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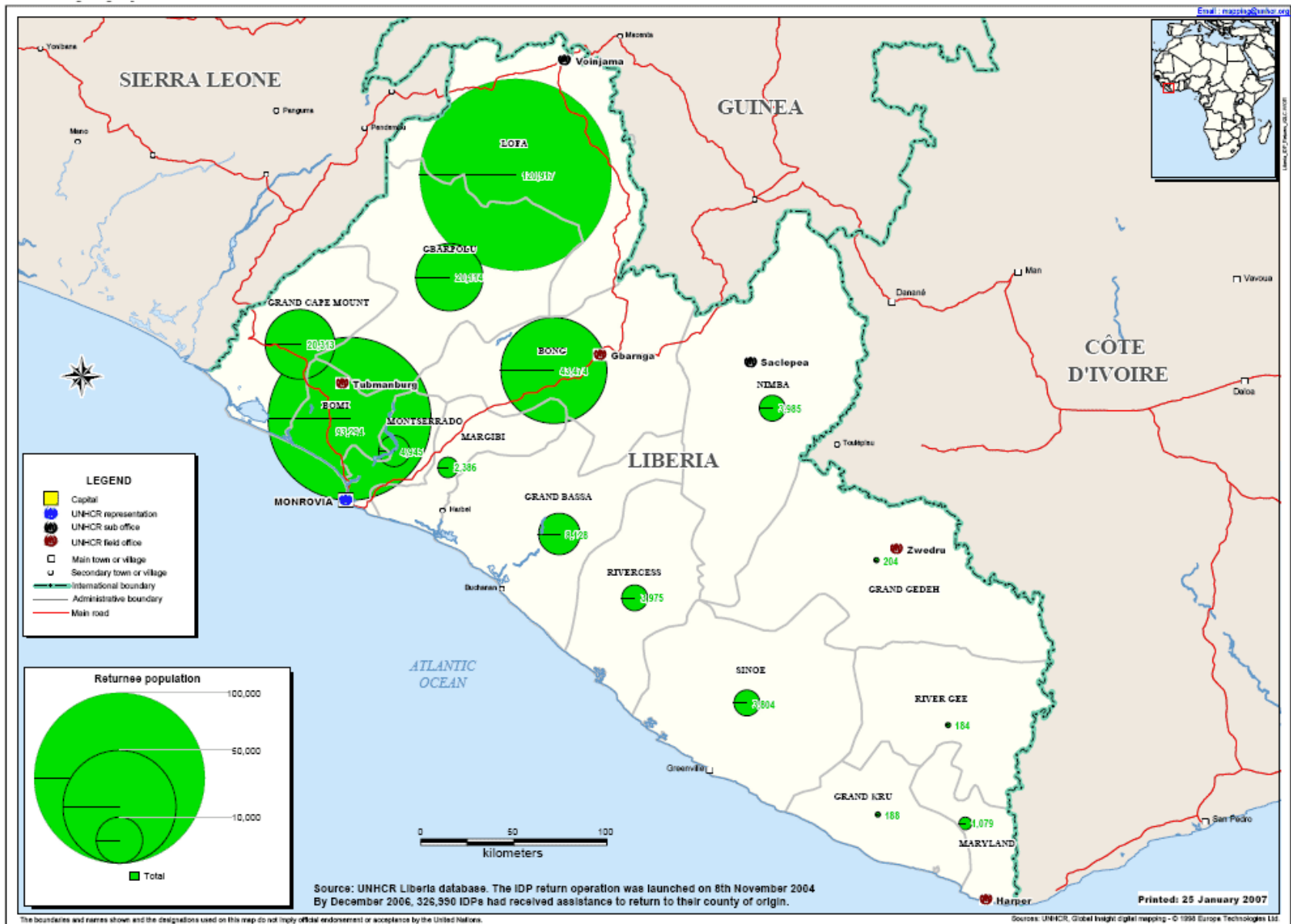
Liberia: Focus for IDP returnees moves from conflict to development

With the return of the remaining registered internally displaced people (IDPs) in December 2006, the process of resolving Liberia's internal displacement crisis was considered complete. More than 326,000 IDPs returned to their areas of origin and the 35 camps that had hosted them were officially closed in April 2006, formally marking the end of a 17-year period during which much of Liberia's population of three million had at some time been internally displaced. Considerable political progress was made by the government of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf to make the transition from conflict to development. The country has also started consolidating peace and stability, with the dismantling of former armed factions and the disarmament of over 100,000 combatants. The sanctions on the country's timber and diamonds have been lifted and Liberia can now progress towards sustainable post-conflict recovery and development.

