

## **70 Year Protecting People Forced to Flee**

### **Short regional panel reports**

**Language:** English

**Region:** West and Central Africa

**Hosting/Organising institution:** Centre for Migration Studies, University of Ghana

**Session Title:** Refugee Protection in West and Central Africa: Legal and Policy Frameworks, Solutions, and Challenges

#### **Context/Background of the panel:**

The West and Central African region faces multiple humanitarian challenges associated with forced displacement. While political conflicts were responsible for population displacements in the 1990s and early 2000s, the forced displacement situation in the region has deteriorated in the last decade, as a result of a sharp increase of violent extremists' activities and counter insurgency operations by national and international security forces. Recent data provided by UNHCR indicates that the stock of refugees, internally displaced persons, and stateless people displaced from countries in the sub-region has seen significant increase over the years. How can the region protect and offer solution to the increasing numbers of forcibly displaced persons in the region?

The session examined the international, regional and national response to forced displacement in the Western and Central African regions. Given that response to refugee influxes varies from one country of asylum to another, with some countries welcoming refugees in communities while others prefer to accommodate them in camps, the panel examined how different countries have been applying various international, regional, and national legal and policy frameworks to offer protection to forcibly displaced persons. The discussions shed light on the compatibility between international frameworks, such as 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and Global Compact on Refugees, and national frameworks for refugee protection. Panelists discussed past and present solutions, best practices, and challenges associated with the protection of forcibly displaced persons in the region. In looking forward, the panelists made recommendations for strengthening mechanisms for protecting refugees and other forcibly displaced persons in West and Central Africa.

The panelists were Professor Joseph Kofi Teye, Centre for Migration Studies, University of Ghana, Mr. Andrews Ginsberg, UNCHR-Ghana, Dr. Veronica Fynn Bruey, Tuki-Tumarankeh, and Mr Titus Murdakai, National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, Nigeria. The moderator was Dr. Samuel Agblorti, University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

#### **Major points arising from speakers and discussions:**

Prof Joseph Teye provided an overview of the forced displacement situation and response in West and Central African region. He explained that the forced displacement situation in the region has deteriorated in the last decade, as a result of a sharp increase in conflict situations caused by religious extremists. He provided statistics to show that the numbers of stateless persons, refugees and asylum seekers generated have all increased over the last few years. In terms of response measures, Prof Teye explained that many governments in the region combine international frameworks (e.g. Refugee Convention and Global Compact for Refugee) with regional frameworks and national policies to protect forcibly displaced persons. According to him, refugee reception practices have moderately improved, with some countries shifting from the traditional practice of confining refugees to camps, in line with

GCR. He further noted that the programs implemented to enhance refugee inclusion in national health and educational systems have not significantly improved their access to health and educational services. For instance, despite the implementation of inclusive free education policies in some countries, enrolment of refugee children is still low and affected by lack of educational infrastructure and inability of many refugees to pay ancillary costs ( e.g transport, learning materials etc.). Similarly, although the inclusion of refugees in national health insurance schemes has moderately enhanced their access to health services, lack of health facilities in some communities, inadequate health personnel, and inability of refugees to buy medicines not covered by national health insurance schemes limit refugees' access to health services. Prof Teye also noted that while some economic inclusion policies have been implemented to enhance refugees' livelihoods, bureaucratic work permit regimes and limited employment opportunities make it difficult for refugees to be gainfully employed in host countries. He explained that the dominant durable solution implemented within the last decade is voluntary repatriation, followed by local integration. According to him, resettlement in a third country remains the most preferred durable solution to many West and Central African refugees, but the proportion of refugees benefiting from this solution has declined in recent years as a result of increasing emergencies globally, low quotas given by traditional refugees' destination countries and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Prof Teye concluded that although the response measures taken to address force displacement has improved slightly, many refugees are facing serious socio-economic problems because efforts by governments and humanitarian agencies to protect them have been affected by resource constraints, insecurity, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing these challenges

Mr. Andrew Ginsberg's presentation focused on UNHCR's role in the protection of refugees, with particular reference to efforts to provide assistance to refugees in Ghana. He noted that Ghana allows many of the refugees to move freely and integrate with nationals, a practice that is not the case for some countries where refugees are hosted in camps. He explained that the refugee situation, in terms of population, had been pretty stable over the years until the October 2020 election situation in Cote D'Ivoire which led to about 900 new arrivals. UNCHR supported the government of Ghana to set up reception quarantine centres in line with COVID-19 protocols. The forcibly displaced persons were also provided with financial support (cash grant), water, sanitation and logistical support for new arrivals in Ghana. He also highlighted how UNHCR has, over the years, been working with the government of Ghana to provide support to refugees in the country. According to him, UNCHR has been providing technical support to the Ghana Refugee Board. Other activities undertaken by UNCHR include training and capacity building for border officials on refugee law as well as providing support to the police and other agencies to ensure security in refugee camps. For refugees, in particular, Mr Ginsberg noted that UNCHR provides livelihood assistance through business grant, income generation activities (eg. support to rent land for crop farming, poultry farming etc), vocational training, scholarships, and apprenticeship training to help them to be self-sufficient. UNCHR is also making efforts to help refugees get into agricultural value chain employment, and there are on-going discussions with private sector to help refugees access employment in private firms. With respect to education, UNCHR has been assisting with the construction of schools and provision of school uniforms. For tertiary education, UNHCR provides scholarship for refugees to access tertiary education. UNCHR also assists refugees to register for the Ghana National Health Insurance Scheme to enable them access orthodox healthcare.

