

## More than 1,600 Liberians return in one day after refugee status ends

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Hope floats: Homebound Liberians cross the Cavalla river from Côte d'Ivoire to Liberia.

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 31 (UNHCR) – A month after their refugee status ended, more than 1,600 Liberians have returned home in the single-largest movements in recent years.

Last Friday, 1,566 Liberians were brought home on buses and barges from neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. Another 79 were flown from Ghana to Liberia on a plane provided by the UN Mission in Liberia. Together, they made up the largest group of returnees in a single day since 2009.

They were received in Liberia by UNHCR staff in Monrovia, Zwedru and Harper offices after security and immigration formalities. Officials from the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Commission were also there to welcome and assure them about security and assistance to reintegrate.

Among Friday's returnees was Nathaniel Sawo, who left Liberia 20 years ago to escape forced recruitment during the civil war. Now 37 years old, he returned from Côte d'Ivoire with his wife and two children, who were seeing their country for the first time.

"It is a pleasure to be home," said Sawo. "When we were fleeing, we spent several days walking through dense dangerous forest. This time, we were safely transported back home. We thank the UNHCR for facilitating our return."

Between 2004 and 2011, 169,300 Liberian refugees returned. Of these 138,600 were assisted by the UN refugee agency including over 1,200 in 2010 and more than 1,700 last year. This year has seen a surge in the number of returnees, with more than 12,500 since January. It comes as refugee status for Liberians ended on June 30 this year.

Expressing delight that more Liberians are returning after many years in exile, UNHCR's Representative in Liberia Cosmas Chanda said the number of refugees who registered to return before the June 30 deadline exceeded expectations.

"We thank donors for their support to the repatriation process, but we need more support to facilitate voluntary return," he said, adding that the ongoing repatriation involves huge logistical, human and financial requirements. "We had planned to receive 15,000 returnees this year as the refugee status for Liberians ended. However, about 25,000 persons had registered to return."

More than 12,000 Liberians still need help to repatriate. Currently, returnees receive repatriation and transportation grants for adults and children. Oretha Coffa, a 33-year-old single mother of three, thanked UNHCR for the grant. "I am going to use the amount I've received to start up a small business to support my family," she said, hoping for brighter days ahead.

Liberia has abundant fertile land, rain and sunshine. With a strong belief that the soil is a bank, returnee Sawo said he will be farming for a living. "With agriculture I will be able to feed my family, as well as sell the surplus to take care of other needs."

Liberia's civil wars, which raged between 1989 and 2003, killed more than 250,000 people and forced some 750,000 to flee their homes. Many have since returned with UNHCR help and many more on their own.

*By Sulaiman Momodu, in Monrovia, Liberia*