Despite the fact that the humanitarian crisis is over, the humanitarian needs of many people in Liberia remain considerable. Much must still be done to enable the reconstruction of livelihoods to ensure continuing peace and stability. Years of conflict have left profound social scars and disruption, and all Liberians have been directly or indirectly affected. Acute mismanagement and corruption have devastated Liberia's infrastructure and economy, leaving it one of the poorest countries in the world. Despite the government's progress, regular and visible results are necessary if it is to continue enjoying the popular support that it needs to move forward with reconstruction. Returnees are faced with the challenge of rebuilding their lives without access to basic social services or economic opportunities, while gender-based violence and communal conflicts over land and property rights continue unabated. The high unemployment rate clouds the positive results of the disarmament and demobilisation process. An undetermined number of urban displaced people are living in often grim conditions in abandoned public or private buildings in Monrovia, and they are finding it more and more difficult to access official assistance.

Sustainable reintegration and long-term stability will only be achieved if Liberia addresses the root causes of its historical instability and rebuilds around the equal inclusion of all members of society. The government of Liberia has already taken positive steps but it will need long-term international support for the daunting task of post-conflict reconstruction.

Facilitated Returns of Liberian IDPs by County



Source: UNHCR, January 2007

More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

Background and causes of displacement

The internal displacement crisis in Liberia was caused by the 14-year civil war that started in 1989. Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia launched an armed rebellion against President Samuel Doe's increasingly brutal regime, starting in the north of the country and quickly reaching the capital, Monrovia. Taylor's attempt to take control of Monrovia was prevented in 1990 by the intervention of a Nigerian-led peacekeeping mission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). However, Taylor managed to consolidate his power base with the creation of a relatively effective "shadow regime" in the rest of the country. He effectively controlled the Liberian countryside through repression and violence, including ethnic massacres and gross human rights violations. An estimated 150,000 people were killed and several hundred thousand internally displaced during this first phase of the conflict.

In 1997 Taylor won a landslide victory in the presidential contest, enabling him to claim the legitimacy he craved through the ballot box. While the international community contemplated the trade-off between stability and justice in preparing its response (J. Goodhand and P. Atkinson, 2001), predictable problems quickly surfaced: factional and ethnic tensions continued across the country, exacerbated by Taylor's tendency to brutality and despotism and the high number of combatants still to be disarmed. Conflict broke out again in 1999 between government forces and the newly-formed rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, and grew

worse with the appearance of another rebel movement in 2003, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, which launched border attacks on neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. Sporadic but intense fighting caused almost continuous displacement, eventually engulfing the capital Monrovia in June 2003 and causing a major humanitarian and human rights crisis that attracted, albeit briefly, intense international attention (UNHCR, 10 June 2003; CRS, 1 August 2003).

The arrival of ECOWAS troops in August 2003, followed by the deployment of United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) peacekeepers, helped restore calm to Monrovia, while President Taylor was forced into exile under huge international pressure. Following the national transitional government of Liberia (NTGL) led by Gyude Bryant, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was inaugurated as president in January 2006 after elections judged free and fair in October 2005. Some IDPs in camps threatened to disrupt the elections unless they were helped to return home in time to vote (IRIN, 15 September 2005), and some candidates reportedly tried to take advantage, by promising assistance to return home in exchange for votes (RI, 22 July 2005), but in the end the disruption never materialised. The National Elections Commission did amend polling regulations to enable IDPs to vote in the camps, albeit for presidential and vice-presidential elections only (NEC, 5 August 2005). Relatively few IDPs chose to vote: out of 1.2 million people registered to vote, accounting for just over one third of the general population, only five per cent were IDPs.

