

Ivory Coast First Lady Leads Death Squad, Report Alleges

U.N. Panel Says Both Sides Are Committing War Crimes

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UNITED NATIONS, Jan. 28 -- A confidential U.N. report says that Ivory Coast's first lady, Simone Gbagbo, has directed a death squad responsible for killing rivals of her husband's government, U.N. diplomats familiar with the report said Friday.

The report, written by a five-member U.N. commission of inquiry, also says that more than 90 other people, including senior rebel officials, committed extrajudicial killings and kidnappings and fomented ethnic hatred.

The commission, which was headed by Congolese lawyer Gerard Balanda Mikuin Leliel, has recommended that the cases be referred to the Hague-based International Criminal Court for possible prosecution. Luis Moreno Ocampo, the court's chief prosecutor, said in Johannesburg that he will dispatch a team to the country to determine whether prosecutions are warranted.

Ivory Coast's U.N. ambassador, Philippe D. Djangone-Bi, denied the accusation against Simone Gbagbo, saying she has struggled for 30 years to promote democracy and human rights. "It is untrue; to the best of my knowledge it's not true," he said. "It's unimaginable that she would organize to kill those who do not think like her. These are allegations meant to demonize the authorities."

Gbagbo, a veteran political activist, reportedly exercises enormous political influence over the government of her husband, Laurent Gbagbo. She has previously been accused of having links to government paramilitary groups.

The former French colony of Ivory Coast erupted in violence in 2002, when rebel forces sought to overthrow Laurent Gbagbo's government. The rebels still control the country's rich cocoa-producing region in the north.

Although Ivory Coast has not ratified the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court, President Gbagbo signed a letter granting the tribunal jurisdiction in the country so it could pursue war-crimes investigations against rebels involved in the failed coup. But the letter could now expose his wife and other government officials to possible prosecution by the court.

The U.N. Security Council established a commission of inquiry last summer to investigate human rights abuses by both sides during the country's civil war.

The contents of the commission's 100-page report, which omits the names of the accused, were first leaked to the Ivory Coast press last month. It charges both sides in the conflict with committing serious violations of human rights, including rape, torture and murder.

Radio France International first reported Friday that a highly confidential annex to the report contained the names of 95 individuals allegedly responsible for committing rights abuses, inciting violence or blocking the country's peace process. It includes Simone Gbagbo, a top rebel leader and the head of a pro-government militia.

Two Security Council members familiar with the list confirmed that the three individuals were on it. But they said the list contained little detail about the precise nature of the accusations against them.

The Security Council, meanwhile, delayed plans to vote Friday on a French-sponsored resolution reinforcing an arms embargo on Ivory Coast. The decision followed a request by the African Union to postpone a decision until the Union wraps up a summit in Abuja this week that will address the crisis in Ivory Coast.

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