

The importance of refugee-host relations: Guinea 1990–2003

Refugees are often discussed in terms of the problems they are seen to pose for their hosting nation. In Guinea, this attitude resulted in deterioration of refugee-host relations, which has compromised the rights and safety of many vulnerable people.

Restoration of a good asylum environment in Guinea is essential since the country houses more than 100 000 refugees and more are seeking refuge from the renewed fighting in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. In this article, we seek to explain how hostility toward refugees in Guinea developed, and establish whether it could have been avoided or reduced.

When antirefugee sentiment culminated in open conflict in early 2001, refugees in Guinea suffered rape, beatings, extortion, and looting of their belongings at the hands of government forces and civilians alike. Tens of thousands saw no alternative but to flee back to Sierra Leone and Liberia despite conditions remaining unsafe in these countries. Many embarked on the treacherous journey unassisted, but as one refugee explained: "in Guinea I am afraid of the Government, the citizens and the rebels. In Sierra Leone there is just one: the rebels."¹

One catalyst for violence against refugees was the rebel incursions staged inside Guinea between September, 2000, and February, 2001, which caused widespread death and displacement. In a public broadcast, Guinea's President Lansana Conté accused refugees of collaborating with rebels in these attacks. Some observers alleged that Conté was using the refugees as a scapegoat to deflect internal criticism about Guinea's sluggish economy, high unemployment, and the government's selective support of factions fighting in neighbouring countries. Despite most refugees being innocent of involvement, they were implicated as a group, and attacked indiscriminately.

Before these events, refugees had already acquired a group identity as a burden for Guinea, and animosity between them and the host community had grown since the first refugee arrivals in 1990. A closer look at these developments might offer an explanation for how Guinean civilians reacted.

Guinea has accommodated several waves of escapees from civil wars in neighbouring Liberia and Sierra Leone. At their peak, in 1994, around 500 000 refugees resided in the country, considerably outnumbering the local population in some areas. In

1998, Conté expressed his concerns to the UN, complaining that the refugee presence hampered the country's social and economic development.² Fears of refugee-induced deforestation, soil erosion, and competition for scarce resources and jobs have been voiced repeatedly by researchers and by residents of Guinea.

These concerns have doubtless affected the atmosphere between refugees and their hosts, but it is also instructive to consider how refugee assistance has been delivered. Some aid interventions might have had the unforeseen side-effect of worsening host-refugee tensions.

Labelling refugees "a burden" might attract international support for a struggling host country, but can result in blame being wrongly apportioned

Between 1990 and 1993, refugees settled themselves peacefully in Guinean communities; many participated in the local subsistence economy, exchanging labour for a share in the harvest or being given land by local authorities on a temporary basis. When international assistance arrived it was offered strictly by nationality. Thus, refugees were entitled to aid, but their hosts who had shared their resources were not officially compensated. Many Guinean people felt that their own poverty was ignored. As one Guinean civilian said: "Why aren't we receiving assistance too? . . . the disparity is so blatant everyone can see it."³

Goodwill was further reduced when the number of refugees became so large that they could only be managed in camps. Indeed, by 1993, entitlement to aid for new refugees had become dependent on this type of settlement. Aid agency decisions were restricted by the need to provide budget forecasts for donors and also by their efforts to prevent non-refugee access to aid. Inherent in this approach, however, is a risk of heightening the visibility of refugees as a separate and comparatively privileged group, thereby making them a potential target of hostility.

Better prospects for equality were achieved in the health sector; in the early 1990s, the refugee assistance programme supported the general expansion of Guinea's health service.⁴ Therefore, services were improved both for refugees and their hosts. This integrated approach would seem more equipped to safeguard good refugee-

host relations, but it too proved difficult to sustain with high numbers of encamped refugees.

The experiences of aid in Guinea show that interventions can unwittingly contribute to divisions between refugees and their hosts. In other words, refugee assistance and refugee protection mandates are not always reconciled. The importance of supporting all affected parties or vulnerable people in refugee situations is gaining more recognition; the UN's mid-year review for Guinea 2003⁵ pledges to reduce tensions between refugees and hosts through promoting balanced assistance and strengthening civil society groups that aim to build trust and peace. However, these projects lack funding. The Guinean government in collaboration with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducted an information campaign in 2001 and 2002 to sensitise local communities to the needs of refugees. The campaign did counteract some of the damage done to refugee-host relations, although it might have been more effective if it had been introduced earlier.

Procedures for maintaining a safe asylum environment need to be built into refugee assistance plans from the outset. The carrying capacity, tolerance, and sympathy of host populations should be monitored, and the use of negative language in policy discussions avoided. Labelling refugees "a burden" might serve to attract international support for a struggling host country, but can also result in blame being wrongly apportioned. As was witnessed in Guinea, this approach can harm innocent people whose presence in the country is justified by law.

Nicolette Lawrie, *Wim Van Damme
One World Action, London, UK (NL); and
*Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp
B-2000, Belgium (WVD)
(e-mail: wvdamme@itg.be)

- 1 Human Rights Watch. Guinea—refugees still at risk: continuing refugee protection concerns in Guinea. Human Rights Watch Publications 2001; 13.
- 2 UN Environment Programme. Environmental impact of refugees in Guinea. <http://www.grid.unep.ch/guinea/> (accessed July, 2003).
- 3 Radio Netherlands. "The tattered welcome mat"—the refugee burden of Guinea. 2000. <http://www.rnw.nl/humanrights/html/guinea000428.html> (accessed July, 2003).
- 4 Van Damme W, De Brouwere V, Boelaert M, Van Lerberghe W. Effects of a refugee assistance programme on host population in Guinea as measured by obstetric interventions. *Lancet* 1998; **351**: 1609–13.
- 5 UN OCHA. Common humanitarian CAP for Guinea 2003: mid-year review. New York, Geneva: UN, 2003.