

## **Establishing Early Warning Networks in Refugee Camps: Problems and Possibilities**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Conflicts in Africa, and particularly the West African sub-region, are becoming increasingly regionalized in nature. With the presence of cross-border rebel groups and hostile neighboring states these “civil wars” are very much inter-state affairs. Refugees play a major and complicated role in the regionalization of these conflicts. By their very nature, refugees bring the effects of war across borders. They are victims of war and hostile reception from host communities and states. But beyond this refugees can also become perpetrators of violence in their host communities and state—bringing along with them the violence from which they are fleeing. Recent conflicts in Africa provide us with numerous examples of refugees participating in the destabilization of the social, political, economic, and security systems of their host countries. The case of Hutu refugee camps of Eastern Congo who exploited humanitarian assistance to revive their war machine and the exportation of the Liberian civil war to Sierra Leone through fleeing refugees are fresh in the minds of humanitarian actors.

Humanitarian aid to refugee camps walks a fine line between providing assistance to those in need and helping to strengthen rebels by supplying food, shelter, and potential recruits. When large influxes of refugees swamp the camps and nearby villages, it is impossible for the camp authorities to effectively distinguish between victims and rebels among the mass of new arrivals. In large camps, humanitarian organizations and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) must rely on local distribution and administration networks in order to distribute rations and monitor who is staying in the camp. The problems with acquiring accurate information about the situation in refugee camps and preventing the misuse of humanitarian aid are fundamental to the refugee camp structure. In order to gain the information necessary to prevent further conflict, such as information regarding the militarization of the refugee camps or the abuse of the refugees by the host country, another method of monitoring the camps must be tested. One solution to this dilemma is the creation of community-level early warning networks that report to a non-governmental organization unaffiliated with the administration of refugee camps.

This paper analyzes the potential benefits of community-level early warning networks in refugee camps in West Africa. It particularly builds its case around the Liberian refugee camps surrounding Guiglo and Blolékin in Western Cote d'Ivoire. The author visited these camps from 4 to 10 August 2003. The paper suggests possible structures for such networks and assesses the problems and difficulties that may arise when establishing early warning networks in refugee camps. The author concludes that, although an early warning network has tremendous potential for preventing violence and human rights abuse amongst refugees, unstable political and security situations in the host countries may undermine the building of such a system. The situation in Côte d'Ivoire poses particular challenges to setting up such a system in the refugee camps visited by the author.

## **Why an Early Warning Network is Necessary**

In Côte d'Ivoire, the need for such a network is great. The camps that I visited near Guiglo and Bloléké are self-administered by the refugees. Community leaders are in charge of registering new arrivals, verifying their non-combatant status, and distributing rations to the people in the camp. This community organization then reports the status of the camp to UNHCR. The information gap was immediately apparent in the refugee camp. Conscious of presenting a good image to UNHCR and fearful of upsetting the host country, the community organization on several occasions prevented refugees from discussing with me certain problems with the camp. When I enquired as to why I was not permitted to speak with these people, the community administrators explained that their grievances were political in nature and the host country would be displeased if that information were made known. Withholding such information removes the accountability of the host country and the aid organizations; it is vital that the people have an impartial outlet for expressing their grievances.

Furthermore, while visiting the camp, I encountered a soldier for the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) who was staying in the camp temporarily. I was unable to determine the ease with which rebel soldiers could take refuge in the camp, but the presence of an active member of MODEL reveals the limitations of the verification process. It would be easy for rebel soldiers to remain in the camps without attracting the attention of the camp administration. Indeed, I remained in the camp for three days without their knowledge. However, many members of the refugee population were aware of my presence and rebels could not escape the notice of the people surrounding them. In order to effectively monitor rebel activity in the camps, it is necessary to go beyond the formal verification procedures of the camp administration.

## **The Potential of an Early Warning Network**

An early warning network in the refugee camps close to the Liberian border would provide key information that is otherwise unobtainable. This information generally falls into the following categories: misuse of aid by rebel groups or the camp administration, recruitment and/or militarization of the camp, abuse of the refugees by the host country or the rebel forces, and the outbreak of violence within Liberia. It is questionable, however, whether it is possible to obtain this information from the refugee population and whether the information will be accurate.

