

Citizen Soldiers

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Sylvan Glondé sleeps on the free-throw line of a crude concrete basketball court, his wife and five children huddled around him, their few belongings stuffed in plastic bags or bundled in threadbare scraps of cloth at their feet. A green unicef tarp tacked overhead provides some shelter from the frequent tropical downpours--rains that turn the surrounding dirt yard to muck and snuff out campfires necessary to help feed the homeless thousands. A few miles up the road, behind a demilitarized zone manned by 10,000 troops from France and the United Nations, a rebel army looms, firmly in control of the northern half of Côte d'Ivoire since a failed coup attempt in September 2002 launched this West African country into its first-ever civil war. There is no privacy on the concrete. Glondé and his family squeeze into a six-by-six-foot space, shoehorned in among thousands of others living here at the St. Therese Catholic Mission, in the town of Duékoué in western Côte d'Ivoire. They came in droves in June, as many as 15,000 seeking refuge following a savage attack on a nearby community by mysterious assailants who left behind more than 70 dead. "I woke up when I heard shots and men screaming," says Glondé. "I was running away when they shot me in the back. It went on all night. People were cut to pieces, even children." Glondé was lucky to escape with a bullet in his back. Gory pictures of bodies half-burnt or split open by machete blows ran in the Ivorian press, and there was much fiery ink spilled over who perpetrated the attacks and why. The story of those killings, and what may have provoked them, does a lot to explain this conflict, which has turned what was once West Africa's most stable and prosperous country--a place where people would read of such brutality happening elsewhere and shake their heads in pity--into yet another sad tale of African destruction.

That destruction is now threatening to get even worse. While the Duékoué attacks demonstrate the explosiveness of two issues at the core of Côte d'Ivoire's conflict--ethnic strife and land rights--government and rebel officials appear unwilling to make the necessary concessions to find a peaceful solution. Ivorians had hoped that presidential elections scheduled for October 30 would stop the killings and reunite the country, but those elections have been canceled, and the rifts that have opened up among Côte d'Ivoire's 60-odd ethnic groups may persist--and provoke more deadly violence--for years to come.

Duékoué used to be something of a cultural crossroads in Côte d'Ivoire, located in the heart of the country's rich cocoa-growing west--near lush national parks, rivers plied by birdwatching tourists, and the picturesque waterfalls of the town of Man, just 60 miles to the north. But, with the

war, Duékoué became a crossroads of another sort. The town was a battleground in the early stages of the conflict, and fighting turned nearby villages into charred heaps of rubble, with innocent civilians slaughtered in cold blood. Man is now a rebel nerve center, and, early in the war, the area crawled with ruthless mercenaries from neighboring Liberia and nearby Sierra Leone--a lawless bunch who floated easily across borders to profit from war-making, the only business many of them had ever known. Today Duékoué is at the center of Côte d'Ivoire's escalating ethnic strife. The victims of the attacks on Glondé's community were all from the Guéré tribe, a group that is native to the Duékoué area. The Guéré are ardent supporters of Côte d'Ivoire's president, Laurent Gbagbo, and, in recent years, they have been increasingly at odds with ethnic groups that moved to the area to work the rich soil. Those groups include people from what is now Côte d'Ivoire's rebel-held north as well as northern neighbors Mali and Burkina Faso, which are seen as friendly to the rebel cause because their people often come from the same ethnic groups as the rebels.

Many of the so-called newcomers in Duékoué have actually lived there for generations. After winning independence from France in 1960, Côte d'Ivoire invited immigrants to help farm the land. They rushed in, often acquiring farms of their own, and Côte d'Ivoire became the world's top producer of cocoa. The country was a rare post-colonial success story in Africa, and Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire's seaside economic capital, blossomed into one of the richest and most cosmopolitan cities on the continent.

But, as more foreigners arrived, and as their families grew and set up more permanent dwellings, the locals began to feel squeezed out. The immigrants' modest fields became profitable plantations, and jealousy set in. When declining cocoa prices and spiraling government debt caused Côte d'Ivoire's economy to But, as more foreigners arrived, and as their families grew and set up more permanent dwellings, the locals began to feel squeezed out. The immigrants' modest fields became profitable plantations, and jealousy set in. When declining cocoa prices and spiraling government debt caused Côte d'Ivoire's economy to nosedive in the 1980s, western Ivorians coveted the land their families had given away more than ever. Over the years, a bitter prejudice developed against the foreigners, and, as it spread, northern Ivorians--who are often ethnically indistinguishable from these foreigners--became victims of discrimination, too.

