kankan, we don't get help (sic) from no international organisation. We don't get what to eat, what to wear, and no money for medical treatment in case of illness.<sup>10</sup>

'The initial response of the international community-including UNHCR to the Liberian refugee emergency was slow and inadequate' (Ruiz 1992), writes one observer close to the situation. Other members of the international community who became involved in this relief project included the International Red Cross, the Catholic and Methodist Churches in Sierra Leone, supported by their international affiliates, Médecins Sans Frontières, a French Voluntary agency, Foundation for African Development from Holland, CARE, as well as the World Food Program.

Indeed by November 1991, months after the commencement of the onslaught, a Methodist mission team visiting refugee sites in Guinea insisted that 'some refugees complain that they have not received any food supply (from aid agencies) since they went into Guinea.'<sup>11</sup> Some of the reports indicated that as the refugee flows increased, the Red Cross refused to register beyond a certain number of refugees<sup>12</sup> — registration being the ticket for access to food supply from the aid agencies. Some 20 per cent of the refugees in Guinea at this time were estimated as 'either unregistered or registered but not getting food supply.'<sup>13</sup>

The initial impact of the Liberian refugee problem was shouldered by the recipient countries in Guinea, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. Most of these refugees had linguistic ties with people across the borders. Two issues come out more perceptibly here. Firstly, the activities of support were not based particularly on governmental intervention from either of the host countries. Secondly, it showed the artificiality of the respective borders particularly between the Mano River states, if one considers the issue of relations of peoples across such borders at the unofficial level, but this is an issue only beginning to receive the attention it deserves (Asiwaju 1985; Akintola-Bello 1989).

---

10 Haja Mariama Kabba, President Refugee Committee, Kankan, to Ambassador of Sierra Leone at Conakry, 24 April 1994. Embassy of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Conakry, Guinea K/1/B/vol. 2.

11 MCSL, Report on Trip to Guekedou District, Republic of Guinea, 25 October to 17 November 1991.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

Most of the inhabitants who once resided on the common borders between Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone had no problems crossing the borders as refugees apart from harassment by soldiers already referred to. These crossings had been a common practice in the area. Instead of going through border posts and rather lengthy and costly recognised roads, people usually found the shortest routes as the crow flies to attend to business, like periodic markets or church services. This of course meant disregarding border posts and formalities of inter-state travel which no one had the facility to insist upon in those areas (Fyle 1993; Bah 1983). In fact, it would have been extremely difficult to insist on these formalities, as it has always been an enigma to keep track of kin members belonging to the same extended family and speaking the same language but only divided according to them by a 'non-visible' border.

Refugees, therefore, followed this age-old routing to seek asylum in the neighbouring countries. Numerous reports indicate the benefits of this relationship in providing for the refugees. Said one evaluation,

Problems of accommodating refugees are least noticeable in the villages nearest the border with Liberia. There, many of the refugees are locals, whose villages are in close proximity, are not only of the same ethnic group, they are often related or have known each other most of their lives (Ruiz 1992:32).

A similar comment was made by the Methodist mission team from Sierra Leone to the refugee areas in Guinea, observing that:

the refugees, many of whom came from the same tribal background as the local population have been well accepted and in addition is (sic) being allowed to remain in the area (and) have also been allocated land for farming purposes.<sup>14</sup>

But even where kinship ties were non-existent, refugees were well treated. Even where refugees and their hosts 'share(d) relatively few ethnic or family ties... no one has been turned away' (Crisp 1990).

As a result of such hospitality, 'Liberian refugees, unlike most refugees worldwide, did not wind up living in refugee camps but "cohabiting" (as it is referred to in the region) with the local people in the countries of asylum' (Ruiz 1992:30). Land, as indicated earlier, was generously allocated to refugees by local authorities and they settled down among farming communities, building rough and ready dwellings when their hosts' homes

---

14 MCSL, Mission Report, 19-26 May, 1993.

became overcrowded. Though refugee camps developed as the numbers rapidly increased, the initial atmosphere was one of cooperation and congeniality.

Kibreab knocks on the head as *passé* the issue of 'traditional hospitality based on kinship ties; but he does agree that munificence based on ethnic or lineage relations correlates with the availability of the resources to accommodate each other (Kibreab 1985:69).

