

Violence Returns to Cote d'Ivoire

Abdoulaye Dukule (November 12, 2004)

Patience has run out in Cote d'Ivoire. Guns that had been silent for two years became active again in early November, with President Laurent Gbagbo's government launching an all-out air attack on rebel positions, and in the process "mistakenly" killing nine French soldiers. In retaliation, President Jacques Chirac of France ordered his troops in Cote d'Ivoire to neutralize Ivorian air power. The French military destroyed Ivorian military planes, took over the airport in Abidjan and closed it to civilian flights after a long battle with the Ivorian military. Gbagbo called on Ivorians to get out and "liberate" the airport. Hundreds of thousands swarmed through the city, ransacking French businesses, homes, and schools, burning and breaking everything on their way to the airport. They encircled the French Military base and the French soldiers responded.

Things calmed down after Gbagbo called off the demonstrations. The United Nations Security Council condemned Cote d'Ivoire and supported the French government's actions.

The once stable and prosperous country has been in a dangerous state between war and peace for 12 years. Cote d'Ivoire's entrenched instability began when a group of soldiers from a garrison in the central city of Bouaké failed to seize power when they attempted to overthrow Gbagbo on September 19, 2002. After failing to take control of the economic capital Abidjan, the rebels retreated to their base, and French troops, stationed in the country, created a buffer zone between government troops and the dissidents. Thus began a long "peace process" that primarily tried to appease dissidents, who were first called "mutineers," then "rebels," and are now referred to as "new forces." The semantic gymnastics never disguised the fact that the rebellion divided the country in two parts. Gbagbo controls the South and the rebels the nation's second-largest city in the North.

Numerous peace talks took place, first in Africa—Dakar, Lomé, and Accra—and finally in Paris, where the two sides signed a peace document that became known as the Marcoussis Accords. The agreement called for a government of "national unity" with a neutral "prime minister." Seydou Diarra was acceptable to both sides. Muslim, originally from the North, he is well known in Abidjan. Although he had

the authority to form the government, he had really no power. Gbagbo's government was dismantled. Every political party in the country was given a seat in the new government and the rebels got eight ministries, including Justice and Information. President Gbagbo gave little, if any, power at all to the Prime Minister. His excuse, backed by the constitution, was that "Cote d'Ivoire was not a parliamentary system where the party with most seats in the Assembly nominates the Prime Minister and runs the country..." The peace accord also called for disarmament of "both sides" and the restructuring of the national army and the passing of new laws and constitutional amendments to address rebels' demands. From the start, government troops made it known that they would never submit to disarmament. The rebels took their seat in the government and kept a tight grip on territories under their control, which represented almost half of the country. The national assembly passed a law that granted the rebels total amnesty for violence committed during the war.

The rebels' demands gradually multiplied. They wanted a constitutional review of land tenure, abrogating a new law passed in the 2000 constitution that barred most foreigners—mostly citizens from Burkina Faso who have lived in Cote d'Ivoire for decades—from holding on to lands they owned. They also demanded a review of Article 35 of the constitution that stipulates that only people born of



Ivorian parentage and who had never pledged allegiance to any other nation could run for the presidency. This article barred Alassane Ouattara, an opposition leader from seeking the presidency. He is said to have carried a Burkina Faso passport when he was young and later worked as president of the West African Bank as a Burkina national. Ouattara later became prime minister under Houphouet Boigny in the early 1990s. He was also a close friend of military leader Robert Guei, who overthrew Konan Bedie, the successor to Houphouet Boigny, and a top International Monetary Fund official.

In July 2004, after many months of stalling, the government and the rebels met in Accra and reaffirmed their commitment to the Marcoussis Accords. Political reforms and the return of rebel ministers in the government were to begin immediately, while disarmament was set for a few weeks later. The rebels returned to government and the national assembly started to debate some of the articles. The sticking point was that Article 35, like all other aspects of the Ivorian constitution, could only be amended through a referendum. Gbagbo said he could not impose an amendment contrary to the constitution. The rebels refused to disarm. The peace process was back to where it stood two years ago.

After the French soldiers were killed, Chirac gave orders to neutralize Ivorian air power. The French military destroyed two jet-bombers and three helicopters. The news spread quickly. French interests were attacked. Homes were looted and set on fire. Many of the 16,000 French nationals living in the country sought refuge on a French military base and were evacuated. Meanwhile, France brought in reinforcements from Gabon and others are expected from Senegal. Following a weekend of unrest, Gbagbo met with the French ambassador, then called off the demonstrations. The chief of military operations

called his troops back to base and calm returned to Abidjan.