The new government led by President Johnson-Sirleaf is faced with huge challenges. Liberia's political history has been scarred by interlinked conflicts that "sustained division and prevented nation building" (B. Tarr, March 2007). This recurring instability can be traced back to the absence of effective governance. The Liberian state has long been centralised and authoritarian, limiting participation in policy-making processes. The short-term peace and stability of the country depends absolutely on the successful reintegration of former fighters (IRIN, 20 April 2007) who have been bemoaning their situation since the beginning of 2007 (IRIN, 9 January 2007; IRIN, 9 February 2007). Disgruntled ex-combatants were believed to be at least partly responsible for the riots that erupted in Monrovia in October 2004, killing 19 people and seriously injuring more than 200 (UN OCHA, 7 November 2004). In 2005 ex-combatants awaiting rehabilitation and reintegration became increasingly volatile, rioting on several occasions in Monrovia and provincial towns (UN SC, 17 March 2005; IRIN, 13 May 2005).

The return process

The process of return and reintegration of IDPs was launched in November 2004, as, on completion of the disarmament and demobilisation process, the counties of return were declared ready to receive returnees (IRIN, 8 November 2004). A "Community Resettlement and Reintegration Strategy" prepared by the NTGL with the support of the international community provided the framework. Thanks to improvements in security in the areas of origin and the IDPs' desire to

finally return to a normal life after 14 years of civil war, the return and resettlement process was completed within 18 months, faster than originally planned (UNMIL, 17 June 2006). However, the return of IDPs was reported to be slow and regularly delayed until it became the political priority of UNMIL in view of the October 2005 elections (X. Zeebroek, July 2006). The government declared the return process to be complete in April 2006 and UNHCR officially completed its repatriation operation for Liberia's refugees in June 2007.

Despite the positive results, criticisms have been regularly voiced about the IDP return process. Some IDPs have complained over its timing, as it took place during the rainy season and in the middle of the academic year (JRS, 21 December 2006). Discrepancies in the treatment of refugees and IDPs have also raised concerns, with refugees reportedly benefiting from much better services than IDPs (A. Davies, M. Murray, October 2005), including in terms of transportation assistance and return packages. The lack of a clear division of roles between UN agencies under the existing collaborative approach was addressed by the introduction of the cluster approach in early 2006, which also enabled greater transparency and accountability in the delivery of aid (UNHCR, 24 July 2007).

In accordance with the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, some IDPs exercised their right to resettle elsewhere in the country. Lack of family links and of basic services in the areas of origin, proximity to former camps or to the economic or educational opportunities in Monrovia, and new family links due to intermarriages have all played a

major role in the decision to resettle. Among the different counties, Bomi has appeared to be one of the preferred destinations due to its proximity to both former camps and the capital's services (JRS, 21 December 2006). However, a number of IDPs have also decided to stay around the former camps, especially where relationships with their local communities have proved cordial and special arrangements for the use of the land have been successfully worked out.

No IDPs remaining?

Acknowledging the continued presence of people in the former camps, the IDP Consultative Forum (ICF), the inter-agency body in charge of the repatriation and reintegration process, commissioned a multi-agency assessment exercise which led to the publication of the IDP Camp Closure Assessment Report (ICF, 14 June 2006). The results indicated that 16,324 of the 28,753 Liberians still living in the former camps were registered as official residents of those camps. The remainder had never registered for return. Included in these numbers were (registered) IDPs who had decided to go back to the camps after returning to their communities of origin, and also some local residents who had moved into the camps after the IDPs left. In December 2006, UNHCR brought an end to the IDP return movement by helping a final 5,245 IDPs to return to their areas of origin (UNMIL, 10 December 2006; UNHCR, 12 December 2006). An additional 122 unregistered families, identified as vulnerable, were later helped to return in April and May 2007 (UNHCR, 24 July 2007).

