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Contact: Diane Morrow

800-927-1517 or dmorrow@tbbmedia.com

Or Tracy McCarter 800-927-0517 Ext. 109 tmccarter@tbbmedia.com

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One Family's Heartbreak Turns to Celebration

Liberian refugees finally reunited after years of separation

Dallas/Ft. Worth, TX— The atmosphere at The Montgomery Airport was alive with



anticipation on August 11. John and Bessie Gonleh scanned the stream of passengers spilling down the jetway, their eyes craving two familiar images. At long last, they spotted them progressing hesitantly toward the arrival gate. A large crowd of friends and supporters let out a cheer as John and Bessie threw their arms around their children. Tears of joy flowed freely all around. This reunion, an event three years in the making, is the jubilant postscript to a family's remarkable saga of survival.

After surviving over a decade of atrocities in Liberia, Ivory Coast, and Guinea—violence that snuffed out the lives of three of their nine children—John Gonleh, a Liberian pastor, and his wife, Bessie, faced a heart-wrenching decision. They were informed by U.N. officials that the two of them could move to the United States, but their youngest two children would have to remain in Guinea for several weeks until John and Bessie could send for them.

Upon arriving in the U.S., the Gonlehs experienced yet another bitter taste of reality. Due to the sluggish pace of government agencies and the introduction of DNA testing requirements, the family continued to reside on separate continents for an agonizing three years. Without the intervention of some good Samaritans the couple befriended in the U.S., the wait would undoubtedly have been even longer.

The Gonlehs have enjoyed the support and friendship of the community at First Baptist Church of Montgomery, Alabama. A lawyer from the church donated his time and expertise to pursuing every legal means through which to expedite the immigration process. But it was a chance encounter in an airport lounge connected the Gonlehs with one of their most passionate advocates.

In 2005, Houston businessman Bruce Beakley traveled to Brussels, Belgium to undergo a new type of hip replacement surgery that had not yet received FDA approval. As he awaited his flight back to the U.S., he shared the departure lounge with a group of refugees from Liberia that included John and Bessie. He felt drawn to them and struck up a conversation. By the time the flight landed, he had exchanged contact information with the couple and promised to visit them

at their new home in Montgomery, Alabama. That visit, during which the Gonlehs began to share their remarkable survival story, marked the beginning of a special friendship. Beakley was determined to help the Gonlehs in any way possible. He began by collaborating with them on *Refuge*, releasing September 30. The book chronicles their amazing story. “The Gonleh family has survived unbelievable atrocities, and they have emerged from the experience with a faith that is not just intact, but growing,” Beakley states. “Even as we have spent the last three years dealing with the frustrating delays and the recent escalation of violence in the children’s temporary home in Guinea, John and Bessie have never given up hope of a happy final chapter to their story.”

For the time being, the Gonleh kids will move into the bedrooms that their parents, along with a phalanx of volunteers from FBC Montgomery, have prepared for them and will hopefully enjoy their new lives as active teenagers when school starts in the fall. Through the church’s Nehemiah Project, the Gonleh family will purchase a once-dilapidated, now newly renovated home for the cost of repairs. The church has even provided the family with a dependable vehicle.

Though in recent months the media has devoted attention to atrocities in places like Darfur, those stories are quickly displaced by coverage of the upcoming elections and the activities of certain celebrities. Many Americans are not aware that survivors from horrific war zones may be living in their zip code and could benefit from their assistance. Now that the Gonleh children are finally safe in their new home, the final chapter of *Refuge* can be written. The book is scheduled for fall release. The nature of the story will compel any reader to rise above a myopic self-focus and awaken to the plight of those beyond American shores and those who have sought refuge here.

It was Christmas Eve, 1989. The Gonleh family had just finished pulling out the decorations for the western-style tree that was shipped all the way from Norway to their comfortable home near Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia. Their celebration was cut short by a cryptic radio announcement by Liberian President Samuel Doe. “The country should pray,” he said. “Our nation has been attacked. We are at war. If you see anyone who looks like they don’t belong, you should report it to the authorities.” With those few words, the whole country was thrown into panic. In the ensuing chaos, the Gonleh home was burned to the ground. John Gonleh, along with 100 other men, was tortured and then gunned down in an open field. He would be the lone survivor of this mass execution.

Refuge: A True Story of Faith and Civil War
by John & Bessie Gonleh with Bruce Beakley
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For more information or to schedule an interview contact
Diane Morrow 800.927.1517 dmorrow@tbbmedia.com
or Tracy McCarter 800.927.0517 Ext. 109 tmccarter@tbbmedia.com