Dr. Veronica Fynn Bruey's presentation focused on refugee protection in West and Central Africa, drawing on her own experiences and perspective as internally displaced person and refugee. Dr Bruey mentioned that she experienced internal displacement multiple times during the War in Liberia. She spent over 9 years of her life as a refugee in Ghana and immigrated to Canada. She argued that the root

causes of displacement in the sub-region include: poor governance buried in colonial vestiges and nationalism; ad hoc and weak protection scheme characterised by North-South divide; violence, conflict and strife; human right, civil and political abuse; harsh environmental conditions; and economic hardship and human suffering. She asserted that the impact of forced displacement includes long-term psychological trauma, apathy, despair, and desperation and imminent danger and death. She believes that the UNCHR 1951 refugee convention does not provide a framework for dealing with some of the emerging challenges facing displaced persons in the West and Central African region. Based on her own experience and more than two decades of working on the issue of forced displacement, Dr. Bruey provided a road map or blueprint of what future comprehensive response to forced displacement in the sub-region should look like as follows: reformation of the UNCHR 1951 refugee convention with frameworks that responds to emerging refugee situations; prioritisation of girls education in all refugee host countries as part of complementarity pathways; and strong political will in implementing OAU Refugee Convention of 1969.

Mr Titus Murdakai's presentation highlights the experience and perspective of officials of a key refugee sending and host country (Nigeria) concerning the current protection systems. He noted that Nigeria has adopted several international and regional frameworks including the Kampala Convention, the Global Compact for Refugees, and the Act that establish the National Commission for Refugees to protect forcibly displaced persons. He also noted that the that the country has, over the years, established and mandated some institutions, such as the Ministry of Humanitarian Affair Disaster Management and Social Development, Federal Ministry for Niger Delta, North-East Development Commission, National Emergency Agency, among others to implement programs aimed at protecting the rights of forcibly displaced persons. He explained that Nigeria has been granting refugee status for forcibly displaced persons from various countries. The crisis in Cameroon has resulted in Nigeria hosting more than 60000 refugees from Cameroon. Mr Titus mentioned that the Federal Government provides identity cards, machine readable travel cards, operates non-encampment policy and undertake host community initiatives to promote local integration of refugees in Nigeria. In terms of durable solution, Mr Titus noted that, in 2019, the Federal Government of Nigeria signed a tripartite agreement with UNCHR, and Cameroon in 2019 which has resulted in voluntary repatriation of some Nigeria refugees in Cameroon. The Federal Government has also initiated a process to return Nigerian refugees in Chad and Niger back to Nigeria. There are also efforts to provide shelter for refugees, enrol refugees and IDPs in the National Health Insurance system, resettlement of IDPs, provision of cash grants and loans to enable refugees and IDPs establish self-reliance project have contributed to local integration.

### **Recommendations/Conclusions on the way forward**

- Regional economic blocs (e.g. ECOWAS), UNHCR and governments in the West and Central African region will need to work with religious leaders and traditional authorities to design and implement effective conflict resolution strategies to reduce the incidence of armed conflicts that cause forced displacement.
- International conventions and frameworks (CRRF and Refugee convention) need to be revised by UN agencies in partnership with other actors (e.g. CSOs, NGOS, Academia and refugees, and host communities) to reflect emerging security, health and development challenges associated with forced displacement within countries and across borders.
- Given that successful implementation of the international and regional frameworks on refugees are predicated on national ownership and reliance of effective national frameworks, governments in the West and Central African sub-region should develop

and implement national frameworks and policies that are consistent with international frameworks (e.g GCR) and regional frameworks (e.g OAU Refugee Convention of 1969).

- Given that scarcity of financial and technical resources makes it difficult for national governments to provide the economic and social needs of refugees, there is the need for the African Union Commission, developed countries, and international organizations to increase funding support to countries hosting refugees so that they can provide the needs of refugees. Humanitarian and development agencies should use the ‘Peace-Humanitarian-Development Approach’ which resonates with the guidelines proposed by the CRRF and GCR to develop and implement economic inclusion programs for refugees and host communities.
- There is the need for UNHCR, ECOWAS and governments in the region to explore alternative funding mechanisms (eg. public-private resource mobilization) to support refugee economic, health and educational inclusion programs.

**Top two quotations from the session:**

- **Dr. Veronica Fynn Bruey:** *“Decolonise the mind and border territories-this should involve all actors”*
- **Prof Joseph Teye :** *“Response to forced displacement in the region has improved slightly but many forcibly displaced persons still face several challenges”*

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