

COTE D'IVOIRE

BACKGROUND AND HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

As international efforts, notably from the West African regional body ECOWAS, are underway to resolve the political crisis in Cote d'Ivoire, Amnesty International calls for human rights concerns to be at the heart of the discussions. Reports of human rights abuses have been on the rise since disputed presidential elections in November 2010. Amnesty International received eyewitness accounts of extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, abductions, and forced disappearances mainly committed by the security forces and militias loyal to Laurent Gbagbo, who the UN says has lost the recent presidential election but refuses to give up power. The UN has stated that over 200 people have been killed during post-election violence and that more than 25,000 people have fled Côte d'Ivoire to seek refuge in neighboring countries, including Liberia. Of particular concern to Amnesty is to ensure accountability for the parties responsible of the recent increase in human rights violations, the ability of the UN peacekeeping mission to implement its full mandate regarding human rights and the humanitarian and refugee situation.

Background

Tensions have been rising in the country since the disputed November 28th, 2010, presidential election. Both the challenger, Alassan Ouattara, and the incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo, have declared themselves the victor of the 2010 elections and set up their respective governments. The United Nations, European Union, United States, and the African Union all recognize Ouattara as the winner of the UN-monitored elections and have protested Gbagbo's refusal to step down and hand over power.



Security forces have fired live rounds at protesters © APGraphicsBank
voluntarily leave. Meanwhile, the United States and European Union have imposed sanctions on Gbagbo and his inner circle and the World Bank and West African regional central bank have cut his financing.

Although faced with this international consensus, Gbagbo has been resistant to step down and still retains vital control of the security forces and many state institutions such as the state-run media. A stand-off has ensued between Gbagbo and Ouattara supporters with reports of increasing violence and human rights violations as tensions grow and the political crisis remains unresolved. The West African regional body, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), has sent in delegations of regional leaders in attempts to convince Gbagbo to step down. ECOWAS has threatened military action to force Gbagbo out if he does not voluntarily leave. Meanwhile, the United States and European Union have imposed sanctions on Gbagbo and his inner circle and the World Bank and West African regional central bank have cut his financing.

Human Rights Abuses and Accountability

Amnesty International has received a growing number of reports of violence against protestors and perceived political opponents, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and mass burial sites. People are living in fear of being shot, arrested or abducted by the security forces or militias close to Laurent Gbagbo. Eyewitnesses have reported people being arrested or abducted at home or on the streets, often by unidentified armed attackers accompanied by security forces or militiamen. The bodies of some have been found either in morgues or on the streets. The whereabouts of many others remain unknown. On the night of January 4th security forces loyal to Gbagbo raided the Abidjan headquarters of political allies of Ouattara, killing one, wounding sixteen, and arbitrarily arresting dozens. In mid-January, several people died as residents clashed with security forces trying to conduct house to house searches. Amnesty calls for security forces to immediately end attacks on political opponents and to unconditionally release detainees.



Amnesty urges an independent investigation into reported human rights abuses and full accountability for those parties responsible, believing that full accountability and reinstatement of rule of law is requisite for a lasting peaceful solution. Amnesty International urges ECOWAS to reiterate that no Ivorian politician should incite the commission of human rights violations or abuses and warns that perpetrators of such abuses could be held to account by the International Criminal Court. As ECOWAS and the international community continue negotiations with Gbagbo, human rights concerns must remain at the heart of the matter.

Attacks against Peacekeepers

Of particular concern to Amnesty is reported violence against UN peacekeepers and their ability to implement their full mandate¹ in regards to human rights. On December 19th, Gbagbo issued a demand for the United Nations mission in Cote d'Ivoire, ONUCI, to withdraw its forces from the country. The UN refused, saying that Laurent Gbagbo is not recognized by the international community and does not have the right to call for the departure of its peacekeeping force.

Two attacks have subsequently occurred on UN peacekeeping forces in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire's largest city— one on December 28th when a convoy was attacked by a mob resulting in the injury of a Bangladeshi soldier by a machete and later on December 29th when another UNOCI patrol came under gunfire. At a press conference in Abidjan on 29 December 2010, Alain Le Roy, Deputy Secretary General in charge of the UN peacekeeping force, attributed the attacks against their forces to “propaganda” and “hate speech” broadcast by the Ivorian state broadcaster, which is controlled by Gbagbo.

The United Nations has also been unable to fully investigate reports of human rights abuses due to resistance by security forces. UN personnel attempting to visit the sites of two purported mass graves on the outskirts of Adibjan containing victims of the recent political violence were blocked from doing so by security forces. The UN says it will continue to investigate reports of human rights abuses and mass graves but without the cooperation of authorities efforts will be fruitless. Amnesty is concerned not only by the failure of cooperation by local authorities and security forces but also by the restrictions on the movements of UNOCI personnel.

Humanitarian and Refugee Situation

Refugees from the Ivory Coast continue to pour across borders, particularly into Liberia, with the UN stating that at least 25,000, mainly women and children, have already fled into Liberia and continue to arrive at a rate of around 600 per day. The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, is in the process of establishing a special camp in Liberia and the UN's World Food Program has begun airlifting emergency rations both to refugees in Liberia and internally displaced people within Cote d'Ivoire.

¹ The UNOCI's mandate includes: protecting civilians under imminent threat of physical violence; facilitating the free flow of people, goods and humanitarian assistance by helping to establish the necessary security conditions; contributing to the promotion and protection of human rights in Côte d'Ivoire, with special attention to violence committed against children and women; monitoring and helping to investigate human rights violations with a view to ending impunity; and assisting in restoring a civilian policing presence and in re-establishing the authority of the judiciary and the rule of law throughout Côte d'Ivoire.

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