As the numbers of refugees became larger and the means of their hosts became consequently stretched, obvious tensions began to emerge. This situation was not helped by the aid agencies which concentrated their emergency relief efforts on the refugee population, to the neglect of the host communities. The latter invariably reacted in what has wrongly been described as jealousy, by beginning to devise ways of benefiting from the aid provided and to make demands on the refugees receiving such aid. The atmosphere, initially very cordial, was subsequently tarnished by this development.

The growth of the refugee population and the consequent strain on resources became even more serious when in some instances the guests became more numerous than their hosts in some settlements. More general comments indicated even by the end of 1990 that 'in many places, the Liberians now easily outnumber the local population (Crisp 1990:9). In one refugee camp at Fangamandou in Guinea, it was stated that 'refugee children outnumber Guinean children attending the new school set up in the area'.<sup>15</sup>

Problems attendant upon this increase were not merely relegated to dwindling means. As one official commented, 'when the number of refugees in a village becomes even higher than the number of locals, the issue of authority and decision-making can become a concern (Ruiz 1992:32).

In some instances, the character of the refugee population was rather different from that of the recipient host communities. Particularly with refugees from Liberia after Monrovia was attacked, there developed a flow of urban-based asylum seekers into rural communities in Guinea and Ivory Coast. Patterns of relating to authority, of urban styles of dress and attitude, particularly among women, were not welcome in a rural community. This clearly added to other tensions related to increased numbers of refugees and declining goods of the hosts. In one rural settlement in the Ivory Coast which

---

15 MCSL. Report of Refugee/Displaced People's Committee for 1991.

was loaded with refugees from Monrovia, local residents were complaining of women wearing shorts and trousers, insisting, in French, *'n'est pas bon, n'est pas bon'* (Ruiz 1992:33).

But the tensions were more related to declining resources of the host communities, and, with the advent of the aid agencies, the concentration of their emergency relief only on the refugees. In the face of it, the depletion of already meagre goods of the receiving communities was caused by the refugee presence and the slow response of the aid agencies. Thus one would have expected that a more general distribution of emergency relief supplies to hosts and guests would have been a fairer deal. But this did not appear to have been the case. Thus the hosts, already impoverished by entertaining the refugees would not be expected to sit by and watch relief supplies being given only to the refugees.

In fact, some of the aid agencies expected the refugees not to share with their hosts. As a Methodist Mission refugee report indicated,

...many of them (refugees) who lived in villages are now building camps where more attention can be given to them by UNHCR and other humanitarian bodies, and can live on food supplies to them without sharing such food with their village hosts as they used to.<sup>16</sup>

Very naturally, the host communities began to devise ways of benefiting from the aid which only increased conflict with the refugees. Interpretations of such developments as due to a lack of common ethnicity or plain jealousy (Ruiz 1992) seem off the mark.

In many instances, the local authorities in the cooperating host community had accepted the responsibility of distributing the relief supplies to the refugees. They were commended for this in terms which stated that 'the host communities' involvement and responsibilities have precluded the need for ration cards, and prevented the abuse that goes with them' (Tison 1991:29). But other reports criticised the 'local civil authorities (who) ... give (the relief supplies) first to their own people arguing that they are looking after the refugees'.<sup>17</sup>

Strategies to benefit from these supplies by the local authorities included inflating the figures of refugees to receive more supplies. When this did not

---

16 MCSL. Trip to Guekedou.

17 MCSL. Report on visit to Guinea by Rev. C.T. Eddy, 12-18 July 1991.

suffice, measures began to be taken to ensure a redirection of these goods from the refugees by the local authorities. It soon came to be claimed that:

landowners demanded part of the harvest and then later on said the land was only available for one season which meant they had to negotiate for new farm areas and start from scratch again by brushing (clearing) the land given to them.<sup>18</sup>

It was also reported, in interviews in Conakry in July 1994, that government authorities in Guinea were citing proposed refugee camps in areas of relatively difficult access, forcing the relief agencies to construct roads to reach such camps, thereby providing for the country these infrastructural benefits from the agencies. These benefits, as discussed earlier, should have been considered in the first place.

