RECOMMENDATIONS ON REFUGEE AND IDP RETURNS AND MOVEMENTS

Summary

In 2017, thousands of people are still on the move across Borno state in northeast Nigeria. There are many reasons for this movement. Some are being displaced for the first time; others are moving or being relocated by authorities into LGA headquarters either from rural areas in the LGA, from already established IDP sites elsewhere and across the border from Cameroon into Nigeria, back across the border where they become IDPs. Some of these are described as “voluntary” or “spontaneous”, and indeed, some may be. But, in the absence of government confirmed information about the level of registration, information sharing to ensure informed decision making and information on planned areas of resettlement we are particularly concerned that these movements may not be voluntary, based on well-informed decisions or safe. This is exacerbated by a context of rumours reported by IDPs that aid will be stopped in places like Maiduguri, that camps could be closed at the end of May 2017, and that aid is readily accessible in other locations to which people are being encouraged to move. The humanitarian community has not received timely information in order to plan for or receive new arrivals, and many sites identified by the authorities for return are already at maximum capacity and cannot support further population increases. In almost all instances, there is insufficient shelter, water, food, health, no education services and this has further exacerbated existing protection risks. These movements therefore pose risks and challenges to those displaced and for those already living in these sites.

On 22 May 2017, 1,339 people were moved from Banki to Pulka. Many of these people had previously been staying as refugees in Minawao camp in Cameroon. Humanitarian agencies repeatedly raised concerns with the authorities that this was not a suitable site accommodate more people due to severe water and other basic service limitations. Agencies were not given specific warning about this movement, and it was not confirmed until the morning of 22 May after buses had departed from Banki. Despite official assurances that most of these people were from the host community, most are currently staying in a UNICEF school site that has only limited shelter and just two latrines, though humanitarian agencies have constructed 16 more (+6 bathing shelters) as of 25th May. Others have been displaced by people returning to reclaim the houses they were staying
in. Water provision is already at 3-5 litres per person per day, far short of what is needed, and is only going to drop further, impacting their ability to keep themselves clean, making people even more vulnerable.

The arrival of large numbers of people back into Nigeria will put pressure on an already overstretched food security sector, in the context of a potentially looming famine in the country. Existing pressure to reduce food assistance owing to funding shortages must be addressed, with clear plans set out both to meet the food security needs of additional populations without sacrificing the needs of the existing population.

People wishing to return to their homes have the right to do so, but all efforts must be made to ensure that these are indeed returns, that people are returning to their place of habitual residence and that they are safe, voluntary, well-informed and dignified. If, in extreme circumstances and in compliance with IHL, people must be moved by military personnel they should not be forced into moving because of difficult or worsening humanitarian conditions, restrictions on their rights in places of displacement or false or misleading information on conditions in a future location.

The promotion and facilitation of secondary displacement or premature return also creates serious protection risks, including to the physical security and well-being of displaced people. Secondary occupancies are now also causing massive land and housing disputes and could hinder the achievement of long-term peace, stability and recovery in the northeast more generally.

**Refugee returns from Cameroon to Nigeria**

The number of people being facilitated to return to Nigeria from the Minawao refugee camp in Cameroon has rapidly increased since the beginning of May. The point of arrival is most often Banki, where over 8,000 people have arrived since 12 May 2017 alone. Movements are also being reported into Mubi and into Gambara Ngala. In total, Minawao camp is currently estimated to host between 55,000-60,000 people, so further movements are anticipated. UNHCR in Cameroon has described these returns as “spontaneous” but there is a degree of organisation - trucks and buses have been organised to transport people out of the camp over the border into Nigeria. There is no clarity on the origin of funds paying for the movement, nor who is responsible for organising the logistics. UNHCR in Minawao camp are currently conducting investigations to understand how these movements are taking place.¹

There are indications that insufficient or inaccurate information about security and the services available is being provided to people, suggesting that many returns are not fully informed. This includes inaccurate information that there are no longer security concerns, that agricultural opportunities are available (particularly in Gwoza LGA) and that there are no restrictions on freedom of movement in Borno state. All people on the move should receive accurate and impartial information about the situation in the place of arrival.