When Gbagbo came to power in the disputed elections of October 2000, natives who had lost their land began to feel more empowered. Gbagbo is from a village near Gagnoa, in southwestern cocoa country, and he was sympathetic to the complaints of the locals. Northern Ivorians and foreigners began to complain that Gbagbo had adopted a policy of state-sanctioned discrimination: Authorities were said to be tearing up their identity cards, and their applications for new Ivorian citizenship cards sat for months without response. Emboldened locals grew more boisterous in their discontent, and clashes between ethnic groups became more frequent. Then, in September of 2002, a cadre of disgruntled soldiers launched a coup

attempt against Gbagbo. The coup failed, but the plotters formed a rebellion that quickly won control of the northern half of the country. The war has been something of a stop-and-go affair ever since. The imposition of French troops and U.N. peacekeepers between the two sides has made sustained fighting nearly impossible. Several peace accords have been signed over the past three years, but they have been largely ineffective, and the country remains divided. Gbagbo blames the cancelation of the October elections on the rebels' refusal to disarm, and the rebellion maintains that Gbagbo has not addressed the crisis of who qualifies for Ivorian citizenship--and, through citizenship, land rights. "The question of identity is not a priority in this government," says Alain Lobognon, a spokesman for the rebellion. "That's what brought on the war. That's what we're fighting for. Nothing else."

Gbagbo dismisses this as empty rhetoric, calling the ethnic tension a minor issue that the rebels have exaggerated for their own benefit. The rebels "want to use these problems to win power," says Desiré Tagro, a Gbagbo spokesman. "But you can't use your ethnicity to get the presidency. Real Ivorians know this is a false debate."

Ethnic strife, however, is now a serious concern for millions of people in Côte d'Ivoire. The massacre in Duékoué was preceded by several months of smaller ethnic clashes in the area. According to an unofficial tally by the United Nations, nearly 100 people were killed in the five months leading up to the attacks. And, despite reinforcements of Ivorian and U.N. security forces since then, scores more have been killed. The town has taken on an angry and sullen atmosphere, with few people on the streets and little or no intermingling among different ethnic groups.

Gbagbo blamed the attacks on rebel fighters, a claim the rebels flatly deny. Whatever its truth, it is an assertion that has only strengthened the notion among locals that all foreigners and northerners are aligned with the rebels. "We can't know exactly who killed us because it was night," Glondé said at the Catholic mission. But, with a furious crowd encouraging him as we talked, he changed his tune. "We know it was the rebels," he said, fingering the bandages on his back. "Everyone is afraid."

On the other side of town, on a shaded porch in a quiet courtyard, Adama Dembelé brushed that theory aside. The chief of a tribe of northern Ivorians who live in the area, Dembelé is in his late sixties. He was born in Duékoué, and he now has a 220-acre cocoa plantation. "This is a land problem," says Dembelé. "When we got here, there was nothing. Just bush. We're the ones who planted the cocoa. We're the ones who gave the land value." Dembelé says that, when his people moved to the area, they acquired the land through the old custom of giving the Guérés valuable cloth or symbolic gifts of money. They were initially welcomed, he said, but eventually the locals started demanding their land back, and they clamored even louder once Gbagbo came to power. "We refused. That's how this story started," he says. "We refused and they attacked us. And you can't be hit by a man two, three, four times, and just sit there. You must hit back."

Dembelé described in awful detail the murders of several young men from his tribe in the weeks leading up to the attacks on the Guéré community. Some had their throats slit; others were castrated. He told of his anger when the Guéré chief did not visit him to help mourn the deaths. But, when I asked who was responsible for the subsequent attack on the Guéré community, he was tight-lipped. "We don't know who did what," Dembelé said. And then he went on to reveal a hard-line stance typical among northern Ivorians today: "Elections can fix the problem, but under one condition. The guy in power has to leave office. With Gbagbo in power, we'll never be able to do anything. And we'll be left with vengeance killings."

Back at the St. Therese Catholic Mission, the stance was just as absolute. The crowd surrounding me had grown much bigger and more irate. "We're all for Gbagbo here! No one is for anyone else!" one man said, his face twisted in anger, his finger shaking in my face. "He's the only one who will give us back our land!"

No votes for anyone will be cast any time soon. In August, the rebels declared a boycott of the October elections to protest Gbagbo's refusal to disarm loyalist militias or deal satisfactorily with citizenship issues. And, in late September, Gbagbo called off the elections altogether, saying a vote was impossible while the nation was divided and the rebellion still armed. West African leaders held a summit in Nigeria to discuss the crisis last week, but the Ivorian president refused to attend. The rebels have called for Gbagbo to step down in November to make way for a transition government, an idea Gbagbo refuses to consider. Now the U.N. Security Council is weighing sanctions in an attempt to force both sides to live up to their previous agreements. All this has many fearful of a return to all-out war.

But, even absent that catastrophe, the situation in the Côte d'Ivoire is likely to worsen as ethnic tensions grow unchecked. "If elections are held, we'll have a difficult year," says one Western diplomat. "If they're not held, we'll have an even more difficult year." For Sylvan Glondé and others sleeping on the concrete and cooking in the mud, that may mean having to fend for themselves on the streets of Duékoué. Last week, over U.N. protests, the government said it planned to forcibly evict the nearly 3,000 people who are still living at the Catholic mission, too afraid to leave.

AUSTIN MERRILL was a reporter for the Associated Press in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002-2003.

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