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DEPUTY SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE VISITS REFUGEE CAMPS

Freetown – The Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG) for Governance and Stabilization, Mr. Alan Doss, yesterday led an assessment mission to the refugee camps at Jimi Gbagbo and Taiama, and the way station at Zimmi, accompanied by officials of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA), and the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).

At Zimmi, in the south-east Pujehun district of Sierra Leone near the Liberian border, a UNHCR representative, Mr. Robert Fonie, told Mr. Doss and his team that there was “an intermittent influx of refugees and returnees.” Whenever there was an upsurge in fighting in Liberia, Mr. Fonie said, there was a concomitant increase in the influx of refugees, as was the case following a recent attack on Singe refugee camp in Liberia.

The Commanding Officer, Pujehun District, of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces, Lt. Col. Salifu Conteh, described the security situation as “under control.” “Not many people are crossing from Liberia to the border town of Dar es Salaam,” he said, noting that some of the refugees were returning to Liberia.

A UNAMSIL Military Observer, Maj. Farid, said there were more than 30 crossing points for refugees coming from Liberia. Because many of these points were inaccessible, it was difficult gauging the exact number of refugees entering Sierra Leone.

At Jimi Gbagbo refugee camp, the chairman of the Refugee Executive Committee, Mr. Sahr Khallie, explained that there were inadequate health facilities and food for the over 6,000 residents of the camp. He said that movement was difficult for the refugees because they did not have identification cards. He asked for a recreation center so that “our youth can keep themselves busy.”

The regional coordinator for the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), Mr. Moses Gbouma, highlighted the unsatisfactory state of sanitary facilities at the camp. He said only a small clinic with an average daily attendance of 150 patients was in operation.

Mr. Doss, who is also UN Humanitarian Coordinator, told the hundreds of refugees who met him at the camp that it would be difficult to meet all their demands. “I don’t have answers to all of your concerns. Exercise some patience. Remember you are in a very poor country. You can’t demand more for yourself than local people have.”

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He urged the refugees to maintain calm and pledged that efforts would be made “to try to increase the resources available to the camp, especially for health.”

From Jimi Gbagbo, the DSRSG moved to Taiama camp, in the Bo District, where he was told there were more than 7,000 refugees. The chairman of the Taiama Executive Refugee Committee, Mr. Chokpelle Ngai, urged UNHCR to come to their aid. The Taiama camp manager, Mr. Alfred Ben Kargbo, said UNHCR was trying to alleviate the problems of inadequate shelter and health facilities.

The Paramount Chief Kakpata of Kori Chiefdom in the Moyamba District told the team that some of the refugees had gone on a rampage the previous two days, compelling him to call in the police. “Some of them are not fit to be among people,” he said. “Please scrutinize them before you bring them here,” he said.

Dr. Matthew Spitzer of Médecins Sans Frontières, who is in charge of the Taiama camp health clinic, said their facilities were overstretched. He cited malaria as the greatest threat to the health of the refugees.

Mr. Doss said he would look into the concerns of both the refugees and the host community. “My coming here is a sign of the United Nations’ concern for your welfare,” he told the refugees to loud applause and adding, “We will do our best to help solve some of your problems, but we need your cooperation.” The DSRSG went on to thank UNHCR for its work and dedication even though the agency is faced with a shortage of funds.