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¹ UNHCR, Flash Infos 5, Spontaneous returns of refugees from Minawao Camp, 21 May 2017
Current numbers

- The number of refugees registered at the police station in Minawao for imminent departure stood at 5,553 persons as of 16 May.
- Arrivals in Banki
  - 12 – 14 May: 2,411 arrivals in Banki
    - 1,155 in transit and planned go to Pulka
    - 1,256 to stay in Banki
  - Of 1,155, 1,011 individuals / 147 households were to be relocated from Banki to Pulka on 16 May, depending on the availability of the escort. This movement was temporarily halted following the request made by PCNI / sector.

Some refugee returnees are being registered to move onward from Banki. 1,339 arrived on 22 May with agencies told to expect further movements in the coming days.

No official information has been provided to organisations working in Banki about increasing arrivals. Shelter, water, food and health provision is all inadequate to meet the needs of the current population. Currently, the site is congested and its services overwhelmed. The site was already hosting 31,438 individuals (5,716 households) before the recent population increases. There are limited reception capacities and transit areas.

Absorption Capacity of Other Sites

Pulka, and other sites including Bama, Gwoza and Konduga, have all been identified as sites to receive people, however there are concerns about the ability of many of these places to absorb larger numbers of people.

Pulka: 1,339 individuals arrived into Pulka on 22 May 2017 despite repeated concerns raised by humanitarian agencies that the community could not host further arrivals due to limited water availability in the town. Prior to this, the town was hosting 13,854 individuals (2,504 households) in the host community and a further 5,851 individuals hosted in two IDP camps. There are a further 1,500 people staying in the compound of a health centre, without adequate shelter. A third camp is due to be constructed by IOM to host people currently staying in the health centre compound, but this will not be able to accommodate further people. Newly arrived people are staying at a UNICEF school site, but this has only limited shelter and two latrines for the entire population, though as of 25th May, humanitarian agencies have constructed 16 more (+6 bathing shelters). More services are now under construction to meet emergency needs.

There are severe water shortages in the town. With additional boreholes online humanitarian agencies are currently only able to provide around 3-5l per person per day. Camp 3 will have to rely on existing water supply sources, as there is no additional supply that can currently be brought on-stream.
Any large movements of people into the town will vastly increase the pressure on water services. Even if all those intending to return to Pulka are from the host community, they may not be able to return to their homes if they have been destroyed, or may displace IDPs currently staying in their homes, leading to further displacement and entirely insufficient water and shelter options.

Freedom of movement is currently restricted in Pulka, with a narrow perimeter around the town with firewood collection only secure within a very small radius and limited livelihood opportunities and the corresponding dependence on food aid.

**Bama**: The General Hospital camps in Bama already hosts around 14,000 people including 2,000 people lacking adequate shelter in the camp and are sleeping outside due to unannounced facilitated movements to the site. Water and sanitation conditions have been repeatedly flagged as below standards due to severe overcrowding and difficult access to the site because of security concerns. There are plans to open an additional camp site as the congested hospital camp cannot host additional influxes. UXO has been found in the land identified for the site which have to be removed and the area fully de-mined prior to construction of a new camp. Freedom of movement is severely curtailed and the population is heavily reliant on humanitarian assistance.

**Neither Bama nor Pulka site can currently absorb further population movements or displacements without further expansions to existing camp sites**, the identification of further available sites and planning to increase the services available to meet projected numbers of arrivals. **Beyond this, the security situation, freedom of movement for people and provision of basic services by the authorities must improve to create a genuinely conducive environment to facilitate larger scale voluntary returns to places of habitual residence.**

**Recommendations:**

**We ask that the Governments of Cameroon and Nigeria to:**

- Suspend movements of refugee returnees (those resulting from the tripartite agreement) that will affect the overcrowding of sites in Nigeria until a plan and minimum living standards are put in place in order to ensure that onward movements to LGAs (host communities and camps) are only facilitated to areas where service provision is adequate or can be scaled up to receive new arrivals, and clear procedures are put in place for the reception of new arrivals.