Some doubts have, however, been raised about the accuracy of the figures. A report published by the Jesuit Refugee Service to assess the return process six months after the closure of the camps raised concerns over two main issues: firstly the lack of a proper registration procedure and the sole use for this purpose of the World Food Programme's logs; and secondly the reliability of the methodology used by UNHCR in the camp closure assessment exercise (JRS, 21 December 2006). Furthermore, in an effort to move forward from relief to development and to consider the humanitarian and development needs across the whole of the country, the distinction between local communities, returnees and IDPs is being abandoned. However, following its May 2007 real time evaluation, UNHCR has acknowledged the presence of a residual caseload of internally displaced people in former camps, and an undetermined number of people in a situation of urban displacement (UNHCR, 24 July 2007).

The government of Liberia, with the support of the international community, made a clear policy decision in assigning legitimate IDP status only to those Liberians living in official camps. This approach left out of the return process those people who had found refuge in Monrovia and who are still occupying public or private buildings. The Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission has drawn up a list of public buildings occupied by "squatters" but has made no suggestions on how and where to relocate these people. The issue has been discussed within the ICF, but so far no plan has been endorsed. Even though the challenge lies in the difficulty of distinguishing legitimate IDPs who need

protection assistance from the rest of the groups living in the buildings, humanitarian actors have warned that the problem will worsen over time if no proper solutions are found. As a report commissioned by the Camp Coordination and Management Cluster has pointed out, they are IDPs insofar as they have not been able to either return home or integrate in the local community (D.Lilly, forthcoming).

The challenges for returnees

Returning IDPs have remained vulnerable to human rights violations – particularly teenage mothers, children and young girls. Even though it is very difficult to establish the actual incidence of rape as many cases tend to go unreported, addressing sexual violence remains a top priority (Action Aid, March 2007). Given the polarisation of gender roles brought about by the civil war, gender-based violence has been more and more a part of family relationships, with domestic violence becoming a common feature in return communities (JRS, 21 December 2006; J. Munala, January 2007). While positive steps have been taken, with the adoption in December 2005 of new legislation that made rape illegal for the first time in Liberia, and the formulation of a multi-dimensional national action plan (E. Johnson-Sirleaf, January 2007), gender-based violence is still rampant, mainly due to a persistent culture of impunity for sexual violence, and a judicial system which is still ineffective (UNMIL, May 2007; L. Bruthus, January 2007).

Since the end of the IDP (and refugee) return process, there have also been increasingly frequent clashes between rival

ethnic groups over land and property ownership, particularly in Nimba county, which saw some of the heaviest fighting during the civil war. Tensions between ethnic Mandingo groups on one side and Gio and Mano people on the other, engendered by Charles Taylor during the 1990s in his quest for economic and political power, have erupted into violence more frequently since Mandingo people have returned from camps within Liberia and across the sub-region to find their homes occupied (IRIN, 8 February 2007; GoL/Ad Hoc Presidential Commission, October 2006).

As evidenced by the return of some IDPs to their former camps, there is clearly a severe lack of basic services and infrastructure in key areas of return. Lofa county, which was once home to many of Liberia's IDPs, was almost entirely devastated in the war. Almost two thirds of communities in Liberia do not have adequate shelter. The healthcare system throughout the country remains in emergency phase, with agencies and NGOs implementing more than 70 per cent of health service delivery (UN, 12 February 2007). With their withdrawal planned for 2007 within the transition from relief to development, a worrying gap in provision is already expected. More than 75 per cent of the population has no access to referral care services such as essential and emergency obstetric care, resulting in some of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world. The lack of water and sanitation facilities is a matter for serious concern: less than 10 per cent of the rural population is estimated to have access to safe water, resulting in widespread infection from various water-borne diseases (UN, 12 February 2007).

