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Medical Assistance to Self-settled Refugees, Guinea, 1990-96. By Wim Van Damme. Antwerp, Belgium: Studies in Health Services Organisation and Policy No. 11, ITG Press, 1998. 249 pp. \$10.00 (U.S.).

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This author worked for more than six and a half years in the forest zone of southern Guinea as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) staff working with a Guinean Ministry of Health (MOH) team responsible for medical assistance to some 500,000 war refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia. The book he has written is an excellent overview of the problems and opportunities encountered. For the technically minded, Van Damme deals with food aid, epidemics, and provision of primary health care from 1990-96. There are valuable insights and data in these chapters on epidemics and on different methods of assessing the nutritional situation. The generalist reader will also find that the three introductory chapters are well written and help to dispel the myths constructed by media hype and compassion fatigue. Guinea, one of Africa's poorest countries, is seen to have a functioning and innovative health care system. Further, as hosts to so many refugees, this system adapts. There is a lot to be learned here about civilized behavior and compassion.

Although the book could have used additional pages of background on the savage wars that led to the influx of refugees, there is enough context provided to glimpse the other side: the failure of civilization and absence of compassion. In one chilling quote attributed to Liberian Samuel Doe, speaking after Nimba county had been taken from him by his opponent Charles Taylor, he states that "... he would transform Nimba county into an empty land, where even ants would not live" (p. 35). Van Damme uses maps to help the reader keep track of the waves of refugees and give a sense of the complex ethnic mosaic in borderlands shared by three countries. The author's use of summary tables is very clear and helpful as are diagrams and tables overviewing the food aid situation.

One theme that is not new in refugee studies, but nevertheless very important, is the relationship between refugee and host populations. In some Guinean Prefectures the ratio of refugees to local Guineans was as high as 3.3 to 1. This gave rise to tension around the use of health centers, but on the whole surprisingly little conflict. Roughly 80 percent of the refugees lived outside "real camps," and many were closely integrated into the lives of small rural host villages. This integration depended to some extent on common ethnic background, but also revolved around refugees exploiting unused swamps for rice production with permission of their host and sale of refugee agricultural.

Van Damme emphasizes the importance of spatial organization of the refugees. For example, rates of cholera, measles, and malnutrition were lower among dispersed, self-settled refugees than among those in camps. Also, cooperative relations with the host population were more likely where refugees had integrated spatially or had established "twin villages" near established Guinean rural settlements.

Being the first detailed account of assistance to a large self-settled refugee population marks this book as unique and timely. The story told in Chapter 6 of the hybridization of two models of health service is thought-provoking. The vast influx could not be fully accommodated within the "primary health care" (PHC) model in use by the Guinean MOH. Yet since the refugees were mostly self-settled, they did, de facto, become integrated into the service areas of the existing system. Thus they could not be fully served by application of existing international models of "emergency medical assistance" (EMA). The result was an uneasy compromise since the logic of PHC is more participatory and the logic of EMA more "top down."

The concluding chapter is too short for readers impressed with the author's erudition and keen eye for detail. Here he begins to sketch out a "more balanced refugee policy," drawing lessons from Guinea and referring to refugee experiences in many other parts of the world. He emphasizes the great complexity and variability within the refugee process. People flee for many reasons and do it in many ways. Also, in his wise words, the image of refugees as passive victims is by no means correct. Fleeing is often the result of a conscious rational decision. Most refugees develop, both individually and collectively, creative coping mechanisms, which are often effective in giving them access to food, shelter, and water. He concludes that settlement patterns are very important, that integration with the host community is, on balance, preferable, and that aid should enable self-reliance. These are not earth-shattering lessons, but they are truths that need to be repeated whenever new data, such as this wonderful book provides, come to light.