

October 1, 2002

## Ethnic Clenching: Misrule in Ivory Coast

By NORIMITSU ONISHI  
NEW YORK TIMES

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Sept. 30 — The conflict that has gripped this country for almost two weeks has its source in xenophobic policies unleashed nine years ago by the death of Félix Houphouët-Boigny.

He was the autocrat who made Ivory Coast into one of Africa's most stable countries, keeping close links with France and emphasizing ethnic harmony in a region with sharp divisions. When he went, so did his vision.

In the decade since, the three men who have led Ivory Coast have differed greatly, except on one front: all three have used ethnic and religious differences to gain and keep power, at the expense of national stability.

The three leaders, Christians from the south, saw the cold numerical reality that they were outnumbered by Muslims from the north. So they invented a logic, called "ivoirité," which held that the southerners were the only pure Ivoirians.

Over the years, through one ploy or another, the leaders made sure that Alassane D. Ouattara, a popular northerner who would almost surely have carried a general election, was disqualified from running for president. They said he was a phony Ivoirian, a citizen from neighboring Burkina Faso, even though he had once served as Mr. Houphouët-Boigny's prime minister.

Under the politics of xenophobia, ordinary northerners began facing daily harassment from the authorities, including the police and military. Northerners were removed from positions of power in the security forces, or shunted aside.

In large part it is these disaffected soldiers who rose up in three cities two Thursdays ago. And today the country's ethnic and religious divisions are physically manifest. Ivory Coast is split in half. The rebel soldiers control the north and the government clings to the south.

So far, President Laurent Gbagbo's government has rejected any suggestion that internal problems may have caused the uprising. To do so would, of course, mean acknowledging misguided ethnic policies.

At first the government said the uprising stemmed from a failed coup by the former military ruler, Gen. Robert Gueï, who during the unrest was killed with a bullet through the head. Then, through its media, the government shifted the blame to Mr. Ouattara and the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré. The rebels were branded terrorists.

At a meeting of West African leaders in Accra, Ghana, on Sunday, Abdoulaye Wade, the president of Senegal, who is known for his blunt talk, seemed to dismiss the Ivoirian government's explanation. "It was not a coup d'état," he said. "It was not a mutiny. It is a group of military — former military, including officers — who have taken up arms to make a number of demands."

What Mr. Wade left unsaid, at least this time, was how the government's policies had pushed those soldiers and others to such a desperate act. Last year he was not so reserved on the subject, asserting that a native of Burkina Faso faced more discrimination living in Ivory Coast than an African living in France.

The Ivoirian government's policies were condemned throughout West Africa, though more discreetly. On a continent with poorly educated, easily manipulated people, many believe that talk of ethnic purity opens a Pandora's box leading to catastrophes like the Rwandan genocide.

In Nigeria, generals held power for years, partly by arguing that politicians would inflame ethnic and religious divisions for selfish goals. Since Nigeria was handed over to civilian politicians in 1999, about 10,000 Nigerians have been killed in ethnic and religious clashes fueled by politicians, more than at any other time in the country's history.

West African leaders may feel little genuine sympathy for the Ivoirian government's present predicament. But given its regional importance, they quickly agreed in Accra on Sunday to send mediators and perhaps, eventually, a peacekeeping force.

"A threat to Ivory Coast is a threat to all of us," said President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, the country that would almost certainly dominate any regional peacekeeping force.

During the glory years under Mr. Houphouët-Boigny, Western and African tourists flocked to Abidjan, the so-called Paris of Africa, where they could go to the Hôtel Ivoire and skate on its ice rink. The hotel so impressed Mobutu Sese Seko, the ruler of Zaire, that he had a similar one built in Kinshasa (albeit without the rink). In the Ivoirian capital, Yamoussoukro, tourists visit Notre Dame de la Paix basilica, which is bigger than St. Peter's in Rome.

But since a coup in 1999, instability has become part of everyday life here. Soldier mutinies have occurred every few months. Restaurants and clubs have had to factor in periodic curfews. The Gbagbo government has pursued the politics of ethnic exclusion. Tourists have scratched the country off their lists. The ice at the Hôtel Ivoire rink has melted.

And what used to be one of Africa's most stable countries may soon witness the arrival of the West African intervention force — the same one deployed in recent years in failed states like Liberia and Sierra Leone.