

UN agency voices concern about forced return of Nigerian refugees from Cameroon

21 March 2017 – The United Nations refugee agency today expressed concern that forced returns of refugees from Cameroon's far north region to crisis-gripped north-eastern Nigeria are continuing despite the recent signing of a tripartite agreement aimed at ensuring the voluntary nature of returns.

So far this year, Cameroon has forcefully returned over 2,600 refugees back to Nigerian border villages against their will, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

"UNHCR is particularly concerned as these forced returns have continued unabated after the governments of Nigeria and Cameroon signed a tripartite agreement with UNHCR in Yaoundé on 2 March," UNHCR Spokesperson Babar Baloch told reporters at the UN's Geneva Office.

The forced return of asylum-seekers and refugees is known as *refoulement*, or forced return, and constitutes a serious violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention, both of which Cameroon has ratified.

While acknowledging the generosity of its Government and local communities that host over 85,000 Nigerian refugees, UNHCR calls on Cameroon to honour to its obligations under international and regional refugee protection instruments, as well as Cameroonian law.

Insecurity persists in parts of north-eastern Nigeria, and access to basic services remains limited. Most returning refugees find themselves in situations of internal displacement upon return and are unable to return to their places of origin.

Inside Nigeria, UNHCR teams have heard and documented accounts about Cameroonian troops returning refugees against their will – without allowing them time to collect their belongings.

Amid the chaos, some families were separated and some women were forced to leave their young children behind in Cameroon, including a child less than three years old.

While recognizing the legitimate national security concerns of the Cameroon Government, UNHCR reminds authorities that refugees are themselves fleeing violence and attacks from Boko Haram and that their access to asylum and protection must be ensured.