

"Ivory Coast on the brink" International Crisis Group Comment by Fabienne Hara and Comfort Ero in the Observer Online - Worldview Extra: Unseen Wars

Will the international community act in time to prevent another full-scale civil war in Africa? The latest in our series on underreported conflicts around the world, in association with the International Crisis Group

Ivory Coast used to be a model of prosperity and diversity. Migrant workers from across West Africa worked in its cocoa industry and busy port of Abidjan. It's economy was one of Africa's largest.

But since September, Ivory Coast has been split in two. The southern part is controlled by the government of President Laurent Gbagbo, the north by the rebel Mouvement Patriotique de la Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI). The standoff risks spiralling into another war as thousands of men answer a recruitment drive to fight for the government, while thousands more are being armed by the rebels. If Ivory Coast is to be spared the horrific violence the region has already seen in Sierra Leone and Liberia, France and the regional political grouping ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) have to act. But there is little sign that they will do so in time.

Ivory Coast's sudden descent into chaos came as a shock to the rest of the world, but signs of trouble have been evident since the death of President Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1993. Houphouët-Boigny was no democrat and his regime was tainted by corruption and nepotism, but for thirty-three years he kept a lid on rivalries and divisions. He appointed officials from different ethnic, regional and religious backgrounds and opened the country to migrant workers, using them to build a vibrant economy. But when he died, so did political diversity. The three leaders that have ruled since then - Henri Konan Bédié, General Robert Gueï and Laurent Gbagbo, have each abused ethnic, religious and regional identity to secure and maintain power.

It was Bédié who introduced the concept of Ivoirité or Ivorian-ness - mainly to exclude his political rival, Alassane Ouattara from participating in the 1995 presidential elections. Ouattara, prime minister under Houphouët-Boigny, was a northern politician with family links to Burkina Faso.

Ivoirité soon permeated the rest of political life. Northerners were removed from senior posts in government and the security forces. Non-Ivorian migrants were blamed for the economic crisis. They faced daily harassment and marginalisation as Bédié concentrated power in the centre and south of the country.

It was in this climate of discrimination and xenophobia, but also because of salary disputes, that disaffected soldiers mounted the coup that brought General Robert Gueï to power in December 1999. Gueï initially included Ouattara's supporters in his military

junta, but soon kicked them out, revising the constitution to completely prevent Ouattara from contesting further elections.

Gueï did however agree to hold presidential elections in October 2000 - although he still refused to allow Ouattara to stand. The vote was marred by violence and Gueï tried to stop the vote-count in an attempt to cling to power but was finally forced into exile in Benin. In the end Laurent Gbagbo, a long-standing opposition politician, was elected by a margin that leads today's rebels to question his legitimacy. Not only Ouattara, but also large parts of the population have been excluded from the political process by increasingly restrictive voting rules.

Gbagbo has also used Ivoirité to maintain his grip on power, while promoting members of his own ethnic group, the Bétés, particularly in the security forces. It is President Gbagbo who is now trying to put down the country's latest mutiny.

The latest uprising was led by about 750 troops who had been recruited by ex-President Gueï, later identifying themselves as the MPCCI. They revolted when the government, pressed by international financial institutions, tried to demobilise them. On 19 September 2002 they executed a well-coordinated attack on three cities, including Abidjan. Others who joined the insurgents are believed to be Ouattara supporters who deserted the army and fled to Burkina Faso when Gueï was in power. The leadership of MPCCI remains unclear, as are their sources of money and weapons.

President Gbagbo was only able to withstand the MPCCI onslaught because of the intervention of 1000 French soldiers to protect his government. Gueï himself was killed in circumstances that lead many to believe the government wanted him eliminated. Eventually, on 31 October, ceasefire was signed between the MPCCI and President Gbagbo. Peace talks began under the auspices of ECOWAS, mediated by Togo's President, Gnassingbé Eyadéma. Meanwhile the government and business sector have enlisted hundreds of mercenaries to protect the president and commercial interests. Many of these foreign fighters are reported to have worked for the firm used in Sierra Leone, the South Africa-based Executive Outcomes.