The nature of the information determines the ease with which it can be obtained from the refugee community, as well as its reliability. When I was no longer under the supervision of the camp administration, many of the inhabitants were very eager to discuss the abuse of the refugees by the government of Côte d'Ivoire. One refugee, who will remain anonymous, informed me of the forced recruitment of Liberian refugees into the Ivorian civil war. The Ivorian soldiers threatened to harm the camp if the refugees refused to take up arms and participate in the conflict, and the soldiers blamed the refugees for the rebel activity in Côte d'Ivoire. I was informed that this recruitment continued to occur through April 2003. When I questioned the man as to whether the Ivorian soldiers used force or violence to recruit the refugees to fight, he said they had not; they merely used the threat of violence. Other members of the camp led me to several unmarked mass graves outside the camp where the casualties were supposedly buried. Upon examining

the mounds of red dirt scattered through the forest, I was convinced of the accuracy of the information. These allegations, however, are not verified and all such information must be treated with a certain degree of skepticism.

Newly arrived refugees can easily be interviewed to acquire accurate reports of where violence is occurring within Liberia. I spoke to one refugee as he arrived at the camp and was informed of the outbreak of violence in Zwedru, in Grand Gedeh County. To my knowledge, this violence has not been reported in the media. Monitoring refugee arrivals would provide an effective means of acquiring accurate reports of violence and rebel activity within the country from which they are fleeing. New arrivals among refugees are often the only witnesses to what is happening on the ground in the most remote and inaccessible regions of their unstable country.

Information of a more personal nature is not so easily gathered from the refugee population. Assessing the presence of rebel soldiers in the camp was difficult. I could identify that a member of MODEL was temporarily staying at the camp only because I had previously met him on a bus from Abidjan. This problem is potentially complicated by the ethnic homogeneity of the camps that I visited. Statistics offered by the camp administration revealed that 96% of the inhabitants are members of the Krahn ethnic group and they were in communities of their ethnic cousins in Cote d'Ivoire. This homogeneity, in some situations, may create a reluctance to disclose information, but this can likely be overcome if the early warning network is designed to include diverse segments of the refugee population. If both males and females, young and old, and members of all the ethnic groups are included in the network, then the difference of interests of these groups will compel at least some of the participants to provide the required information. Women and the elderly have the potential to make an important contribution in this respect, but further study will be necessary to determine their role in refugee society and their potential for the early warning of rebel recruitment or misuse of funds. Even so, information of this nature will be less reliable and more difficult to verify than reports of human rights abuses.

### **The Structure of a Refugee Early Warning Network**

An effective early warning network must be free from political and social pressure. This requires a structure that is autonomous not only from the host country, but also from the community administration of the camp and the humanitarian organizations directly involved with the camp. Without such autonomy, the network will be compromised by political pressure from the host country, as well as by pressure to present a "best case" assessment of the camp in order to please donors or the UNHCR. Autonomy can be achieved by organizing an early warning network under the supervision of an impartial non-governmental organization. This organization must not have a vested interest in the camp and should ideally be international or foreign-based in order to better resist pressure from the host country. The early warning network should include members from all segments of the refugee population and the number and composition of the participants in the network will be determined by the size and demographic characteristics of the specific refugee camp.

Effective communication between the refugee population and the non-governmental organization is the key to a successful early warning network. There are three possible ways in which this communication can be arranged:

- A representative of the organization can be present in or near each camp in the network in order to gather the necessary information;
- Each member of the network can independently communicate with the organization on a regular basis or as the need arises;
- One or several members of each camp can be hired by the organization to gather the information of the network and then relay that information to the organization on a regular basis.

Each option carries with it a set of advantages and disadvantages that must be considered in order to choose the option that best suits the organization and the scope of its project.

*Placing an Outsider from the Early Warning Organization in the Camp:* A representative present at each camp in the network will ensure that the person in charge of gathering the information will have sufficient training and expertise in order to effectively assess the validity and value of the acquired material. However, the camp's population will potentially consider this representative an outsider; he/she may be treated with suspicion and might have difficulty gathering sensitive information. But there is also the possibility that the converse will be true. My status as an outsider at the camp was an asset in acquiring information. Many of the camp residents viewed me as impartial and hoped that by informing me of their hardships I could help improve their situation. Nevertheless, it is impossible to judge the extent to which information was withheld when speaking to me. The biggest drawback of this approach is undoubtedly the resources required to implement it. The costs of stationing a representative at every camp in the network would severely limit the number of camps involved in the network, and most organizations would not be able to spare the necessary personnel.

