

By the Grace of God: Insecurity and Empowerment in a West African Refugee Camp

We live here, and sleep in the night... and certain times, we get up and we just find the miserable things that have happened. So our security is not really guaranteed as a refugee... we are only secure by the grace of God here. –Liberian refugee, 14 March 2006

Walk down any of the crowded streets in Buduburam Refugee Settlement near Accra, Ghana and approach one of the 40,000 persons living there - a water seller, hair braider, pastor, teacher, journalist or computer technician. Engage them in conversation about themselves and they will inevitably invoke the phrase “by the grace of God.” It is used to explain why this refugee camp exists and the deep sense of uncertainty that characterizes the residents’ lived experience. It reflects the powerful belief Liberians have in God and the protective powers of faith. It also reveals an important day-to-day reality: residents lack control over their present and their future.

For refugees, security is a concept with multiple aspects. To feel secure, they must live in a community with low crime rates, adequate justice systems and supportive police forces. Security is also based on something deeper. Refugees must know what tomorrow will bring and have the capacity to make decisions for themselves and their families. They must be able to take responsibility for, and pride in, a better future for their communities. But a safe community, a reliable future and an ability to take responsibility for that future are the very aspects of security that are lacking in the lives of refugees. Refugee camps are by nature temporary; they are often physically insecure. Camp authorities may dictate the personal freedoms of residents. The government, not the refugee community, may make decisions about the future. Daily subsistence is a struggle. Thus, for many, “the grace of God” is the only explanation for how life goes on.

This predicament is being challenged by a group of refugees at Buduburam. They are taking control of one aspect of their security, physical security, through a refugee-led organization that monitors crime and conflict: the Neighborhood Watch Team (NWT). Founded in 2003 to address rampant crime at camp, the organization has not only successfully reduced crime, but has also given the community more choice, voice and regulation over a part of their residency in Ghana. Having greater responsibility for physical security has empowered these refugees in their relationships with camp authorities, international organizations and the government. Their work is a unique and instructive example of one human rights-oriented way security can be addressed in refugee camps.

The Buduburam Refugee Settlement in Ghana

The Buduburam Refugee Settlement is a protracted refugee situation involving more than 40,000 Liberians currently residing at the camp. Many of them have lived in Ghana since 2003, and some since 1996. During the six months I spent conducting research at Buduburam, I found that crime and insecurity had been an important problem for residents and the Ghanaian government since the camp was established in the mid-1990s. In Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, there is a lack of government capacity to address refugee security issues. At Buduburam, there are approximately five daytime police officers and often less at night; they rarely patrol. As early as 1996, Buduburam was rife with such crime as rape, petty theft, armed robbery and assault. Intermittent riots and general unrest destabilized daily life. In 2003, local press reported that Buduburam was “wreaking havoc in Ghana as the refugees perpetrate various heinous crimes,

threatening the host country's security."¹ One article claimed 10% of residents were ex-combatants, not "genuine refugees," and alleged the camp was a mercenary recruiting ground.

Following a large-scale military raid in 2003, during which soldiers with tanks and helicopters searched for rebel training facilities and weapons, the camp administration and UNHCR implemented the NWT as part of the Ghana security package. The NWT has successfully addressed primary issues of insecurity, especially those of highest concern to the Ghanaian government, such as armed robbery. My research on refugee security at Buduburam employed a refugee-centric, human rights approach and comprised an ethnographic interview project and an initial case study of the NWT. I sought to discover why the NWT model had worked so well in addressing crime at Buduburam, and how it has empowered refugees, with the support of official bodies, to take some control over their security needs.

The Neighborhood Watch Team

I feel [with] the NWT, I'm safe while they are here. They are all Liberians. What used to happen is not happening again... because now the watch team is walking around at night. You can sleep in the night. –Liberian refugee, 28 February 2006

When the NWT was founded in 2003, it established a statute that recognizes that Liberian refugees have suffered the consequences of "the horrible and dehumanized armed-conflict" and resolved to "reinforce security in our community in order to prevent or minimize the reoccurrence of crimes like burglary, rape [and] armed robbery" in a way that is "non-governmental, non-political, and non-profitable." Members are tasked with enhancing security through nighttime monitoring and assisting the police in all "events endangering the safety of camp residents or their property."² They are to "strictly adhere to the civilian character of their stay in Ghana and the civilian character of their residence in a refugee camp."³

During the NWT formation, UNHCR agreed to provide limited support for the 200 refugees enlisted to patrol as volunteer security officers. In 2007, the team was pared down to 120 (roughly 20 of which are women), due to decreased UNHCR support. Members have generally been given limited food aid each month in exchange for their service. The police, immigration service, and watch team managers screen recruits to verify refugee status and identify any criminal records. There is a team head and the head's deputy; operations, patrol and investigative supervisors; and a Women's Auxiliary coordinator. A Board of Internal Affairs handles problems with and between NWT members. A general patrol and coordinator monitor the activities of the zone patrols, thus providing checks and balances on nightly activities. There is a clear chain of command in the NWT model, with multiple levels of supervisory capacities.

