

courage

UNHCR staff: testing courage

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In the height of insecurity, UNHCR staff had to ensure that only Sierra Leonean refugees were repatriated and that it was done in safety and dignity.

In the words of one 6th grade pupil here in Liberia, courage means "to stand up for a cause when you really would like to run away or hide". This insightful definition describes exactly how UNHCR staff felt during the height of the 2003 rebel onslaught on Monrovia, when they remained behind to provide the needed assistance and protection to persons under the care of UNHCR.

In June 2003 the three-sided war between the Liberian Government of then President Charles Taylor, the rebels of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), and Movement for Democracy

in Liberia (MODEL) reached a crescendo when the LURD rebels launched a vigorous attempt to capture Monrovia.

UNHCR's Associate Community Services Officer Mary Flomo-Hall was among the first to feel the force of the rebels' attempt to take over the Liberian capital: "I was at work, away from home, when the rebels started their advance on Monrovia, and I lost everything," she remembers. Fortunately, a few days later Mary was reunited with her children, and she was able to move them in with a family member. As the security situation continued to deteriorate, evacuation of international staff began, and Mary also planned to "run away to safety". But, the then UNHCR Representative Moses Okello asked Mary to lead the UNHCR Management Team, and she was faced with the dilemma of whether to pursue her plans to flee or accept the challenge.

"In the end, I chose to stay out of respect for the organization and my people, and with no change of clothes, I came straight to work amidst high expectations from my colleagues and the refugees," she recalls. "With the help of UNHCR and its implementing partners such as MERCI, MERLIN, WFP, we were able to respond to the priority needs of water, feeding, health and sanitation."

It was a tough situation, especially for a woman: "At times my life was threatened by the very people I had stayed behind to help, and during this difficult time it was insinuated that a man would have made more of a difference," Mary explained. But in spite of the threats and negative comments, she stuck bravely to the task at hand.

The UNHCR Management Team also organized the emergency repatriation of Sierra Leonean refugees during the height of the conflict. Field assistant Josiah Flomo takes up the story: "It was a crazy and chaotic atmosphere, where everyone was desperate to leave the country, so we had to ensure that only genuine Sierra Leonean refugees were allowed on board the ship. It was a risky decision, but we carried it through." He adds: "There were also several interruptions during the refugee registration and screening process, as there were often threats to their and our safety."

Staff members had to use the cover of ambulances to transport refugees from displaced centers located around the greater Monrovia area to the UNHCR office to be repatriated. "Now we can look back and speak light of the situation," Josiah stresses, "but at the time, it was a matter of life and death."

The repatriation of the Sierra Leonean refugees during the height of the conflict was carried out under extremely difficult circumstances. The repatriation convoy had to pass through extremely tense areas of Monrovia, with UNHCR assuming the responsibility for its safety. UNHCR had to liaise with all the warring factions

according to the constantly changing situation: "We had to escort the convoy to the Freeport of Monrovia and ensure that the refugees would set sail without harassment or intimidation," Josiah said. They had to be in constant contact with the security forces to ascertain whether they could reach the Freeport as planned or abort the mission. "Routes were changed at the last moment to save lives," he added.

It is customary for UNHCR to provide a safe escort to the refugees – in this case to turn them over safely to their colleagues in Sierra Leone. Field Clerk Hattie Kamara was on one of the journeys when the ship MV Overbeck developed mechanical problems, and those on board had to wait at sea for 6 days to be rescued. "Even though I was afraid, I didn't have any regrets about my choice," Hattie revealed as she reflected on her ordeal on the high seas. There was panic on board, and the refugees turned to the UNHCR escort for comfort and reassurance: "I was the conduit between the crew, the UNHCR offices in Freetown and Monrovia, and the refugees," Hattie narrated, adding that she had to let go of her own fear in order to calm a troubled situation with regular situation updates and words of encouragement. It was a real test of courage, in which Hattie learned that she could manage an emergency situation when instead, in the words of that 6th grader, she "really would like to run away or hide." Today, as a result of the August 2003 Accra Peace Accord, calm has returned to Liberia. UNHCR continued repatriating Sierra Leonean refugees until the exercise was successfully concluded, in July 2004. Local reintegration is being sought for the remaining 2,715 cases, and UNHCR is still providing much-needed humanitarian intervention, not only for the Sierra Leonean refugees but also for Liberia's internally displaced people, an influx of Ivorian refugees, plus a number of urban refugees of various nationalities. Additionally, UNHCR is actively involved in the return and reintegration of over 300,000 Liberian refugees who are scattered around West Africa.



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The MV Overbeck that short landed its passengers due to technical faults- Hattie Kamara was on board the vessel to ensure that refugees are safely handed over to UNHCR Sierra Leone.

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