*Periodically send Outside Monitor to Consult and Leave:* The second option is to send a representative of the organization to each of the camps that are to form the network and recruit all the necessary participants. These participants will then independently contact the organization in order to disclose their information. This communication could take part either on a regular basis or when the situation requires it. This approach provides the advantage of an unfiltered access to primary-source information, but it has many disadvantages. It would not be practical to train each member of the network on proper reporting procedures and the network may become inundated with unsubstantiated rumors. It would also be extremely difficult to keep track of all the participants and to compensate them for their involvement. The organizational costs of this approach outweigh its expected benefits.

*Train Local Conflict Monitors in the Camps:* The third option is for the organization to rely upon one or several delegates within the camp to collect information from the network and then relay it to the organization through regular reports. Since the delegates will be few in number, it will be possible to provide them with some training as to how to assess and report information

effectively. Furthermore, since these delegates are themselves members of the camp, they will already have connections to family and friends that can be utilized to form the basis of a broader early warning network. However, relying on delegates creates the risk of compromising the integrity and impartiality of the network. The delegate system is vulnerable in several respects:

- The chosen delegates may not be accepted or trusted by all aspects of the refugee community;
- The delegates may be pressured by the various organizations involved with the camp or by the host country;
- The delegate's personal interests may influence the information he relays to the organization.
- Residents of the camp may be hesitant to share information with the delegate because the host country, the various organizations, and any rebels that may be present in the camp will likely be aware of their participation.

Nevertheless, if these vulnerabilities can be addressed by ensuring the anonymity of those involved with the network and by selecting appropriate delegates for the task, this option will provide a good compromise between the previous two; it is more cost-effective than stationing a staff-member of the organization at each of the camps and provides a greater degree of quality control than relying upon the individual participants alone.

### **Obstacles to Establishing an Early Warning Network in Côte d'Ivoire**

At the present time, Côte d'Ivoire presents a uniquely difficult environment for establishing an early warning network in the Liberian refugee camps. This is largely due to the political instability in the country. The refugee camps that I visited were in the center of what is known as the "Wild West" of Côte d'Ivoire. Violence can break out on occasion and without warning and there are many rebels present throughout the area. Furthermore, Guiglo and Blolékin are located in the "Zone of Confidence," the buffer zone between the four warring parties to the Ivorian conflict. Although these factors make for a difficult working environment, they are also a testament to why the creation of an early warning network is so important in this region.

The logistics of establishing an early warning network are formidable. The countless military roadblocks make travel, especially for Liberian nationals, very difficult and potentially dangerous. The banks and the post offices in the region have been closed since the outbreak of war in September 2002 and it is not certain when they will reopen. There is no access to email and, as far as I could tell, the only communication to the rest of the country is by mobile telephone, which is prohibitively expensive. As a result, the organization that implements the early warning network will not be able to visit the camps on a regular basis and any communication with the network will be extremely difficult and expensive. Furthermore, the lack of banks and post offices makes it nearly impossible at the moment to compensate any of the network participants or delegates for their services.

If the political situation improves in Côte d'Ivoire, it is very likely that many of these obstacles will be removed. However, there is a legal obstacle associated with hiring refugees that must be considered. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees lawfully staying in a host country should be given "the most favorable treatment accorded to foreign nationals in the same circumstances"<sup>1</sup> in terms of employment. Unfortunately, Côte d'Ivoire is not a hospitable environment for foreign nationals. Indeed, the government's xenophobic policies and the widespread discrimination throughout the country against those not considered "true Ivoirians" are major causes of the current conflict. It will likely be very difficult to secure the necessary permits in order to employ Liberian refugees for the purpose of the network. However, this process can be simplified if the participants in the network are considered "consultants" rather than full employees of the organization; they are then subject to less stringent laws regarding payment and compensation. When speaking to the refugees about the problems with finding employment, they cited the language barrier between them and the francophone Ivorian population as the major difficulty. Legal barriers were not mentioned, so it is possible that those barriers would not present much of a problem to the establishment of an early warning network.