The African Union has asked President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa to take charge of negotiations. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo as head of the African Union is steadily working to calm tensions in the sub-region. Now, the question is who should be negotiating with Gbagbo? The French who stopped him from taking control of the national territory or the rebels?

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Gbagbo and Chirac are not close friends. Since this crisis began, France has played an ambiguous, if not at times confusing, role in the peace process. Gbagbo has been a pain in France's neck since the late 1960s when he led university students and teachers against the pro-French policies of the first Ivorian president, Houphouet Boigny. Opposition leader Ouattara has closer ties with France. A Muslim from the North with

parents originally from Burkina Faso, his wife Dominique is a powerful French woman with strong political ties in Paris. Former presidents Konan Bedie and Robert Guei barred him from running for the presidency and he became the emblematic figure of the disenfranchisement of Muslim northerners in Ivorian politics.

Ouattara, at the head of the largest political party in 2000, could have blocked the passing of the constitution that later was used to bar him from contesting the presidency. Rather, he went along, knowing full well that the text could be used to stop him. At the time, he was very close to Guei and never expected that the head of the military would run for president.

Gbagbo took a big gamble when he launched the attack on the rebel territory. Had the nine French nationals not been killed, he might today be at the head of a reunited Cote d'Ivoire and emerge as a national hero. Instead, he is weakened, blamed by the international community and being forced to accept

a new French dictate. The rebels are also weakened. Gbagbo destroyed most of their ammunitions and their exit road to Burkina Faso. They are at the mercy of France, just as Gbagbo is. Can France now come up with a quick plan before the dust settles?

By urging Ivorians to take back their airport from French troops and succeeding in putting hundreds of thousands of people in the streets for two days just as he did in 2000 to oust Guei from power, Gbagbo has proven he has a power base. Although weakened militarily, he has ignited nationalistic sentiments on both sides of the divide. Villagers throughout the country built roadblocks to stop French troop movements toward Abidjan and created human shields around government properties from Abidjan to Yamoussoukro to protect them from being bombed by French jets on Friday and Saturday.

Ouattara is now in worse shape, thanks to growing anti-French sentiment. The vast majority of the people in the North have become wary of the rebels and those in the South generally don't consider him as a leader. Whatever chance he had of winning elections in Cote d'Ivoire may have just evaporated with France's intervening directly in the conflict. The fact that Guillaume Soro, his protégé and partisan, is the head of the rebel movement, makes Ouattara look like he contributes to the nation's destabilization.

Ouattara was the first to introduce xenophobic laws into Cote d'Ivoire when, in 1990 as prime minister, he decreed that all foreigners in Cote d'Ivoire must pay for and carry a "carte de séjour." It was the first time in Ivorian history that people from Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and other places were forced to identify themselves as "non-Ivorian." This was the beginning of "ivoirité" that Bedié would later turn into a political tool. Ouattara's reason for doing this was to raise funds for the government, which was all but bankrupt at the time.

France now has no other solution but to disarm the rebels and ensure that Cote d'Ivoire goes to elections, peacefully. Gbagbo appears assured of being remembered as the first Ivorian who stood up to the French and survived.

Cote d'Ivoire may just be beginning its struggle for real independence, where French interests would no

longer drive political decisions. Whatever the outcome may be, relationships between Cote d'Ivoire and France will never be the same, no matter who takes over from Gbagbo.

A disintegration of the peace process in Cote d'Ivoire could have dire consequences on the fragile situation in Liberia where two of the former rebel groups, MODEL and the NPFL have strong ties with the Gbagbo government and the MPCI of Guillaume Soro respectively. During disarmament exercises in Liberia, none of the factions turned in their heavy weaponry and this could be interpreted that they either sold or returned them to Cote d'Ivoire or may be hiding them in Liberia.

With hundreds of thousands of former fighters in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire, and millions of unemployed youth, West Africa is a volcano that could burst anytime. The United States and the international community can help reduce volatility in the region. The first step is recognizing that France, with a policy of appeasing the rebels, is no longer viewed as a neutral peacebroker in Cote d'Ivoire.

The U.S. can work with the African Union and the United Nations, not to pass sanctions, but to put in place new approaches that would ensure peace in Cote d'Ivoire and surrounding countries. Such policies would include the disarmament of the rebel movements whose ranks are filled with child soldiers and mercenaries from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Burkina Faso; the re-unification of the country under one authority; and a referendum on aspects of the constitution such as land tenure and eligibility criteria for the presidency.

Political conflict and instability are symptoms of deeper economic and social ills that must be addressed for real peace to take hold in Cote d'Ivoire and throughout West Africa.

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