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Liberian Refugees Head for Ivory Coast

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) -- Refugees, many paddling dugout canoes, were streaming from Liberia into Ivory Coast on Monday, part of a massive 10,000-person exodus in 48 hours to escape fighting in a major new rebel push there, the U.N. refugee agency said.

The flight started when the coastal Liberian town of Harper fell to rebels over the weekend, the U.N. refugee agency said.

"We don't know if this is a few days' panic or something that will last and increase. But for now, it's sure chaos," refugee agency spokeswoman Astrid van Genderen Stort said in Abidjan, commercial capital of neighboring Ivory Coast.

Liberia's battles with rebels fighting to oust President Charles Taylor already have displaced 1 million people within the West African country, and sent 300,000 others fleeing to Ivory Coast and other neighboring countries

Pressure on Taylor's regime appears to have increased dramatically in recent weeks, with a new rebel group based along the eastern border with Ivory Coast emerging to do battle against Taylor.

It was that group behind the fighting over Harper.

U.N. workers on both sides of the border said Monday that many of those fleeing Liberia were using canoes to cross the Cavally River, which forms the border between the two countries.

Prior to the latest flight of refugees, the United Nations was sheltering 700 Liberians at an area transit center in the seaside Ivory Coast border town of Tabou, 20 miles from Liberia.

"We're hoping that most people will be able to stay in villages nearby," said Van Genderen Stort, adding that the agency planned to meet with the Ivory Coast government to discuss the influx.

U.N. officials feared some of those fleeing might be gunmen.

President Laurent Gbagbo's government in Ivory Coast also has been battling a rebellion. Fighters in both countries' wars are believed to be slipping back and forth across the lawless border.

“There's the fear that rebels may come across with the refugees,” Van Genderen Stort said.

The U.N. estimates that Ivory Coast has about 35,000 Liberian refugees, while more than 38,000 Ivory Coast refugees are in Liberia.

It was not immediately possible to tell how many of those fleeing over the past two days were Liberian and how many Ivorian, but an aid worker in Liberia said more than 10,000 people were in flight.

The southern stretch of the Ivory Coast-Liberia border is remote, thickly forested and dotted with small villages inhabited by fishermen who ply the waters of the Cavally River for food.

In the anarchy of wars on both sides of the border, gunmen, soldiers and rebels have been accused of massacres and other atrocities against civilians.

On Monday, the U.N. refugee agency canceled a routine humanitarian flight to the area, citing security concerns.

In the north, Liberia claimed over the weekend that forces of neighboring Guinea had actively started fighting alongside a separate, northern-based rebel group there.

Rebels are fighting to capture Monrovia, the capital, and drive out Taylor, who launched a ruinous seven-year civil war in Liberia in 1989 and won presidential elections the year after it ended.