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Forgotten or Neglected? Non-Registered Liberian Refugees in Ghana: Their Rights and Protection

By Omata Naohiko

This paper reports on the existence and plight of non-registered Liberian refugees in Ghana. According to UNHCR statistics, the Buduburam refugee settlement, located in Southern Ghana, accommodated approximately 12,000 Liberian refugees as of the end of 2009 (UNHCR 2010). However, this number was not quite accurate. These 12,000 refugees were only those who had been registered with UNHCR in Ghana. Besides these 'formal' refugees, according to settlement residents, there were more than a few thousand non-registered Liberians. Most of them were forced migrants who had fled from Liberia to escape violence and persecution during the Liberian civil war, which began in 1989 when Charles Taylor took up arms against Samuel Doe's regime. Nonetheless, these Liberians had not been recognised by UNHCR and its Ghanaian refugee counterparts and had been excluded from any forms of refugee protection and assistance in Ghana.

Between August 2008 and July 2009, I conducted a one-year doctoral field-research in the Buduburam refugee settlement. The main focus of my research was to explore refugees' livelihood strategies to understand how they had been making ends meet. During the research period, in order to observe refugees' daily life as closely as possible, with permission from the Ghanaian government, I lived inside the settlement and conducted more than 300 semi-structured interviews with settlement residents from different ethnic groups and with different ages, socio-economic status and gender. To obtain a balanced perspective, I also interviewed non-refugee stakeholders in Ghana, such as UNHCR Ghana office and the Ghana Refugee Board (GRB), which is the government body responsible for refugee issues in the country. This report is based upon these first-hand data and my direct interactions with Liberian refugees.

Complicated refugee status in Ghana

The legal status of Liberian refugees in Ghana was quite complicated. Overall, they were categorised under three different 'labels' (Zetter 2007). The first category consisted of the so-called 'formal' refugees who had been issued with a UNHCR ID card which was later 'verified' by UNHCR. The second comprised those who had been granted a UNHCR ID card but had missed getting it verified. The third group, the main focus of this paper, was non-registered Liberians without a UNHCR ID card, who were not recognised as refugees by UNHCR or the Ghanaian government.

This complication over refugee status emanated from previous refugee registration and verification exercises. In August 2003, UNHCR and the GRB conducted a first and last registration exercise for refugees in the Buduburam settlement (UNHCR and WFP 2006). Liberian refugees who had arrived in Ghana before this registration and who managed to show up for this exercise were at that point granted their *prima facie* status and given a UNHCR ID card (UNHCR 2008). Since then, there had been no update of new arrivals, meaning that those who arrived after this 2003 exercise, or who missed it, never had an opportunity to receive this ID card and to be registered as refugees in Ghana.

To make matters more complicated, in early 2007, UNHCR organized a verification exercise, but only for those who had already been issued with their ID card in 2003. UNHCR verified the individual data of ID card holders and took their fingerprints during this exercise. The ID card

holders who went through this verification were called refugees with a 'verified' UNHCR ID card. Although granted their ID card in 2003, refugees who missed the 2007 verification were no longer considered 'formal' refugees by UNHCR. In January 2008, UNHCR Ghana produced a document titled *Answers to Frequently Asked Questions on Legal Status and Durable Solutions of Liberian and Sierra Leonean Refugees in Ghana*. This document stated that those who had missed either the 2003 registration or the 2007 verification were not 'refugees', regardless of their physical presence in the Buduburam settlement. As the document gave no explanations why they were not refugees, it seemed that the provision of refugee status was based upon whether refugees had successfully gone through both of the exercises rather than on an assessment of the well-founded fear of being persecuted in the country of origin.

During the fieldwork, I specifically asked around thirty refugees, both registered and non-registered, what they thought about the registration and verification. Regardless of their refugee status, they complained about a series of these exercises conducted by UNHCR and the GRB. All of them confirmed that these events had been announced with only a few days' notice. Therefore, some refugees who were outside the settlement for various reasons, including medication, schooling and economic activities, were unable to return for these exercises (also see Tete 2005: 50). I interviewed three refugees who had missed the 2003 registration exercise for medical reasons. For instance, when the registration was announced, a female Liberian refugee had been hospitalised in the Ghanaian capital, Accra, because of severe malaria and was therefore unable to be present for the registration. After she left the hospital and returned to the settlement, she explained why she could not attend the registration and asked UNHCR staff members to issue her ID card, but her request was rejected. Also, the majority of refugee interviewees confirmed that the 2003 registration was never really completed. The registration exercise team organised by UNHCR ran out of ID card materials and promised to come back to those waiting in a queue but never returned, consequently leaving these refugees without any formal identification in Ghana.

When I interviewed public information officers of UNHCR Ghana, I pointed to the large number of Liberians without a UNHCR ID card and asked them why UNHCR had not conducted another registration after 2003. Their answer was that the final ceasefire agreement of the Liberian war was made in August 2003 and Charles Taylor had subsequently left Liberia and hence there was no longer a risk of persecution in Liberia (Interview with UNHCR public information officers, Ghana, 8 April 2009). They also insisted that Liberians who arrived in Ghana after the 2003 registration were all economic migrants, not refugees, who were only interested in third-country resettlement in the West.

