

Cote d'Ivoire: Stuck Between Refuge and Risk

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UNHCR/G.Gordon

Refugees from Côte d'Ivoire walk along a forest trail to find safety and shelter in eastern Liberia. Tai/Para — Intermittent violence and widespread insecurity have left thousands of villagers in western Côte d'Ivoire stuck between fleeing their villages for the greater safety of refuge with host families in bigger towns, and the risk of being attacked if they return to the farms where they earn their livelihood.

"It's the same thing every time. We hear gunfire, we take the kids with us, walk in the bush all night long to reach Tai [town]. Once there, after two or three days, we are told the situation has calmed down, so we go back - and it starts again," said Nathalie Kouakou.

In early June she and her entire family fled from their home in Tiele-Oula village, around 20km from Tai town, which has been attacked at least six times in the past 10 months. "I'm tired of it," Kouakou told IRIN.

Western Côte d'Ivoire has been plagued by insecurity and clashes, often fuelled by political tensions and ethnic rivalry between native communities and those from other regions, as well as disputes over land ownership.

At least 22 people, including seven UN peacekeepers were killed in an ambush by gunmen in the western Tai area on 8 June, which the UN described as the worst attack on peacekeepers in Côte d'Ivoire since 2004. The Ivorian authorities blamed mercenaries from neighbouring Liberia and Ivoirians loyal to former president Laurent Gbagbo.

Up to 13,000 people fled their homes in the days following the attack, said Jocelyn Brousseau, a coordinator for the Danish Refugee Council in western Côte d'Ivoire. There are no camps set up for the displaced people, who have mostly taken refuge with relatives in the larger towns. Some families host up to 20 people.

"Some people have fled as many as six times," said Brousseau. "They're divided between the desire to go back and keep working on their farms, and [the fear of] risk[ing] their lives [if they do]."

Kossere Sadj, another villager who fled to Tai, walked to the town with her 70-year-old mother and sought refuge at the deputy mayor's house. The deputy mayor has hosted up to 50 people, half of whom have already returned home. "At some point, I'll have to go home because it is my home, but I don't feel like going now - it's too dangerous," Sadj told IRIN.

The UN peacekeepers and Côte d'Ivoire troops have reinforced their units between Tai and Para towns, a distance of about 40km, to secure the villages in the area. The peacekeepers have three bases, and the Ivorian troops are stationed in villages, from where they patrol the dense forest along the Cavally River on the border with Liberia.

Some villages in the area have been almost completely depopulated. Farmers who have fled are desperate to return to tend to their cocoa, coffee, rubber and rice plantations. In many cases, the men stayed in the bush to look after the farm while the women and children fled, said Father Laurentin, who runs a Catholic mission in Tai.

"I am afraid, but I had to go back to work on my farm," said rice farmer Pascal Sande. "If I stay away, everything will deteriorate." He fled from his village of Saho, where two of his neighbours were shot dead and the gunmen looted houses and stole 50,000 CFA francs (around \$100) from his house.

Besides the violence, many residents say they worry over the rising tension between the different groups in the region. Communities in western Côte d'Ivoire have had disputes over land with other residents, mainly from the north of the country and neighbouring Burkina Faso.

Some local people had sold their land to buyers from other regions, but the children of the original owners claim that the land still belongs to them. Most local inhabitants are supporters of former president Gbagbo, who was arrested in April 2011 after refusing to concede defeat in national elections and plunged the country into months of bloody unrest.

Those from outside western Côte d'Ivoire are seen as supporters of President Alassane Ouattara, whose victory in the November 2010 elections Gbagbo refused to accept. The two sides accuse each other of stoking violence.

"Mistrust has risen between the communities," said Father Laurentin. "Foreigners arrived 32 years ago in the village and our relations were cordial, but now that Ouattara is the president they feel powerful," said village chief Jean Gnonsoa.

The suspicion between the people is hard to bear, he said. "Autochtones [local people] and their brothers in Liberia are behind the attacks because they want to take back the land they sold us," said Salam Zongo, a cocoa grower in Saho.

Most local ethnic residents in areas between Tai and Para fled their homes after the attacks and in one village only nine people remained out of a total population of 300, said village chief Gnonsoa.

More than 58,000 Ivoirians have sought refuge across the border in Liberia, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Some fled because of repeated attacks, while others feared acts of retaliation.

"We're telling our children and brothers to come back to Côte d'Ivoire, but they are too afraid," said Gnonsoa. "If a young man comes back, he will be suspected of being a militia member."

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations]