

IVORY COAST: 'The key to ending the tragedy destroying the Ivory Coast is to get the French and their Force Licorne out'

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The African Union and the international community are busy planning how to allow the rebels of the Ivory Coast to win through stealth what they couldn't win by subversion and conflict. The rebels of the north and the former president of the Republic and head of the PDCI, Konan Bedie, have stated that President Laurent Gbagbo's term ends on October 30, 2005 because Article 35 of the Constitution says he must have an election on that day. They have demanded that a 'Transition Government' be installed to supervise the new elections. They say the President will have lost his legitimacy when his 'term expires', so a transition is necessary.

This is total nonsense, as anyone who reads the Ivorian Constitution will see. The legal position is clear, but its interpretation is subject to self-serving views. The Constitution says:

Art. 35. "The President of the Republic is elected for five years by the direct vote for all. He is re-eligible only one time..."

Art. 38. "In the event of events or of serious circumstances, in particular an attack to the integrity of the territory or natural disasters making impossible the normal course of the elections or the proclamation of the results, the president of the Commission in charge of the elections immediately assumes power over the constitutional Council for purposes of observation of this situation. The constitutional Council must decide within 24 hours to stop or to continue the electoral operations or to suspend the proclamation of the results. The President of the Republic must inform the Nation by a message. The government remains in place. If the constitutional Council orders the stop of the electoral operations or decides the suspension of the proclamation of the results, the Commission in charge of the elections must examine the position and report to the President daily. When the constitutional Council notes the suspension of these events or these serious circumstances, it fixes a new time which cannot exceed 30 days for the proclamation of the results or 90 days for the carrying out of the election."

Art. 39. "The legitimacy of the President of the Republic to rule expires at the date of the taking of the oath of office of the newly elected President. The taking of the oath of office of the newly elected President must take place in front of the constitutional Council joined together in solemn audience within 48 hours of the final proclamation of the

results."

Art. 40 "In the event of vacancy of the Presidency of the Republic by death, resignation, or incapacity, the duties of the President of the Republic are taken over temporarily by the President of the National Assembly, for one period of between 45 and 90 days during which he must proceed to the election of the new President of the Republic."

The call for a Transition Government is not a Constitutional claim; it is a political claim. It is a claim which says that since the President cannot govern, someone else should step in to make sure elections take place. This is more than disingenuous. If the rebels refuse to disarm as they have agreed to do on several occasions to allow the electoral roll to be produced, they have a very weak case to say that the President is unable to govern, because it is they who are preventing him governing according to the Constitution. It is a little like a defendant in court asking to be treated leniently as a poor orphan when the charge against him is that he has killed his mother and father.

The matter of the Ivory Coast was raised at the meeting of the United Nations in New York on 15 September. Gbagbo did not attend. Kofi Annan recognized that there was no chance for an election on the 30 October. The impartiality of President Mbeki as a mediator was called into question. The rebels, especially Soro, decried Mbeki's efforts as too partial to Gbagbo and refused to allow him to continue as a mediator. For all but the francophone nations, Mbeki had made important steps towards peace.

However, the rebels refused to enforce the agreements they made in Pretoria and accused Mbeki of bias. This theme was taken up by the francophone states at the UN. They insisted that Niger President Mamadou Tandja (currently head of ECOWAS) work with President Obasanjo of Nigeria within the African Union to oust Mbeki as mediator and to interpose the AU's Peace and Security Council in his place. They want to make this a West African endeavour; one in which Gbagbo's enemies (Blaise Campaore of Burkina Faso and Toure of Mali) can have a say. Not surprisingly, this did not sit well with Mbeki, or with Gbagbo. The president wrote a letter to Kofi Annan which expressed his opinion most clearly. Gbagbo pointed out that Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were complicit in aiding and profiting from the rebellion.

Not only did they aid the rebels with weapons and materiel supplied by the French, and offer the rebels safe haven, they were actively profiting from the Ivory Coast's dilemma by stealing the cotton, cocoa and teak in the North and exporting them through Togo and Burkina Faso.

This exploitation of Ivory Coast resources is conducted with the active participation of the French. Just last week a shipment of teak was discovered en route to Burkina Faso, guarded by French troops from the Force Licorne. Amadou Gon Coulibaly, Adama Bictogo, Koné Zakaria and others, tied to the Ouattara RDR party, are in business smuggling cocoa for the rebels in alliance with Credit Lyonnais and the firm SOEXIMEX. Several of the leading rebels have been buying expensive properties in Paris. Adama Bictogo travels Europe presenting himself as a special consultant to the

Ivorian Minister of Agriculture, Adamou Gon Coulibaly (one of the rebel ministers imposed on the Ivory Coast). This lends credibility to the smuggling transactions. The profits are making the rebel leadership rich and paying for arms and equipment.

The biggest beneficiaries are the French, through companies like SOEXIMEX. This is a company involved in the sale of foods and agricultural products, as well as distribution and sale of spare parts for motor vehicles (COGEFO). Since its creation, it has been owned by a single shareholder, a holding company operating out of Luxembourg (COFIDA), itself entirely owned by the Dagher-Hayek family. They had faced difficulties when Gbagbo came to power, as they were exposed to international competition. Their answer, as with many French companies, was to work with the French Government to promote the destabilization of Ivory Coast.