However little progress has been made since the ceasefire with each side accusing the other of recruiting, rearming and preparing for war. The recent discovery of a grave containing more than 120 bodies allegedly killed by government troops has raised passions further. The appearance of two new rebel groups suggests the conflict is in grave danger of spreading.

The two groups appeared in late November as renewed violence broke out near the Liberian border. Calling themselves the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) and the Ivorian Movement for the Great West (MPIGO), they claimed to be fighting to avenge the death of Robert Gueï. However they also reportedly had the help of Liberian soldiers. President Gbagbo has also claimed that former soldiers from Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United front (RUF) are operating in the area. The RUF's chief sponsor was President Charles Taylor of Liberia, and news of his possible involvement is a disaster.

The shift in international attention from Liberia to Ivory Coast could not have been better timed for President Taylor, whose government is under UN sanctions and who is fighting his own battles with rebel groups. With President Gbagbo also accusing the President of Burkina Faso of plotting against him, this could quickly grow into a regional crisis. Arms are already traded across the porous Ivorian-Liberian border and solidarity networks of language and culture link ethnic groups across many West African states. 400 people have died and more than a hundred thousand have already been displaced by this crisis. West Africa, especially Sierra Leone and Liberia have seen massive movements of refugees as a result of previous conflicts - and human rights abuses on a shocking scale. But stopping the conflict in Ivory Coast before it descends into another vicious war will require considerably more effort and determination by key international players - especially France, regional leaders and ECOWAS.

West Africa's leaders fear the rebellion will be contagious. Few have the moral authority to criticise Gbagbo even though he has persecuted citizens from neighbouring states. Whenever their regional colleagues have faced threats in the past their public response has been to support the elected government and they show little sign of change.

France, the former colonial power, is also extremely reluctant to intervene, and has justified current actions only on the basis of concern for French business interests in Ivory Coast, and the 20,000 French nationals who live there. Ever since the Rwandan genocide, France has stepped back from active support for any African government. In Ivory Coast, Paris is not keen to be seen to support Gbagbo, who officials privately see as arrogant and poorly advised, but neither can it endorse an armed insurgency. Ideally, France would like to hand responsibility for the crisis to a proposed ECOWAS peacekeeping force.

However, ECOWAS leaders say they are stretched too thin - with difficult elections ahead next year in Guinea, Liberia and Nigeria. Moreover, the ECOWAS interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone were controversial and the poor behaviour of troops left a bitter taste. However, ECOWAS has made progress on training and discipline, and the precedent set by having African troops involved in African interventions should not be lost.

Ivory Coast is likely to face more violence, so it is vital that a sustainable French/ECOWAS peacekeeping effort is established. Current troop numbers are not high enough and there is no clear mandate for armed intervention. France could take a role similar to that of Britain in Sierra Leone - where British troops helped provide security but also worked to train Sierra Leone's army and police. French plans announced last week to send more troops and hold a conference of African leaders are welcome, but there is a grave danger that these moves will be too little too late.

France has considerable leverage over the Ivorian government - especially in relation to aid. It should make it clear that any resumption of EU and IMF support, which was cut in 1999, will be contingent on the parties reaching a political agreement. At present there is a deadlock, with the rebels demanding that Gbagbo stands down and calls early elections

open to all Ivoirians, while Gbagbo refuses and demands the rebels disarm. Neither side is blameless in this crisis and a compromise must be found through more serious political negotiation. The emergence of new rebel groups allegedly sponsored by Liberia must also be dealt with. Here it is essential that the United Nations maintains sanctions pressure on President Taylor. The ECOWAS mediation team should, as a first step, also conduct a thorough investigation to establish the facts and then recommend appropriate action. France and West African leaders made a mistake by ignoring the creeping extremism of Ivorian politics in the past decade. Failing to act now risks reviving previous wars and setting the entire region back many years. All the warning signs are there.

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