Liberia is also one of the most food-insecure countries in the world, with less than 10 per cent of arable land being cultivated. This is due to a number of factors, including the continued disruption of agricultural systems due to the displacement of farming communities, limited access to food due to absence of market mechanisms, high unemployment and lack of economic opportunities, socio-economic dislocation and the breakdown of family and community coping mechanisms (GoL, January 2006) especially among IDPs who have been displaced repeatedly since 1999. In March/April 2006, the Government of Liberia conducted a countrywide Comprehensive Food Security and Nutrition Survey which found 11 per cent of the rural population to be completely food insecure, rising to 28 per cent in the areas that were most affected by war and displacement (GoL, October 2006). These results add to the acute shortage of housing and shelter opportunities which prevents people from resettling and discourages the movement of qualified staff towards rural areas.

Reconstruction of livelihoods is the basic pre-condition for sustainable peace and stability. In an economy where unemployment rates are especially high among youth, the long-term success of reintegration strategies will largely depend on the creation of viable economic opportunities in the return communities. A joint study conducted by the International Labour Office and UNHCR found that the majority of youth and adolescent returnees will have to find employment opportunities within the informal sector despite the lack of policies and programmes to sustain them (ILO-UNHCR, December 2006). As mentioned in the UN's Com-

mon Humanitarian Action Plan, "despite the end of the humanitarian crises, there remain urgent humanitarian needs across Liberia" (UN, 12 February 2007); and even though the lack of basic social infrastructure affects in equal terms the different parts of the country, return areas need to be prioritised to facilitate social reintegration (*ibid.*).

Government's actions must show visible results

Liberia has made significant progress in consolidating peace and democracy. The country is on the right track towards economic recovery, sustainable growth and longer-term stability, but huge challenges still remain. The long-standing constraints of weak national response capacity and limited humanitarian access due to endemic insecurity and poor infrastructure have improved. Restoration of basic services in areas of return and generation of employment opportunities remain at the top of the government's list of priorities, but visible progress is still limited.

After years as a pariah state during the rule of Charles Taylor, the free and fair elections held in October 2005 provided the first essential step towards restoring Liberia's credibility. More than one year after the election of the first female head of state in Africa, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's government has impressed international donors with its efforts to achieve financial accountability. In a country where donor assistance has been undermined by "corrupt diversion and political manipulation of aid" (K. Savage, April 2007), this newly-acquired image helped to enable considerable progress on the issue of debt relief and debt reduction

at the Liberia Partners Forum in February 2007 (UN News, 16 February 2007). Having been up to \$3.7 billion in debt, Liberia was able to secure a US offer for debt relief, soon to be followed by several other countries (IRIN, 14 February 2007). The Government also received positive feedback on the implementation of the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Programme, a three-year anti-corruption plan drafted and imposed by key donors in 2005, and on its interim poverty reduction strategy, which highlights the challenges for the transition from relief to development (GoL, January 2006). Finally, in “recognition of the progress made by Liberia”, the UN Security Council lifted a six-year old ban on diamond exports in April 2007, even though the diamond mining is to be legalised again only after the government introduces an effective monitoring system (UN SC, 27 April 2007; IRIN, 5 June 2007).

Considerable efforts have also been made to addressing the deep-rooted problem of impunity, most notably with the June 2006 transfer of Charles Taylor to The Hague to face a UN Special Court’s charges of war crimes committed during the conflict in neighbouring Sierra Leone, and the launch of Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, again in June 2006 (IRIN, 5 June 2006). However, as Amnesty International has warned, there are both political and practical challenges in addressing impunity in Liberia (AI, 15 February 2007). Politically, the pervasive culture of violence during the 14 years of conflict has left the political class compromised, with current Members of Parliament facing allegations of human rights abuses; practically, the work of the Commission is hampered by

the difficulties of operating in a context of post-war reconstruction and by a chronic lack of funding.