### **Impact of the Refugee Situation on Women**

Assumptions, often misguided, about such disasters which give rise to refugee situations, tend to underplay the role of and impact on women of such situations. Yet the position of women deserves special consideration because there are issues of gender not applicable to men.

Issues often overlooked relate to the role of women as mothers and greater vulnerability of females as refugees because of their sex. As Berthiaume has commented, female refugees 'are vulnerable to acts of violence and sexual harassment in exchange for their basic needs' (1991:10). In addition, caring for children, especially the very young, is almost entirely done by women in African societies. The emotional attachment of mothers to suckling babies and their very young offsprings involve special passionate bonds that can throw up more serious problems for women in refugee situations. Again, Berthiaume mentions that 'when children cry because they are hungry, their mothers experience major emotional disturbances' (1991:10), especially if they cannot satisfy this hunger.

This often would lead women into severe compromises. In order to feed their children they would be willing to find work more actively and compromise themselves in the process. Instances had been recorded in refugee camps where women accept consorts in monogamous relationships, often without a choice, simply for protection, for unprotected women are easily subject to abuse.

---

18 MCSL. Report on the trip to Guinea to visit the Refugee Camps. 28 March to 6 April 1994 (parenthesis mine).

Such situations were not altogether absent from the refugee situation in the Mano River area. One report on the Liberian refugees by late 1990 stated that 'many of the women have been sexually abused' (Crisp 1990:9).

In terms of their emotional attachment to their children, as mentioned, women are also put in a difficult position. There is the situation of a Liberian refugee named Annie who fled the Liberian war across the border to the village of Belegleu in the Ivory Coast 'with 26 members of her family, most of them children' (Ruiz 1992:32). Having secured temporary accommodation from an aunt in that village, 'Annie obtained a small plot of land next to her aunt's house where she and her family were able to build a hut of their own'. This responsibility of caring for the family, particularly the very young, would tend to be shouldered by a woman alone; a situation which makes unfortunate compromises more likely.

Despite these possibilities, there are occasions where some women display the fortitude necessary to provide leadership in such difficult situations. In one instance, the president of the refugee committee in Kankan, Guinea, is a woman, Haja Mariama Kabba. By rising above all the possible difficulties analysed earlier, Kabba's success demonstrates the ability of women.

This special position of women would therefore require special consideration in addressing refugee situations.

## Conclusion

According to Gaim Kibreab writing in 1987 about international relief organisations,

current programs are designed to benefit only refugees to the neglect of the local population and assistance to refugees is not provided beyond the level of subsistence (1987:4).

This kind of situation seems to have prevailed in the Mano River Tri-state area. Indeed, as this paper has tried to demonstrate, quite a bit of the impact of the refugee crisis was borne by the receiving communities, utilising already scarce resources. In fact, the situation was worsened in Guinea as the first flush of the refugee onslaught occurred during the 'hungry season', the period soon before the first harvests when supplies are usually very low. But these settlements demonstrated sterling qualities and the increased tension that developed later should be put largely to depleted resources, while emergency relief was concentrated on the refugee guests who after all had consumed much of the resources of their hosts. These benevolent communities were, therefore, equally entitled to relief aid. Lack of common ethnicity or language, jealousy of local recipient villages about refugee aid, where these

existed, would have played much less of a role in conflict than has apparently been attributed to them.

A situation of hope is expressed that relief agencies are becoming more aware of this problem, but this has to be matched with greater resources, in an international atmosphere of decreasing aid. 'By mid September (1990, UNHCR) had received only US\$5.7 million of the US\$15.9 million needed to assist half a million Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea' (Crisp 1990:9).

One unintended outcome, perhaps, of the refugee situation is that some refugees will remain permanently in the countries to which they fled. For the pain of revisiting their destroyed homes, the new life with new farm land and homes, perhaps new partners in marriage sometimes among people of common ethnicity, would have the effect of refugees turning their backs on repatriation. In fact some have begun to express such sentiments in Guinea.

But addressing the problems of refugees, as indicated at the start, means also addressing the root causes of the occurrences spurning the refugee crises. We have attempted to show that this foundation relates to the political economy, to a situation where political developments are attributable largely to underlying economic causes. Attempts to trace the bedrock of such conflicts to ethnicity would be at best misleading, for whether it is in Somalia or Burundi (Ress 1992), attempts to control the distribution of resources particularly by a privileged minority to the exclusion of the other larger segment of society has a strong potential for ultimately flaring up into conflict.

