

# Reflections on Liberian Refugee Repatriation from Ghana

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## **Abstract**

**I**n May 2008, Dana Binnendijk commenced a two-and-a-half month stay in the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana, where she conducted research for her master's thesis on the repatriation of refugees and taught NGO management to organizations started in the camp. The following are some of her reflections on her experiences in the field.

If I don't wake up to the sound of clanging pots and pans in the morning, my eyes fly open to a man shouting in a loudspeaker at 4:45 a.m., providing refugees with vital information about daily news around camp and the plan for repatriation. At times I wonder whether his loudspeaker is pressed firmly against the screen of my window since it almost feels like he is in the room with me. The deafening noise only makes the Liberian accent harder for me to understand. I groan, wave my hand around in the dark to find the opening of my mosquito net, and turn on my radio to listen to BBC Africa. Since refugees start their days when the sun rises at 5 a.m., so do I.

As I get dressed listening to news about the Zimbabwean elections and President Mugabe's refusal to admit defeat, I think about the power of information. Here I am, in the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana in the summer of 2008, hearing about the crisis in Zimbabwe, where opposition leaders are disappearing and rural voters are being physically harassed. Is someone, somewhere across the continent, or even across the world, listening to news about the tension between Ghanaians and the Liberian refugees in Buduburam?

When it comes to human security, refugees have little to protect them. According to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone who flees his or her country of origin because of a "well-founded fear of being

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persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”<sup>1</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the international humanitarian agency responsible for the protection of refugees, but it is often at the mercy of its donors, the host country where the refugees are staying, or the refugees’ country of origin. UNHCR can advocate and negotiate to promote the rights of refugees, but it cannot necessarily control the decisions made by these various stakeholders. In a protracted refugee situation, resources become slim as more immediate crises arise.

Liberian refugees have been in Ghana since their first civil war started in 1989. Many tried to return home in 1997 after the war ended, only to find a second civil war would erupt soon after Charles Taylor was elected president. Even though there has been peace in the country since 2003 and a relatively stable democracy with Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in power since 2006, refugees have been hesitant to return from Ghana. I find myself repeatedly asking “why?” as I hop over trash and rivers of waste, trying to ignore the stench and instead to summon up the comforting smells of the camp, such as the cooking of cassava and fresh bread.

I find my favorite breakfast spot in camp and slip myself onto the high stool at the U-shaped, bar-like table surrounding the cook. I savor this hour of peace, where I can eat an egg and bread sandwich, watch Al Jazeera news, and drink a hot chocolate or coffee for just over one dollar. Samuel,<sup>2</sup> from Sierra Leone, has an inviting smile and an entrepreneurial spirit. He owns one of the most successful businesses in the camp, yet when he arrived at the camp he had nothing but the clothes on his back. I find that I am continuously impressed by how resilient people at Buduburam can be despite violent histories and a lack of resources. Markets are thriving with food and household goods, and small businesses owned by refugees exist throughout the camp. In fact, many people, including Ghanaians, would say the Liberians in Buduburam are better off than many Ghanaians living in local villages, where they don’t have easy access to Accra and have very little to no help from the international community.

While I wait for my egg and bread to be made, a refugee sitting to my left looks at me, holds up his plate, and says “you are welcome.” The first few times I frowned in confusion, but now I realize it is a custom for Liberians to offer you some of their food if they are eating and you have nothing in front of you.

Through interviews for my thesis or casual conversations during my internship, it becomes clear to me that the Liberians at Buduburam understand their options. UNHCR provides all refugees around the world with three durable solutions: local integration into the host country; resettlement to a third country such as the United States, Europe, or Australia; or repatriation back to the country of origin. Liberians never have any trouble telling me what these options are, which shows that UNHCR has provided them with significant information through poster stands around camp and through the early-morning camp announcements. In fact, the flow of information is surprisingly official, since the camp has a Liberian Refugee Welfare Council (LRWC). The LRWC is a formal structure that has elected council members from each zone to represent

the voice of the people at council meetings, and also to relay news from UNHCR back to the refugees. Yet there is still a lack of clarity about the fact that resettlement is no longer an option, or about what it means to locally integrate. Refugees know these are options, but whether they fully understand their meaning is unclear.

