

## Cote d'Ivoire: 'Everyone Is Looking for Safety'

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*Human RightWatch*

Ivorian soldiers at a border post with Liberia.(file photo)

Abidjan — Up to a dozen people jostle for space in small houses meant for families of four, but at least they have found refuge in Duékoué, a town near the Liberian border.

A new militia attack in Côte d'Ivoire's restive western Tai area left 16 people dead, including seven UN troops, and triggered the displacement of around 300 families from villages to nearby towns.

"It's survival for the fittest. Everyone is looking for safety," said Fabrice Kouablan, a primary school teacher who fled to Duékoué after the attack on 8 June, when gunmen ambushed UN peacekeepers in Para village. Thousands of civilians are believed to be still hiding in forests with little to survive on.

"I did not have the time to carry a shirt or trousers. As soon as I saw my parents ready to leave, I had no choice but to follow them," Kouablan said. "Now all the villages have been deserted."

Most of the civilians displaced by the June 8 attack are on the Ivoirian side of the border, but scores of others crossed into Liberia, said Anouk Gesgroseilliers, the spokeswoman for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

The UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI) said around 300 families who fled the violence have been registered.

The latest spate of attacks in Côte d'Ivoire's western border regions is being blamed on mercenaries from neighbouring Liberia and Ivoirians loyal to former president Laurent Gbagbo. Gbagbo's refusal to concede defeat in the November 2010 polls plunged Côte d'Ivoire into months of violent crisis.

The porous Côte d'Ivoire-Liberia border is densely forested and difficult to police, and has been plagued by intermittent violence since Gbagbo's fall. Fighters opposed to the current regime of President Alassane Ouattara have been attacking villages for months, according to analysts.

Land disputes - occasionally violent, with offences on both sides - are not new in western Côte d'Ivoire, but landowners say the post-election crisis raised existing tensions to a new level, triggering violence in which countless homes have been destroyed and tens of thousands of people displaced.

Thousands of Ivoirians, many of them Gbagbo supporters, fled their villages in the 2010-2011 violence and are displaced either in Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia as they fear attacks, or because their homes have been destroyed or occupied by others.

Some 160,000 Ivoirians have sought refuge in Liberia, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

In a report released two days before the attack on 8 June, Human Rights Watch (HRW) blamed the Liberian government for failing to prosecute Liberian mercenaries and Ivoirian gunmen who are hiding out in Liberia.

"For well over a year, the Liberian government has had its head in the sand in responding to the flood of war criminals who crossed into the country at the end of the Ivoirian crisis," said Matt Wells, HRW's West Africa researcher.

"Rather than uphold its responsibility to prosecute or extradite those involved in international crimes, the Liberian authorities have stood by as many of these same people recruit child soldiers and carry out deadly cross-border attacks."

The UN Panel of Experts on Liberia noted in a December 2011 report that the gunmen would worsen insecurity in the border areas and land conflict in western Côte d'Ivoire, especially if the attacks were coordinated and sustained.

Liberia closed its border with Côte d'Ivoire a day after the attack. Ivoirian Defence Minister Paul Koffi Koffi said they would pursue the militia across the border if they carried out another attack.

In Tai, host families struggle to keep up with the influx, while their guests yearn for security and being able to resume a normal life.

"I have already suffered this situation less than a year ago. This can no longer continue," said Mathieu Glougoueu, 64, a farmer and father of four. "We left food in granaries. We were preparing for the rice planting season. We are wondering whether it is worth returning."

Aid is yet to reach the people in the remote region where poor roads and insecurity make access difficult, but for Alice Mombhehi and her six children, the crowded living conditions are slowly taking a toll.

"At the moment we are sleeping several people in the houses of those who have agreed to host us," she said. "Even with food aid, we will not be comfortable."

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

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