

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Since civil war broke out in September 2002, there have been increasing reports of violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Côte d'Ivoire. All of the parties to the armed conflict are accused of violence against noncombatant civilians. From December 23-29, 2002, the United Nations sent a fact-finding mission to the country with the consent of the government of Côte d'Ivoire. The mission's purpose was to gather accounts and to assess accusations against both government and anti-government armed forces, underscoring the desire of the UN to help in the restoration of peace. At the request of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, one EAAF member joined the mission from December 26-29. In January 2003, the delegation presented its main findings and recommendations to the UN Security Council. The mission's report can be viewed at the United Nations website.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 2000, an electoral struggle in Côte d'Ivoire led to violence among political factions and the targeting of populations based on national origin and ethnic difference. This violence, which has engendered more violence over the last three years, surprised many observers of the region because of the country's long history of domestic peace and prosperity.

During the three decades following its independence from France in 1960, the country was governed by a single party — the Democratic Party of the Ivory Coast, or PDCI. Because of its strong economy, based in coffee and cocoa exports, Côte d'Ivoire welcomed both foreign investors and foreign workers, becoming West Africa's chief destination for migrants and refugees. Despite the country's religious and ethnic diversity, these differences did not lead to violent conflict during the thirty-year presidency of Felix Houphouët-Boigny (1960-1993.) Catholics, animists and so-called "indigenous people" (*autochtone*) are concentrated in the south and center of the

country, while many Muslims and immigrants live in the north of the country. In other parts of the country such as Abidjan, people from all ethnic groups are present. During the early 1990's, however, the country began to suffer from crises in the export markets, and underwent structural adjustment reforms. Under pressure at home and internationally, Houphouët-Boigny legalized opposition political parties in 1990. In 1993 he died, leaving the speaker of the National Assembly as his successor. The new opposition parties began to accuse the PDCI of corruption. International aid agencies, including the World Bank and the IMF, did the same, and cut off all support to the government in 1998.ⁱ

Reformist members of the government split from the PDCI to form a new party, the *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR), which would campaign for transparent elections and democratic reforms. Their candidate, Alassane Ouattara, a US-trained economist who had previously served as Prime Minister, enjoyed a great deal of popular support, especially among Muslims Ivoirians from the north of the country.ⁱⁱ The PDCI



Patrols of rebel soldiers, Boaké. September 30, 2002.

countered his candidacy by emphasizing ethnic and religious divisions. In particular, sitting president Henri Bédié and others began to use the concept of *Ivoirité*, which defines Ivorian nationality in narrow, ethnic terms. Many observers saw this as a way to exclude Ouattara — who had grandparents from Burkina Faso — and many of his supporters from the political process. Given the economic downturn, the *Ivoirité* concept was also incorporated into claims on employment, land, and other resources.ⁱⁱⁱ

Political Violence

In December 1999, a section of the military performed a coup, installing General Robert Guei as president. According to Human Rights Watch, the coup drew its support mainly from soldiers frustrated with low pay.

Guei called new elections for October 22, 2000, but early polls showed Ouattara leading. In response, Guei passed stricter citizenship laws excluding not only Ouattara but also many others born in Côte d'Ivoire. According to the US State Department, 26% of the population is noncitizen under this law, and therefore may not vote.^{iv} On October 24, Laurent Gbagbo, the candidate of another major party, the Front Populaire Ivoirien, took the lead. Guei shut down the polls and declared himself the winner.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators from all the parties took to the streets that day. Guei reportedly had soldiers fire on FPI and other demonstrators, but other military groups refused to participate and forced Guei to abandon the presidency. Laurent Gbagbo declared himself president. According to Human Rights Watch, Gbagbo also capitalized on ethnic divisions, and used repressive

tactics with his opposition.^v Large demonstrations by RDR supporters were severely repressed in late October, and again during parliamentary elections in December 2000. In total, more than 250 people died in connection to the two elections; many others were wounded and some cases of rape were reported. A UN International Commission of Inquiry in early 2001 confirmed these allegations, and recommended both trials and reforms to alter the culture of impunity within the Ivorian military and in society at large.^{vi} Judicial and military trials later that year produced no convictions.