Before March 2008, UNHCR planes were leaving half-empty to go back to Liberia. Few refugees were interested in going home; the majority decided to stay at the Buduburam camp, despite their complaints that it was illegal for them to get jobs in Ghana and that education was too expensive. However, Ghanaians are now ready to see the camp closed. In March, protests by refugees were deemed illegal by the Ghanaian government and led to a serious increase in tensions between the Ghanaians and the Liberian refugees. Hundreds of women and children had gathered and asked for \$1,000 per refugee from UNHCR to go back to Liberia or to be relocated to the United States. They refused to integrate locally because they believed it would be expensive and unfair since they had never been allowed to work. Neither demand was realistic as the United States no longer accepts refugees from the camp and UNHCR does not have the funds to give such sums of money to the 42,000 slated for repatriation. During this contentious period, there were reports of protesting women running around naked—apparently untrue according to volunteers who were in Buduburam during this period. There were rumors among bloggers and reports in some newspapers that arrests of the protesters led to severe human rights violations, such as beatings and rape. It is hard to sort fact from fiction in such mixed and confused reports (especially since not all media in the region is necessarily reliable), but there was undoubtedly violence during March and April. In this case, the power of misinformation may dominate, perhaps contributing to the escalating tensions between Liberian refugees and Ghanaians.

As I leave my favorite breakfast spot and weave back and forth through the crowd in the market, I think about how these dirt roads will soon be empty. It is now clear to most refugees that they essentially have no other option but to repatriate back to Liberia, despite their many hopes for a new resettlement program to reopen. As part of my research, I ask what their greatest fear is about returning. The majority of answers revolve around both physical and material safety. First and foremost, Liberians are afraid they won't have a place to stay upon their return home. While UNHCR asks where refugees will be staying and does provide a place to sleep on the first night of arrival, the \$100 refugees receive does not last long. Many of the refugees I interview believe that if they have a place to sleep at night once back in Liberia, they will figure out all of the other issues.

Other concerns include finishing education, getting jobs, and dealing with the rising crime rate in an overcrowded Monrovia. Some are afraid they will have trouble keeping family members together. Those who have either lived all their lives in the camp since 1990 and/or whose families and friends were killed during the war are uncertain about their futures. Although life in Buduburam camp is “not easy,” as they so often express, they have a close-knit community and more resources than they will have at home.

I count my change to give to the woman slicing oranges, and start to wonder whether the situation at home is as bad as the Liberians think. What if the power of information is working against the refugees and reports coming from Liberia are exaggerated? Or, alternatively, what if top-level reforms in Liberia are not reaching people on the ground, and the refugees will, in fact, suffer upon returning home? According to the international community, Liberia is one of the most successful post-conflict states in western Africa. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf has done a remarkable job making substantial long-term reforms to the government, ensuring that it is structured as a democracy and that there are functioning institutions that provide for the people.

Yet the fears refugees have are not directly related to the restructuring of government. The refugees' knowledge about Liberia is almost entirely dependent on their communication through the internet and hearsay from other Liberians who are struggling in the country. UNHCR and the Liberian government attempt to provide accurate and reassuring information, but when there are conflicting messages, refugees tend to trust their personal contacts more than official ones. The sudden surge of free media in Liberia is also resulting in alarming reports that are highly critical of the government's tolerance for corruption and the rising crime rate, adding to the reluctance among refugees to return home.

My feet ache by the end of the day after walking several miles around camp, and I am exhausted from the pounding Ghanaian sun. I finally sit down to eat a scrawny, bony chicken breast and some fried rice before it gets dark at 6:30 p.m. I smile up at the woman serving me, and thankfully sip on my orange Fanta. I wonder whether she was one of the women protesting out in the fields this past March, and I realize that it is not hard to see both sides of the issue. Since the war ended in 2003, not only has the conflict been over for five years, but Liberia has become a relatively stable democracy. It must be time for the refugees to return home. On the other hand, I can understand why they are hesitant to return to a situation where they are so unsure about their personal security. I picture myself in their situation—potentially roaming the streets for a place to live and hoping I will not be robbed of the little money I have—and cringe. For some, it must feel like walking straight off a cliff with their eyes closed, unsure about how far they will fall.

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## Endnotes

- 1 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 1(2). <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>
- 2 Name has been changed.