These views, however, risk oversimplification for two reasons. First, the Liberian civil war was a quite complicated conflict that involved several different warring parties based on different ethnicities. Charles Taylor was not the only cause of persecution and violence and therefore removing him from power did not mean an elimination of the risk of persecution in the country for all refugees. For example, several families from the same village in Liberia expressed the peril of persecution upon return. According to them, one of the Generals of the warring faction who had committed atrocities against their family members was alive and running a business there. Because their family had not joined this warlord during the civil war, they firmly believed that their repatriation to the village would seriously endanger their lives. The plausible risk of persecution and insecurity upon return has also been documented by other studies (for example, Hardgrove 2009; Sahan 2008).

Second, due to the rise of insecurity in Ivory Coast between 2002 and 2003, a large number of Liberian refugees in Ivory Coast were forcibly relocated to Ghana. There are no statistics to show exactly how many of them escaped to Ghana. But according to Drumtra's report (2003), at

the outbreak of the Ivorian war, there were some 70,000 Liberian refugees in Ivory Coast and about 30,000 of them fled from there to safer neighbouring countries including Ghana. These Liberians somehow managed to flee from Ivory Coast but not of all of them, especially households with multiple children and elderly members, could reach the Buduburam settlement before August 2003. During the fieldwork, I interviewed more than ten refugee families which had missed the registration because they had had to stop at several places prior to their arrival in Buduburam.

The views presented above by UNHCR public information officers seem to be an organisational official position. For example, some UNHCR documents highlighted the restored peace and stability in Liberia marked by the final ceasefire agreement and the departure of Taylor in 2003 (UNHCR 2004: 169; UNHCR & WFP 2006: 10). The tone of the documents seems to suggest that these events were a sign of the absence of any persecution risk in Liberia for all refugees after August 2003. But the presented evidence questions the legitimacy of UNHCR's perspective.

Plight of non-ID card holders

In Ghana, as in other refugee-hosting countries, refugees without a UNHCR ID card had been excluded from protection and assistance provided by the UN Refugee Agency. This exclusion made their lives extremely daunting. For instance, they were denied access to the UNHCR/WFP free food ration for vulnerable refugees even if they met the vulnerability criteria, such as being HIV positive or being disabled. Inside the settlement, there was a UNHCR clinic which provided a subsidized medical service for refugees but non-ID card holders had not been able to benefit from it so they had had to pay all their medical expenses on their own. They had been unable to access vocational training programmes organised by UNHCR Implementing Partners to teach new livelihood skills. UNHCR Ghana conducted a voluntary repatriation programme for Liberian refugees between April 2008 and March 2009 with a provision of transportation services and a USD 100 repatriation stipend for returnees. Nevertheless, refugees without a UNHCR ID card could not avail themselves of this repatriation package. Thus, if they wanted to go back to Liberia, they had to cover their transportation and other necessary expenses, which cost at least USD 50 per person according to refugees who returned spontaneously, on their own.²

Unfortunately, according to the findings from my field-research, very often, these unrecognised refugees without a UNHCR ID card were the most vulnerable group that required external support and protection from the refugee-supporting regime. During the fieldwork, I classified the refugee population into different economic categories and learned that more than one-third of the poorest refugees were non-registered, female-headed households with multiple children. Many of them were directly attacked by the rebel groups in Liberia, were forcibly displaced a few times, and ended up in Ghana after August 2003 by following other refugees. Given their scarce livelihood assets and lack of access to external support, they had been constantly compromised in terms of the most basic needs such as daily diet and medications. Because of the lack of recognition, however, they had not been able to appeal their adversity to UNHCR and the national refugee authority since they were 'invisible' (Polzer and Hammond 2008: 417) to the non-refugee stakeholders.

² Non-verified ID card holders could access some of these services provided by UNHCR but were not allowed to use the UNHCR repatriation package like non-ID card holders. Only the verified ID card holders could use the UNHCR repatriation package to Liberia between 2008 and 2009.

Disappearing boundary between registered and non-registered refugees

Recently, however, the boundary between formally registered refugees and non-registered refugees has been rapidly disappearing. This does not mean that UNHCR and the GRB have finally recognised non-ID card holders as refugees and have started providing protection for them. Rather, the assistance that registered refugees could access has recently been terminated by UNHCR. Therefore, the level of protection and support offered to even 'formal' refugees has been deteriorating to that of non-ID card holders. In 2009, UNHCR stopped subsidizing the settlement's clinic and schools, terminated the free food ration for vulnerable families, and finally handed over most of the settlement facilities to the Government of Ghana. With a decreasing budget for protracted Liberian refugees (UNHCR 2007), a senior international UNHCR officer in Ghana confirmed frankly that there was no more finance for Liberians in Ghana as it was very difficult for UNHCR to "sell this refugee population" (Interview with a senior international UNHCR officer, 8 June 2009).

Regardless of their sheer vulnerabilities, non-registered Liberians in Ghana have mostly been neglected by UNHCR and have not been granted another opportunity to be registered in order to receive protection. Regrettably, there seems to be very little prospect of any improvement in the level of protection and welfare for non-registered Liberians since the UN refugee agency is disengaging even from formally registered Liberian refugees. Some UNHCR staff members in Ghana suggested that the UN Refugee Agency has been seeking the moment to declare the cessation clause for residual Liberian refugees. Nevertheless, my field-study confirmed the existence of unrecognised Liberians and pointed to the higher percentage of vulnerable groups among them. Given their predicaments, more attention to their rights and protection should be paid by the international refugee regime.

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