

January 12, 2003

## Infectious Chaos in West Africa

By ROBERT D. KAPLAN

Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, warned last week that the Ivory Coast's civil war threatened the recently restored stability of Sierra Leone. It was an indication that West Africa's pockets of chaos could spread.

Since a failed coup last September, rebels have torn the Ivory Coast into pieces. President Laurent Gbagbo controls the south, but the largest rebel group, the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast, holds the Muslim north. French officials sent 2,500 troops, but worry that they will be mired there for years.

As the region's economic magnet, the Ivory Coast became a victim of its own success. Immigrants from Burkina Faso, a Muslim country to the north, flooded there in search of jobs, upsetting fragile Muslim-Christian and ethnic-regional balances. President Félix Houphouët-Boigny kept the Ivory Coast unified until his death in 1993, while expatriate Lebanese merchants helped keep the economy afloat. But after the war in Lebanon ended, the Lebanese began returning home.

As the 1990's wore on, political parties devolved into factions for various ethnic and religious groups. In December 1999, there was a military coup, begun after soldiers rioted for back pay. Attempts to restore democracy the following year led to ethnic clashes.

Next door in Sierra Leone, a United Nations force of 17,500 keeps order (to be reduced to 13,000 by May). Yet there is barely a police force, never mind a functioning government, and militias terrorize parts of the country. In Liberia, government and rebel troops are warring in diamond and gold mining towns. Guinea's stability, meanwhile, is threatened by hundreds of thousands of refugees from Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Ivory Coast.

Then there is Nigeria. As in the Ivory Coast, the end of one-man rule in the 1990's raised hopes for greater stability. But since the return of democracy four years ago, 10,000 people have died in ethnic and religious violence. The main opposition party chose Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, a former dictator who has said he supports strict Islamic law, as its candidate against President Olusegun Obasanjo in elections in April.

Between Nigeria and the Ivory Coast lie Ghana, Togo and Benin. Not all is well in those countries either, notwithstanding the impressive democratic transitions in Ghana and Benin. Togo's ruler, Gnassingbe Eyadema, engineered a parliamentary vote last month that makes him effectively president for life. As for Ghana, there was a war in the north last year among different factions of the Dagomba tribe.

GHANA, Togo and Benin have had among the world's highest birthrates; more than 40 percent of their populations are under 15 years old. And living standards are only marginally better than those of their more anarchic neighbors.

This does not make them candidates for failure. But Africa's history shows that nothing can be taken for granted, and that seemingly well-off countries can be undermined by their neighbors' troubles.

The West has tended to call any African country a success as soon as it holds a successful election ending military misrule. But tyranny is not only a cause, but a symptom of more intractable problems, with tyrannical authority often replaced by a vacuum of authority.

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