

## Helping West Africa's Refugees

The Washington Post

December 23, 1991, Monday, Final Edition

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**Section:** EDITORIAL; PAGE A18; LETTERS TO THE EDITOR; LETTER

**Length:** 417 words

**Series:** Occasional

### **Body**

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As someone who served this past summer in the U.S. Embassy in Freetown, Sierra Leone, I read Tami Hultman's article on the Liberian refugee crisis [news story, Dec. 6] with some interest. While I found the article to be basically correct, several elements of the crisis that deserve attention were not mentioned.

First, one of the reasons this country will not accept the already low ceiling set for African refugees is that there is only one Immigration and Naturalization Service officer stationed in Africa, and he is based in Nairobi, across the continent from Liberia. The refugee processing center in Sierra Leone is operated by the International Rescue Committee, a nongovernmental organization with a State Department contract. Until the U.S. government and the INS decide to devote more attention to Africa's growing refugee problem, crises like the one in Liberia will persist.

Second, as Tami Hultman correctly pointed out, our embassies are constrained by the Immigration and Naturalization Act, specifically section 214 (b), which forbids the issuance of tourist visas to individuals who cannot prove they will return to their country. Most Liberians cannot pass this test and are referred to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees for processing. It tears your heart out to split families and force human beings to live in refugee camps, but until this gap between tourist visas and refugee processing is filled by Congress, embassy personnel and refugees will continue to be frustrated.

Finally, the U.S. record on the "supply-side" of this problem has been abysmal. In these days of a "new world order" driven by humanitarian concerns, our government has done little to alleviate the suffering in West Africa. Despite repeated requests to the Agency for International Development for disaster assistance, little money has been spent on improving the condition of the refugee camps. Sierra Leone is in desperate need of food, transportation, medicine and shelter for both Liberian refugees and Sierra Leoneans who have been displaced by the rebel incursions from Liberia.

Contrary to what many Americans think, the people of Liberia love their country and would rather be there than here. If we give the refugees assistance in West Africa, they will be willing to wait for the results of the Economic Community of West African States' peace-making efforts in Liberia. However, at present, a full-scale crisis is underway in West Africa.

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### **Classification**

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** REFUGEES (93%); EMBASSIES & CONSULATES (92%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (90%); IMMIGRATION

## Helping West Africa's Refugees

(90%); CITIZENSHIP (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); MIGRATION ISSUES (90%); RELIEF ORGANIZATIONS (89%); **REFUGEE** & RELIEF CAMPS (78%); EMERGENCY SHELTERS (78%); STATE DEPARTMENTS & FOREIGN SERVICES (78%); DISPLACED PERSONS (78%); DIPLOMATIC SERVICES (78%); NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (78%); NATURALIZATION (76%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (74%); UNITED NATIONS (73%); INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ORGANIZATIONS (71%); DISASTER RELIEF (69%)

**Company:** UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR **REFUGEES** (92%); INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (57%); INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (57%)

**Organization:** UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR **REFUGEES** (92%); INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (57%); INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (57%); UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR **REFUGEES** (92%); INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (57%); INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE (57%)

**Geographic:** FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE (79%); NAIROBI, KENYA (72%); LIBERIA (95%); SIERRA LEONE (94%); UNITED STATES (94%); AFRICA (94%); **WESTERN** AFRICA (94%); KENYA (79%)