Unfortunately there is another legal issue to consider. The 1951 Refugee Convention protects the right of refugees against "[forming or joining] political associations..."<sup>2</sup> The host country could easily construe an early warning network as a political organization, thus the refugees could potentially be barred from participation. This is likely to occur in Côte d'Ivoire considering the government's alleged history of refugee abuse. Perhaps by cooperating with UNHCR, the organization implementing the network could safeguard the right of the refugees to be involved with the program. This partnership with UNHCR should be arranged in such a way as to not significantly compromise the autonomy and impartiality of the early warning network.

## **CONCLUSION**

An early warning network in the Liberian refugee camps in western Côte d'Ivoire would be a valuable resource in predicting and preventing the outbreak of violence. It would be possible to monitor the movements and activities of Liberian rebel forces in and around the camps as well as become informed of the outbreak of violence within Liberia by interviewing recently arrived refugees. The international community would also be made aware of abuse of the refugee population by the host country and the misuse of funds within the camp, but this information could politicize the network and endanger the participants.

In light of the current situation in Côte d'Ivoire, it is necessary to wait before any steps can be taken to implement an early warning network in the refugee camps. Fortunately, the political climate of the country appears to be improving, so the wait may not be too long. The Government of National Reconciliation has recently become functional and government officials will soon be resuming their posts in the western regions of the country. Accordingly, the banking and postal systems will likely reopen shortly. However, the government has minimal control over the armed forces. As such, the countless roadblocks that impede transportation will likely remain in place for some time to come.

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<sup>1</sup> "2001 Note on International Protection." United Nations High Commission on Refugees. p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

The key variable in whether the situation in Côte d'Ivoire will improve to the extent necessary to implement an early warning network is the degree to which the demobilization and reintegration program for Ivorian soldiers is successful. The responsibility for this program is shared between the French peacekeepers and the Government of National Reconciliation. If the demobilization program succeeds, then the reconciliation government will regain control over the armed forces and the western region will become sufficiently stabilized. This will also decrease the likelihood of refugee abuse since the area will no longer be at risk of renewed violence. As a result, the host country will be less threatened by the establishment of an early warning network and will be less inclined to take steps to prevent its implementation. At present that is not the case. The Ivorian situation is deteriorating each day that passes by. The demobilization program, in its present form, leaves much to be desired. A recently demobilized soldier informed me of the situation: "It is serious. I have to do small jobs just to get by. They didn't give me anything when they took my gun away. There are a lot of us around here with nothing to do."<sup>3</sup> The presence of large numbers of disgruntled soldiers and the increasing hostility between the Gbagbo government and the so-called "New Forces" create a situation that is highly unstable. Although an early warning network would be extremely useful in such a case, it may be too difficult to organize under such conditions.

An early warning network would not require much time to construct. I estimate that a network can become functional in a given camp within approximately three weeks if the organization that implements it has prior connections to the camp population. These contacts should not be difficult to obtain considering the large number of Liberian refugees present throughout West Africa, but this does imply that an organization already established in West Africa would be more suited to construct an early warning network than an organization with little connection to the sub-region.

The need for greater vigilance in refugee camps so as to mitigate or avert the instability they bring with them when they flee West Africa's uncivil wars should not be minimized. It is critical to reducing the rapidity with which these wars transcend borders and spread their cataclysmic effects. The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) is in a unique position to undertake series of experiments in refugee camps around West Africa. Not only does WANEP already have a well-established community-level network throughout West Africa, it is also the representative for non-governmental organizations in ECOWAS particularly on early warning. This provides WANEP the opportunity to use the gathered information to compel the actions required to prevent the outbreak of violence or the exploitation of helpless refugees. By acting as liaison between the early warning network and the policy makers of ECOWAS, WANEP can address the warning signs before they become tragedies. Creating an early warning system in refugee camps will not be an easy task but it is worthwhile. And most worthwhile endeavors never come easy.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview conducted 7 August 2003 outside Blolékin, Côte d'Ivoire. Translated from the French by the author.