The destabilization of the Ivory Coast and the creation of an unregulated market in the north of the country, an area without taxation, rules or other obstacles to illicit trade, constituted a dream come true for the European firms. In the north, foreign competition is prohibited, reporting is unnecessary, labor laws are irrelevant and taxation is non-existent. There is a local French army to protect the shipments and to organize transport. The cocoa, for example, passes through Burkina Faso directly to Loma, in Togo, on transport provided by the French firm Bollore; handled by the French firm Delmas. Cotton and wood pass through the same route. Blasé Campaore of Burkina Faso, it is said, derives most of his personal wealth from the smuggling of Ivorian products.

American companies are also involved with their French partners and with both Bedie and Ouattara. These two are tainted by their long stay in Paris and their close financial ties with the seedier end of international business: especially Amajaro and its ties to Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) and the Ivory Coast companies SIFCA and ANAPROCI (in the cocoa trade). Their main ties are through Daniel Usher and Georges Ouegnin (the cocoa trader for Houphouet-Boigny and Bedie). Usher works with Victor Nembellisini and Ali Anjani (two sugar traders). Anthony Ward and Derek Chambers of Amajaro have a significant network of relations in the political world of the Ivory Coast, in particular with the PDCI, as well as close relations with several persons in charge of the RDR. Mama Ndyaye is also a close relation of the French banker Jean-Luc Lecorre, of the African Merchant Bank. All of these are active in the cocoa trade and have fought turf wars to control it. This group has spent many millions in support of the PDCI and the RDR in the current struggle.

It is not surprising that the francophone countries of West Africa (through ECOWAS, headed by Tadjia of Niger) want to take the reins of governance of Ivory Coast into their own hands. It is also not surprising that Gbagbo, the FPI and the people of the Ivory Coast reject this out of hand. These francophone leaders (Tandja, Toure and Campaore) lead countries which are international basket cases. Their economies do not function. The citizens are starving. They have their begging bowls out for international charity. The Niger Government of Tandja is busy stealing food from the international aid relief; Campaore, in defiance of his own Constitution, is seeking an illegal third term; and Toure presides over one of the poorest countries in the world, with 65% of its land area desert or

semi-desert. These three landlocked countries suffer drought, desertification and bad governance. It is beyond belief that these three failed leaders of failed states think they have the right to tell one of the richest and most prosperous states in Africa how it should be governed. They only do this because they are supported by the French government, French soldiers and French businesses.

The most important military force is Force Licorne, which maintains a heavy-handed presence (along with UN troops) in the buffer zone dividing the warring sides. France paid a price for its intemperate massacre of Ivoirians in November 2004. Even the French people were revolted by such a callous disregard of the norms of civil society. This hasn't deterred them from plotting but they do it less egregiously. There is a new commander of Force Licorne, Elrick Irastorza. He has recently stated that he thinks the time has come to remove the "Zone of Confidence" between the two sides. He and his Chief of Staff, Col. De Stabenrath, observed that the arms embargo was not responsible for a massive influx of weapons that they have discovered. Presumably this does not include the arms brought in on French planes to Chad, Niger and Mali. He denied that the Force Licorne has been re-supplied with helicopters and tanks.

Irastorza is no democrat. He is critical of the political process and the intervention by Mbeki. In a recent interview he gave to "Le Figaro" he said: "If the rebels do not disarm, it is because 'political points' were not reached." These points include, according to him, issuing all the rebels with identity papers. This was never agreed in any of the talks and was never asked for by the rebels. The agreement actually states that it will be the aim to 'repatriate' the foreign combatants. He went on: "There is no military solution to the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. The solution is political. We are ready. We do not know what the next hour will require. We are in a situation of permanent vigilance. Almost instantaneously, we can gather our equipment and engage in support of Onuci. Our units are equipped today with non-lethal armaments which enable us to maintain crowd violence at a low level." It was 'non-lethal' weapons which killed 64 and wounded 200 in November 2004. When asked about the solution to the problem, he said: "What's wrong with partition? They've had it in Cyprus since 1974"

This is essentially the French position. They do not want a solution to the Ivory Coast crisis. They benefit from the division of the country. It makes their businesses secure and free from competition. It allows a large French civilian population to stay in the Ivory Coast, protected by French troops. It stops investments by 'foreigners' to challenge French dominance. As long as there is not a lot of killing, they are happy.

The role of the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS is even more hypocritical. The countries like to pretend that they are capable of coherent and forceful action. The only force that ever performed this task was the ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone, largely because these deployments were made by the Nigerian armed forces. African military forces are a sham and ill equipped to fight African wars.

The African Union is adept at pretending that it can solve Africa's problems. It has never been able to solve anything, nor has it ever made a rational contribution to solving any

nation's problems. The ECOWAS is even more impotent and self-delusional, despite Nigeria and Ghana's presence. In truth, the francophone states rely on the French for almost everything. This is the point being made by Gbagbo, the FPI and most directly by Mamadou Koulibaly; that the Pact Colonial of the French is the curse of African development; the curse of military preparedness and, above all, the curse of the Ivory Coast.

Surely there is no sense in allowing the poseurs and frauds of ECOWAS any say in the future of the Ivory Coast. Their interests are purely material, deriving from the theft of Ivory Coast's riches. Thieves should not be put in charge of their victims. The rebels have no political program or goals. They are happy with looting. The key to ending the tragedy destroying the Ivory Coast is to get the French and their Force Licorne out of the Ivory Coast. Without that there will be no progress. It is monstrous that it has gone on this long.

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