The Global IDP Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council has now updated its country profile on internal displacement in Sierra Leone. A summary is presented below. The Database and the country profile can be accessed at www.idpproject.org, or the complete profile can be sent to you by e-mail on request (Claudia.mcgoldrick@nrc.ch).

UPDATED PROFILE OF THE IDP SITUATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Some 220,000 internally displaced Sierra Leoneans were resettled in their areas of origin by the end of 2002, according to UN figures, officially ending the situation of internal displacement in the country and further consolidating its recovery after more than a decade of devastating civil war. But many IDPs returned to areas with no basic infrastructure or social services in place, creating acute humanitarian needs and causing some resettlers to drift back to urban areas. Resettlement assistance was only provided for registered IDPs, not for the many thousands who were either unregistered, or who did not wish to be resettled for various reasons. Homelessness in the urban districts of Freetown has become a serious problem.

Large-scale resettlement

Since April 2001 both the Sierra Leone government and the UN have made a concerted effort to resettle large numbers of IDPs, as well as returning refugees, and to gradually close down the IDP camps. At that time, the UN moved its focus from protracted provision of humanitarian relief to support of resettlement and recovery efforts, confident of advances being made in the peace process and increasing stability throughout the country. Indeed, by the end of 2001 the world’s largest UN peacekeeping mission was deployed across the country and the disarmament programme was completed. President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah declared the official end of the 11-year civil war, in which an estimated 50,000 people had been killed and up to half of the country’s 4.5 million population displaced.

Displaced Sierra Leoneans were resettled in accordance with the national government’s Resettlement Strategy, which applies to IDPs as well as refugees and ex-combatants with their dependants, and states that it will “only facilitate resettlement into an area when it is deemed that the area in question is sufficiently safe to allow for the return of displaced people in safety and dignity” (NCRRR, rev. October 2001). All but two of the country’s 149 chiefdoms had officially been declared ‘safe for resettlement’ by the end of 2002. Beneficiaries were offered resettlement packages, which included a two month food ration, household utensils, plastic sheeting, and in some cases transportation. According to UN OCHA, a total of some 220,000 registered IDPs were resettled in five phases since April 2001, the last 12,800 of them in November 2002. Many more returned home spontaneously. Officially at least, this left no more IDPs in Sierra Leone. However, the UN acknowledged that “the challenge of closing camps will remain and the social problem of homelessness within the urban districts of Freetown will urgently need to be addressed” (UN OCHA, 31 October 2002). At the same time, NGO sources in Sierra Leone privately reported that about 10,000-20,000 ‘unofficial’ IDPs remain, mostly in urban areas.

Return to new hardship

There has been harsh criticism, most notably by MSF, of the government-led resettlement programme. MSF claimed that the government, with the UN, has practically forced people to return – ahead of elections and ahead of the planting season in order to avoid food aid dependence for another agricultural season; that in many cases return could not be described as voluntary because IDPs were not given the information to make an informed decision; that inadequate support during both the transit and rehabilitation phases meant that IDPs were returning in neither safety nor dignity; and that in some cases resettlement was taking place to areas considered by the UN as too dangerous for its own staff (MSF, 12 April & 21 May 2002). Similarly, the US-based Women’s Commission reported that, “while [IDP and refugee] returns have been deemed ‘voluntary,’ in reality they have faced enormous security, political and socio-economic pressures in their attempt to return home” (WCRWC, 31 October 2002).
While the UN acknowledged that numerous challenges had arisen during the resettlement process, which needed to be urgently addressed, it also said that the MSF report to some extent focused on specific issues out of context, thereby misrepresenting the full reality of the situation.

Clearly though, humanitarian needs generally remain most acute in areas with large-scale resettlement, particularly in the east and north of the country, where there are little or no facilities. Shelter is a priority need: many resettling IDPs are attempting to rebuild their homes by themselves, but often lack the necessary materials. In the meantime, poor living conditions and overcrowding are leading to increased morbidity rates. In urban areas there is also a problem of housing ownership disputes, as ex-combatants are found to be occupying the homes of the formerly displaced. Major humanitarian interventions will also be needed in the sectors of food security, health, water and sanitation, and education (UN, November 2002).

Protection concerns

Widespread human rights abuses committed to differing degrees by all sides to the conflict have been the main cause of internal displacement in Sierra Leone, and lack of adequate protection of internally displaced populations has been a major cause for concern. One reason for this was the collapse of the national law enforcement system. Large parts of the country were for a long time without police presence, and the national army was disbanded after its involvement in the 1997 military coup. Civilians outside rebel-held areas received some protection from civil defence militia and the West African ECOMOG forces. However, as reported by Human Rights Watch, the merciless atrocities by the rebel forces in January 1999 against civilians in Freetown revealed a situation of inadequate protection of civilians throughout the country. During the 1999-2000 period when the ‘peace process’ was still intact, there were reports of rebel abuses against IDPs even within areas apparently under government control (HRW, 3 March 2000).

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels regularly abducted children, and both Amnesty International and Save the Children (SCF) reported that the use of children as combat soldiers both by RUF and pro-government forces continued during 2000. According to SCF, children constituted about 60 percent of IDPs and as many as 1.8 million children may at some time have been displaced since the outbreak of the war in 1991 – making them extremely vulnerable. More than 5,000 parents reported their children missing in the wake of the rebel attack on Freetown in January 1999 (UN OCHA, 6 December 2000).

Women have also been exposed to grave human rights abuses by fighters on all sides to the conflict. A study by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), published in January 2002, revealed the extent of war-related sexual abuse against IDPs. One year later, a report by Human Rights Watch highlighted the ‘widespread and systematic sexual violence’ suffered by thousands of women and girls during the conflict in Sierra Leone (HRW, 15 January 2003).

A lasting peace?

The Sierra Leone government’s national recovery strategy, published in October 2002, clearly impressed bilateral and multilateral donors, who one month later announced a US$ 650 million aid package for reconstruction (PANA, 15 November 2002). At the same time, the UN requested a total of almost US$ 83 million for humanitarian programmes in the 2003 consolidated interagency appeal (UN, November 2002).

Progress was also seen in the commencement of work by both the South-African style Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Special Court – mandated to arrest, try and convict those guilty of war crimes in Sierra Leone since November 1996 (Mail & Guardian, 11 October 2002).

However, several causes for concern remain. The extremely volatile situation in neighbouring Liberia continues to threaten border areas and ultimately the stability of the whole country. Armed fighters from Liberia have periodically carried out cross-border raids and abducted Sierra Leonean civilians. The influx of refugees from Liberia has once again heightened tensions inside Sierra Leone. The major downsizing of the UN peacekeeping force, UNAMSIL, has heightened anxieties for many. Much will therefore depend on the Sierra Leone government’s ability to maintain security and to consolidate its authority in all areas of the country, which will necessarily entail effective, equitable management of diamonds and other natural...
resources. Other root causes of the conflict in Sierra Leone – including unemployment, poor education, crushing poverty, widespread corruption and a culture of impunity – also remain largely unaddressed (HRW, 11 July 2002). Until these issues are tackled effectively, Sierra Leone’s peace will remain a fragile one.

*Updated April 2003*