Each of the 11 camp zones has traditionally had a NWT post open 24-hours a day, a commander and a deputy, and a patrol team of 17 persons. The general patrol team moves around camp twice during the night, checking on each zone. While the NWT is not allowed to arrest residents, members may obtain an arrest slip from the police post and "invite" residents to accompany them to the police. Criminal cases are sent to the police, while the NWT handles petty crime. The NWT also takes residents to the welfare council or police to seek help or file a formal complaint if a dispute cannot be solved. All female NWT members are part of the

¹ Sarpong, Sam. "Refugee camp a security threat." March 2003. *News from Africa*. www.newsfromafrica.org

² Neighborhood Watch Team. "Neighborhood Watch Team Statute." 2003. Buduburam Refugee Settlement. *Note: the NWT Statute is included as an Appendix in the full report.*

³ *ibid.*

Women's Auxiliary, which handles domestic abuse, rape and harassment cases with the support of a women's counseling group on camp. The presence of women on the NWT is vital, as sexual and gender based violence is a serious problem at Buduburam.

During the course of my research, I found that camp residents felt vulnerable due to lack of police protection and uncertainty about the future of the camp; they also felt alienated from formal law enforcement and justice frameworks in Ghana. Conversely, many of the refugees I interviewed feel empowered by the NWT because camp is safer and residents are more in control of the security situation; in particular, they are heartened by the absence of military raids over the last four years. Residents are pleased to have a Liberian security organization, as they feel Liberians are more receptive, responsive and fair in handling their cases. The NWT provides residents with better representation in official forums, as they can speak to refugee security needs in a way the police cannot. The NWT has served the Ghanaian state by reducing crime, bolstering police capacity and acting as a "second eye" monitoring the activities of ex-combatants and potentially dangerous areas on camp. Overall, interviewees reported few problems with the NWT, and the government and UNHCR are pleased with the NWT's efforts.

Further Exploration of the Watch Team Model

Though watch teams have been informally used in refugee camps for decades, they are a relatively new concept as official elements of UNHCR security packages. Security packages are implemented in conjunction with host states and refugees and include such support as police training, and material aid for law enforcement officials and camp welfare offices. UNHCR has enacted security packages in Tanzania, Guinea, Liberia, Kenya and Ghana, among other states. Watch teams have been established in Tanzania, Liberia, Zambia, Sierra Leone and Ghana.

According to UNHCR, "With proper supervision and training, security mechanisms that involve refugee guards, wardens, patrols and watch teams can be highly effective;" they caution, however, that "such teams can be successful in maintaining security and order only if their roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, and they have good relations with the host country's law-enforcement authorities... if not monitored properly... such refugee-empowerment initiatives... could lead to vigilante justice or harassment of less-powerful refugees."⁴ This concern was expressed by both camp administration and refugees in Ghana, and highlights the need for careful planning, implementation and oversight of security teams. One must also be careful that refugees are not burdened with providing the entirety of their own protection, as they are defined under international law as vulnerable individuals entitled to protection by the host state.

Literature on the operation and success of watch team programs is extremely limited. However, UNHCR's positive review of the concept indicates teams may continue to be a part of security packages. Further research on watch teams is critical to assessing whether NGOs should also put forth support for such teams. This research might involve "embedded" observation of the Buduburam NWT as well as a comparative study. One such comparison could be of watch teams in Zambia, where Angolan and Congolese refugee security efforts have reduced crime and militarization.⁵ An in-depth study of these teams would allow for a comparative assessment of capacity, limitations, needs and impact, and a determination if this model of security could be an empowering supplement to traditional policing structures in a wider number of refugee camps.

⁴ UNHCR. *The State of the World's Refugees 2006: Human Displacement in the New Millennium*. 2006. Oxford University Press, Oxford, Chapter 3.

⁵ *ibid*