New Conflict

According to Human Rights Watch, during 2002, the Gbagbo administration began to decommission soldiers who had been recruited by General Guei.^{vii} On September 19, new fighting broke out in Abidjan and in two provincial towns. The latter were seized by a new armed group, the *Mouvement Patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire*, or MPC. Gbagbo declared that the MPC was backed by foreigners and implied that it was affiliated with Mr. Ouattara. Independent journalists and groups, such as Human Rights Watch, believe that the MPC is composed mainly of former branches of the armed forces. The UN later found that the administration's language, amplified by the mass media, created an atmosphere that encouraged independent attacks on anyone labeled an "assailant."^{viii} General Guei himself, his wife, and several aides were shot dead on September 19th.^{ix}

The UN summarized the situation in the following terms: "The government and its supporters felt that the life of the nation was imperiled by those who had brought conflict to the country, while others, notably MPC, felt that the government lacked legitimacy, with the President having won an election in which only 13% of the people had participated, and called for new elections and constitutional reform."^x

In the weeks that followed, military personnel were widely reported to have bulldozed or burned down entire neighborhoods on Abidjan's outskirts, producing a large internally displaced population.^{xi} Settlements selected for

destruction were home to Muslims from the north and "immigrants," despite the fact that "most have been living in Côte d'Ivoire for years, if not generations."^{xii} According to Human Rights Watch, alongside this destruction, soldiers and groups of young people in civilian clothing pillaged belongings and committed rape and murder.

The MPC maintained control of the center and north of the country, including the cities of Korhogo and Boaké. After intense fighting, government forces retook the city of Daloa, and imposed a curfew. During the next few days, approximately 75 civilians were allegedly killed, mainly people with Muslim names, both Ivorians and citizens of neighboring countries who were accused of supporting the MPC. They were reportedly buried in mass graves. The Gbagbo administration says that government forces were not involved. Similar events reportedly took place in Monoko-Zohi and in the town of Man, near the Liberian border, according to accounts gathered by Amnesty International.^{xiii}

The MPC, too, has been accused of human rights violations, including summary executions. In particular, Amnesty International has drawn attention to an episode in which a group of government *Gendarmes* and members of their families were allegedly dragged out of barracks in Bouaké, Côte d'Ivoire's second largest city, on October 6, 2002, to be killed and buried in a mass grave.^{xiv} The MPC claims that they died in combat. In Daloa, Boaké, and other towns, the government claimed that police and military personnel were summarily executed when the MPC took control.

On October 15, the MPC and the government signed a ceasefire, and agreed to hold peace talks mediated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). At the time of this writing, over 2,000 French troops are guarding a buffer zone between the two areas. Toward the end of the 2002, the Gbagbo government was further challenged by two new armed opposition groups along the border with Liberia in the west: the *Mouvement Ivoirien du Grand Ouest (MPIGO)* and the *Mouvement pour La Paix et la Justice (MPJ)*. As in previous episodes, all sides have been accused of reprisal

attacks on civilians based on their ethnicity or ethnic alliance, real or presumed. Both rebel groups signed ceasefire agreements with the government in January 2003. Still, observers of the region are concerned about potential future outbreaks, especially considering the Army's allegations that the rebel groups have had been recruiting soldiers from Liberia.^{xv}

FOOTNOTES

- i. Information on structural adjustment in Côte d'Ivoire, and its relationship to international agencies, can be found on the IMF's website at www.imf.org/external/country/civ. See also a special issue of the *Review of African Political Economy on Structural Adjustment in Africa*, vol. 18, no. 18, Spring 1991.
- ii. For more background, please see Human Rights Watch report "The New Racism: The Political Manipulation of Ethnicity in Côte d'Ivoire" available at www.hrw.org/reports/2001/ivorycoast.
- iii. *ibid*
- iv. The US State Department's Country Report can be found at www.state.gov/drl/rls
- v. "The New Racism," cited above.
- vi. According to the UN Commission's final report, "*Côte d'Ivoire: Rapport de la Commission d'Enquête Internationale pour le Côte d'Ivoire*" released July 19, 2001, especially ppgs. 54-59. The report is available in French at www.un.org/french/hr/ivory.pdf.
- vii. On the human rights abuses allegedly committed by the Ivorian armed forces under President Gbagbo, please see Human Rights Watch's report "Government Abuses in Response to Army Revolt", also available through the website listed above.
- viii. According to the 2002 Mission's final report to the Security Council, "Report of an urgent human rights mission to Côte d'Ivoire" January 24, 2003, UN Security Council document S/2003/90.
- ix. Source: Amnesty International Press Release, October 18, 2002.
- x. "Report of an urgent human rights mission to Côte d'Ivoire," p.6.
- xi. This population is estimated at 600,000. "Report of an urgent human rights mission..."
- xii. *ibid*
- xiii. Amnesty International Report "Côte d'Ivoire: Sans une mobilisation internationale immédiate, le pays va sombrer dans le chaos" December 19, 2002. AI document AFR31/010/2002.
- xiv. See Amnesty International's reports "Côte d'Ivoire: A Succession of Unpunished Crimes" and "Côte d'Ivoire: A Country Caught up in a turmoil for more than a month." Both reports are available at www.amnesty.org/library
- xv. According to a BBC report, "Liberia accused by Ivorian Army," January 23, 2003. This article is available at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/africa/2685841.stm. Additional helpful BBC articles on the Côte d'Ivoire are cited on the same page.