- Provide clear, accurate and accessible information to refugee and IDP populations about the situation in their areas of habitual residence to ensure that decisions to move are fully informed.

- Send a clear statement to refugees that they can remain in Minawao camp and other locations in Cameroon should they not wish to move or are currently unable to return to their areas of habitual residence.
• Develop a joint returns information strategy, including facilitated go-see visits and refugee and IDP community engagement for the spontaneous voluntary returns to enable them make informed decisions.

• Address gaps in service provision in Minawao camp that may be encouraging onward movement and work with the humanitarian community to meet these gaps.

• Establish clear coordination channels to with the humanitarian community on planned or facilitated movements of people, both those returning from Cameroon and those displaced inside Nigeria, providing information about the number of people registered to return, areas of origin and areas of putative return to ensure that authorities and humanitarian agencies (UN and INGOs) can ensure sufficient services can be provided once returns resume.

• Since the provision of services in Banki does not yet meet emergency standards, alternative sites must be identified that can host voluntarily returning refugees, or onwardly displaced IDPs in adequate conditions until they are able to return to their place of habitual residence in coordination with federal and state actors and the humanitarian community. This should specifically exclude Pulka, which does not have the water availability to sustain further population increases.

We ask the UN to:

• The Nigeria HCT should coordinate with the Humanitarian Country Team in Cameroon to advocate for the immediate halting of all organised or facilitated refugee returns from Cameroon to Nigeria until there is a clear plan to provide conditions that meet emergency standards for service provision inside Nigeria.

• As movement of refugee returnees from Cameroon will affect the overcrowding of sites in Nigeria, movements within Nigeria should be suspended until a clear plan is developed in order to ensure that onward movements to LGAs and camps are only facilitated to areas where service provision is adequate or can be scaled up to receive new arrivals, and clear procedures are put in place for reception of new arrivals.

• UNHCR must ensure that effective border monitoring teams are in place to ensure that details of those refugees crossing the border are captured and shared with the humanitarian community, and ensuring that vulnerable people, such as unaccompanied children, are immediately referred, and that people receive support including entry interviews at border transit sites;

• IOM should clearly distinguish between “return” and “secondary displacement” in tracking people on the move and identify intention to move and proposed location at points of registration so that their needs can be appropriately planned for by organisations at the point of arrival;

• Develop an action plan to facilitate humanitarian access in the northeast, including an urgent scale-up in OCHA capacity on access and civil-military coordination and drafting of civil-military guidelines;
• Ensure adequate planning for the provision of food by the food security sector and WFP if Nigeria is to attempt to absorb so many people;

We ask the Donors to:

• Call on the authorities in Cameroon and Nigeria to publicly commit to maintaining camps and ensuring adequate services are available, and to halt all organised or facilitated refugee returns from Cameroon to Nigeria until there is a clear plan providing for conditions that meet emergency standards for service provision inside Nigeria;

• Similarly, as movements of refugee returnees from Cameroon will affect the overcrowding of sites in Nigeria, support the suspension of movements within Nigeria until a clear plan is developed in order to ensure that onward movements to LGAs and camps are only facilitated to areas where service provision is adequate or can be scaled up to receive new arrivals, and clear procedures are put in place for reception of new arrivals;

• Ensure that they are not inadvertently supporting secondary displacement or premature return through the funding they provide;

• Provide sufficient funding to ensure that continued scale-up of assistance to IDPs in both camps and host communities to meet needs in Nigeria and to meet needs in Minawao camp in Cameroon;

• Support the food security sector and WFP to plan and effectively meet the food security needs of large arrivals of new people.