That there is sometimes a coincidence of identifiable ethnicity in such conflicts (Cohen 1972:234; Magubane 1969:538) should be understood in terms of fragile political systems inherited from colonial rule which have made it easily possible for scheming politicians to use ethnicity to abuse the minds of a populace largely unfamiliar with such political systems.

As Rutake has suggested for Burundi, seeking answers to such questions should make us,

move beyond the short-sighted and simplistic explanation (of ethnicity)... put forward to justify the ethnic confrontation between the minority Tutsis and the majority Hutus... It would be more logical to focus on the structural data of the Burundese society in its evolution, with a particular attention to the political behaviour of the Burundese elite in the management of the state, both in the one-party and in the multi-party system (1995).

We have tried to show here that the elaboration of the conflict in both Liberia and Sierra Leone was deeply related to perceived access to resources



and the control of such resources by a minority elite group considerations of both the refugee situation and the causes of it should therefore be considered particularly in this direction.

## References

- Adelman, H. and J. Sorenson. 1994. *African Refugees: Development Aid and Repatriation* Boulder, Westview Press.
- Akintola-Bello, O., 1989, 'The Political Economy of Artificial Boundaries', in Asiwaju, A. and P., Adeniyi, *Borderlands in Africa* Nigeria, University of Lagos Press.
- Asiwaju, A., 1985. *Partitioned Africans: Ethnic Relations Across Africa's International Borders, 1884-1984* London, C. Hurst & Co.
- Bah, Alpha. 1983. 'Fulbe Migration and Settlement in Koindu Among the Kissi of Sierra Leone'. Ph.D. Dissertation, Howard University.
- Berthiaume, Christiane, 1991, 'Refugee Women: Principles and Practice', *Refugees* (UNHCR), 84. April.
- Cohen, R., 1972. 'Classes in Africa: Analytical Problems and Perspectives', *The Socialist Register*. London, Merlin Press.
- Crisp, Jeff. 1990. 'Sierra Leone: Nightmare Journey to a Land of Peace', *Refugees* (UNHCR) 79. October.
- Drayton, Shelly. 1995. 'De-mystifying "Tribalism": Identity, Politics and Conflict in Modern Africa', CODESRIA Bulletin, 1.
- Fyle, C. Magbaily. 1993. 'Regional Integration and Border Relations in Upper Guinea: Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone', Paper presented at the International Conference on West African Integration, IDRC/ECOWAS, Dakar, January.
- Fyle, C. Magbaily. 1994, 'The Military and Civil Society in Sierra Leone: The 1992 Military Coup d'Etat'. *Africa Development* XVIII, 2.
- Kibreab, Gaim. 1985. *African Refugees: Reflections on the African Refugee Problem* Trenton, New Jersey, African World Press.
- Kibreab, Gaim, 1987. *Refugees and Development in Africa: The Case of Eritrea* Trenton, New Jersey, The Red Sea Press.
- Magubane, Bernard. 1969. 'Pluralism and Conflict Situations in Africa', *African Social Research* 7, June.
- Magubane, Bernard. 1976, 'The Evolution of the Class Structures in Africa', in P. Gutkind and I. Wallerstein (eds.). *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa* Beverley Hills, Sage Publications.

- Reno, William, 1993, 'Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor's NPFL', *Liberian Studies Journal*, 18, 2.
- Ress, David, 1992, *The Burundi Ethnic Massacres*, 1988, New York, Mellen.
- Roulet, Annick, 1990, 'The Politics of Assistance', *Refugees* (UNHCR) 76, June.
- Ruiz, 1992, 'Liberia: The Honeymoon is Over', *Refugees* (UNHCR), 88 January.
- Rutake, Pascal, 1995, 'Burundi in Search of Democracy', *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1.
- Tison, Elizabeth, 1991, 'Getting Back to the Land', *Refugees*, (UNHCR) 85, May.
- Windgreen, Jonas, 1990, 'Demography and Democracy', *Refugees* (UNHCR), 73, March.