Liberia still faces massive reconstruction and development challenges, and humanitarian support is still essential in principle areas of return such as Lofa and Bomi counties. With some 500,000 displaced people having returned or resettled in areas where basic services including provision of drinking water, healthcare and education are critically inadequate, the situation remains fragile (UN SC, 15 March 2007). Constant tangible improvements are necessary for the government to continue enjoying people’s support given the length of time that the task of rebuilding Liberia will take (BBC, 16 January 2007; NRC, 31 December 2006), but the path will not be smooth; while the government faces damaging allegations of corruption by the country’s auditor general (BBC, 21 June 2007) and legal procedures get underway against alleged coup plotters (BBC, 21 July 2007), steps “critical to the consolidation of peace in the country are yet to be completed, including the reintegration of ex-combatants, the resettlement of returnees, the reform of the judiciary and the extension of the rule of law throughout the country” (UN SC, 15 March 2007).

Positive reviews and outstanding challenges for the cluster approach

The UN manages the humanitarian response in Liberia through UNMIL. Having absorbed the office of the Humanitarian Coordinator, UNMIL has maintained since the beginning of 2003 a fully integrated structure, led by the Spe-

cial Representative of the Secretary General.

In 2006, in order to help Liberia's new government meet its responsibility to assist and protect both returning IDPs and the "residual" IDPs still living in camps or in public buildings, the international humanitarian community in the country reorganised in line with the global humanitarian reform process to overcome a legacy of weak, confusing coordination mechanisms and bitter divisions, particularly between the UNMIL and humanitarian agencies (A. Davies, M. Murray, October 2005).

The 2006 introduction in Liberia of the new cluster approach – whereby clear responsibilities have been assigned to lead organisations at sector level in order to strengthen the accountability and predictability of humanitarian response – appears to have addressed at least some of the previous coordination problems, helped also by the creation of an Inter-Agency Standing Committee country team including non-UN organisations. UNHCR, which had already played a key role in the IDP return process in Liberia, assumed cluster lead for camp management, emergency shelter and protection (UNHCR, 21 April 2006). As part of its new responsibilities UNHCR elaborated both a camp closure and a protection strategy, which established a monitoring framework mechanism in camps and areas of return.

Despite concerns voiced by some international NGOs over the risks of undermining the UN-NGO relationship and the "humanitarian space" (X. Zeebroek, July 2006; IASC, 26 October 2006), the cluster approach has received positive re-

views. The results of UNHCR's real-time evaluation presented in June 2007 show that there is "strong participation by all actors and good leadership in the Liberia cluster approach" (UNHCR, 24 July 2007). It is further noted that the designation of cluster leads has given legitimacy, accountability and predictability to the operational responses and that there is an excellent cooperation between the international community, the government and the NGO community. The availability of funds has been crucial to UNHCR's ability to provide a coordination role, whereas for other cluster leads the central emergency response fund (CERF) has played an essential support role. The previous emergency response fund in Liberia had directed the largest share of funds to support the activity of local NGOs, but it was closed at the end of 2005 despite the dissent of some of the beneficiaries (UN OCHA, January 2007). Inter-cluster coordination is clearly of crucial importance to avoid overlaps and make certain that all the gaps are accounted for.

Although the situation in Liberia is considered to be improving, and no Consolidated Appeal Process is planned for 2007, several challenges still face the international response. The Common Humanitarian Action Plan, launched in February 2007 to provide a bridging fund for humanitarian activities during the transition from emergency to recovery and development, had received little over one third of its funding requirements (\$45.9 million of an estimated total of \$117 million) by 21 July 2007 (UNMIL, 23 July 2007). In order to avoid gaps in the provision of assistance, continued funding must be ensured while the role of the UNDP-led early recovery cluster must be expanded, especially as some of

the humanitarian actors begin to withdraw or scale down their operations (UNMIL, 17 June 2007; UNMIL, 10 June 2007).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Liberia. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this overview are directly accessible on the Liberia [List of Sources](#) page of our website.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

Media contact:

Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer

Head of Monitoring and Advocacy Department

Tel.: +41 (0)22 799 07 03

Email: jens.eschenbaecher@nrc.ch

IDMC

Norwegian Refugee Council

Chemin de Balexert 7-9

1219 Geneva, Switzerland

www.internal-displacement.org

Tel: +41 22 799 0700

Fax: +41 22 799 0701