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Ivory Coast Haven Turns Hostile for Liberians

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

TABOU, Ivory Coast, Jan. 17 — In the language of international aid, "voluntary repatriation" refers to the homecoming of refugees who once fled war. The voyage must be made of their own consent, "in safety and with dignity."

But for Lillian Gwih, a dazed Liberian refugee in Ivory Coast, a sick baby sleeping on her back, a 4-year-old clutching her skirt, voluntary repatriation means crossing a river called Cavally, from one bank of hell to another.

Eight years ago, Mrs. Gwih fled war in her own country, as have thousands of other Liberians, for the safety of Ivory Coast, once one of this region's most stable and prosperous nations.

But today it is Ivory Coast that is gripped by war, a messy conflict between the government of President Laurent Gbagbo and various rebel factions that began after simmering religious, ethnic and political tensions burst with a failed coup in September.

So grim has life suddenly become for Mrs. Gwih that she and about 1,000 other refugees have rushed into the United Nations compound here over the last three days and volunteered to do the unimaginable: return to Liberia. Its own war, which scattered 100,000 refugees last year alone, continues unabated.

On this morning, Mrs. Gwih, 26, with an outsize man's polo shirt draped over her bony frame, was among the first 87 refugees whom the United Nations hoped to ferry back to Liberia — refugees without refuge in this hapless corner of the continent, who embarked on what for most proved to be a futile journey.

There were once 70,000 Liberians like Mrs. Gwih in Ivory Coast — men and women who fled here when their own country was plunged into conflict by Charles Taylor, a rapacious, American-educated warlord who rules there even today. They settled mostly in the western swath of Ivory Coast, working the plantations and having children, sometimes with local Ivoirians.

Then in November, rebel forces said to have been trained in Liberia began wreaking havoc here in the country's precious cocoa belt, and the Ivoirians who had once laid out the welcome mat for their desperate Liberian cousins now want their heads. An estimated 40,000 Liberians have returned home in the weeks since, without United Nations assistance, along with 25,000 Ivoirians, who are now refugees in Liberia.

There have been reports, impossible to confirm, of both government and rebel forces recruiting among the refugees. Whatever the truth, fear runs so deep that no one wants the Liberians here.

"They're saying the Liberians are rebels, they're coming to kill them, so there's reprisal," explained Isaac Tuee, 29, a former engineer who had also signed up to go home to Liberia. He sounded almost empathetic at first, then rueful. "You live with someone so long, almost like brothers. They've been so good. Why they change hearts so quick?"

The United Nations has trumpeted the need to distinguish between refugees and rebels. But as United Nations officials readily acknowledge, the job of vetting the innocent from the guilty among refugees here can be extremely difficult.

In these circumstances, "voluntary repatriation" takes on new meaning. The refugees are "volunteering" to leave villages where there are credible, though again unconfirmed, reports of 10 vigilante killings of Liberians in recent weeks. The journey home means crossing checkpoints manned by hostile, pro-government local militiamen — war paint on their faces and chicken-bone amulets around their necks. Home itself is mystery.

"I don't got no house there," Mrs. Gwih said, before boarding the minibus that would take her from this frightful place to another. "I don't got nobody there."

In the United Nations compound, amid a chaotic tableau of blue plastic buckets and bedding rolls and children dressed in their Sunday finery for an improbable journey, tales circulated about beatings and executions by local militia.

Emmanuel Wah, 25, bore deep gouges on his back and wrists, remnants of a recent beating. Cyrus Barley, 17, had a swollen eye. Johnson Bodro, 28, recalled fleeing as fellow Liberians were set upon and killed by a local mob. Yet, his recollection was also peppered by tales of kindness: an Ivoirian boss who sheltered him, an Ivoirian friend who told him about the execution of his friends, an Ivoirian driver who hid him in a copse of rubber trees.

Where that driver succeeded — in providing a safe haven — United Nations officials have been confounded. No neighboring country has responded to United Nations appeals to take the refugees in, leaving the agency with one awful option.

That is why, shortly before 9 a.m., Mrs. Gwih found herself on the first list of those going home to Liberia. She wrapped an identification bracelet around her wrist, pinned a name tag on her son, Prince, wrapped another around baby Richard's fat ankle. The baby, snoozing on his mother's back, was hot with fever. Mrs. Gwih clutched jars of bactrim and chloroquine.

The red clay road to the Cavally River had potholes big enough for cows to hide in. The sun beat down. The war has made it impossible to tend to the red palm and bananas here, and ferns, like rebels of nature, have overtaken the groves.

At checkpoints stood men with charcoal-smearred faces. They wore amulets of hair, leaf, bones. They carried spears, machine guns, slingshots. Some were high on drugs. An occasional contingent of French soldiers on antipersonnel carriers peppered the road. Ivoirian government troops were nowhere.

By midafternoon, the caravan arrived at Prollo, a tiny fishing village on the Cavally River. Liberia was only a hundred yards on the opposing bank, but impossible to reach; the motorboats that were supposed to be here had not shown up. United Nations officials were stumped.

For over an hour, they negotiated with government authorities and the village leader to find a way across. All the while, Mrs. Gwih and her fellow refugees roasted on the buses. Hardly a soul dared come out, even to relieve himself. The young men of Prollo strutted about, their knives glinting. A few French soldiers kept a silent guard.

The hot silence was broken shortly after 3 p.m., when a dozen men, singing a war chant, hoisted dugout canoes into the Cavally. The refugee women and children were lined up, life jackets were slipped on, and the first canoe was loaded up with six small babies and six frightened mothers. The women kept their eyes on the near shore, looked at the water rushing in through the cracks and lapping at their ankles, then stared at the shore ahead. A baby began bawling. They smiled only when the canoe reached Liberia and the children were handed to safety. The voyage lasted no more than five minutes.

On this side, Mrs. Gwih and her children prepared themselves for the crossing, putting on life jackets. "I'm afraid," she whispered. "Canoe so small." They waited.

The United Nations officials watched the perilous crossing, the dugout canoes just inches above the water line. Only 28 women and children reached Liberia before the operation was called off.

The government representative of Ivory Coast, Kouame Bouaki, marched back to his car. Would the refugees be safe in his country until they could be safely sent across? "Of course," Mr. Bouaki said. "It is the government's job to protect people and property, including refugees."

Nearby stood the remnants of a United Nations ferry. It was brought here to transport refugees across the water — 100 at a time — and then was given to the Ivoirian government. Government troops blew it up six weeks ago.

Blessed or cursed, Mrs. Gwih did not have to make the river crossing. She took off her life jacket, wrapped the baby on her back. Wordlessly, the refugees piled back onto the steaming buses and rolled down the red clay roads, back through the checkpoints operated by the war-painted boys. The buses rolled back to the United Nations office here. Officials will try again to find bigger and safer boats to make the crossing next week.

A slogan inscribed on the back of one bus read: "Molo molo. La route est longue." In English: "Slow slow. The road is long."

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