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COTE D'IVOIRE

REPUBLIC OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Head of state: Laurent Gbagbo
 Head of government: Charles Konan Banny
 Death penalty: abolitionist for all crimes
 International Criminal Court: signed

Intense diplomatic efforts, notably by the UN and the African Union (AU), did not prevent further human rights abuses by both government security forces and the New Forces (Forces Nouvelles), the coalition of armed groups in control of the north since September 2002. Women were targeted with impunity by both sides, a situation aggravated by the lack of a functioning justice system. Supporters of President Laurent Gbagbo continued to incite violence against Dioulas, a generic term for anyone with a Muslim family name originating from the north of Côte d'Ivoire or other countries in the sub-region. Hate speech also continued to fuel ethnic clashes in the west of the country. There were violent demonstrations targeted at UN peacekeeping forces, but the presence of about 12,000 peacekeepers prevented a resumption of hostilities. Freedom of expression came under attack from both sides.

Background

Despite intense political pressure from the international community, the conditions required for a presidential election scheduled for October were not met. The election was postponed for a second time, primarily because of disagreements between supporters of President Laurent Gbagbo and opposition parties. The President and his supporters demanded the immediate disarmament of the New Forces, while the opposition insisted on a programme to issue identity documents ahead of the election.

Supporters of President Laurent Gbagbo criticized the presence of French and UN peacekeeping forces, repeatedly demanding their departure.

In January, there were anti-UN demonstrations organized by Young Patriots (Jeunes Patriotes), a loosely defined movement supporting President Gbagbo. UN peacekeepers responded on one occasion, prompting allegations of excessive use of force.

In August, following a scandal surrounding toxic waste dumped in Abidjan (the economic capital), the government resigned. However, when a new government was formed, only two ministries had changed hands.

In October, the UN decided to extend Laurent Gbagbo's mandate for an additional 12 months and to expand Prime Minister Charles Konan Banny's powers. At the end of the year efforts to implement the UN decision were being resisted by President Gbagbo and his supporters.

Violence against women

Serious human rights abuses against women and girls continued to be reported in the government-controlled part of the country, encouraged by an atmosphere of impunity.

- In March, a 14-year-old girl was raped in Abidjan by a member of the Command Centre for Security Operations (Centre de Commandement des Opérations de Sécurité, CECOS). A complaint was lodged on her behalf before the military tribunal, but the investigation led to no legal proceedings.

In the part of the country controlled by the New Forces, perpetrators of rape also benefited from virtually total impunity.

- In May, a 10-year-old girl was raped by the director of a radio station in Man. Officials close to the New Forces intimidated medical personnel, preventing them from issuing a medical certificate confirming the rape.

Alleged excessive use of force by UN forces

In January, anti-UN demonstrations erupted after a decision by the International Working Group - the international mediation group on Côte d'Ivoire - not to extend the mandates of National Assembly members. Demonstrators demanded the departure of the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and attacked UN vehicles and buildings while the security forces reportedly stood by passively.

- In Guiglo, following demonstrations in front of the UN military compound, UN peacekeepers opened fire on demonstrators, killing five people and wounding at least 20. Peacekeepers maintained that they acted in self-defence, while supporters of President Gbagbo claimed that the UN forces had fired at unarmed demonstrators. The UN opened an internal inquiry into the incident whose findings had not been made public by the end of 2006.

UN sanctions and embargos

The UN imposed sanctions on individuals responsible for inciting hatred and grave human rights violations.

- In February, the UN Security Council imposed targeted sanctions on two leaders of the Young Patriots, Charles Blé Goudé and Eugene Djué, for their role during the January anti-UN demonstrations. It also imposed sanctions on Fofie Kouakou, a New Forces commander, for recruiting child soldiers, imposing forced labour and gross human rights violations by forces under his control.

In October, a report drafted by a UN Group of Experts concluded that Ivorian rough diamonds were being exported in violation of the UN embargo imposed in December 2005.

Demobilization at a standstill

Despite international pressure, notably from UNOCI, the repeatedly postponed disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme remained deadlocked because of disagreement over the timetable. Supporters of President Gbagbo wanted DDR to begin immediately, while the opposition refused to disarm until a programme to issue identity documents ahead of presidential elections had been implemented. This impasse seemed to have been overcome in mid-May when the two parties agreed on the simultaneous launch of the identification and DDR programmes. By June, both the National Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire (Forces Armées Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire, FANCI) and the New Forces had reportedly regrouped some 12,000 combatants each. However, by August, the UNOCI had collected only a limited number of arms from pro-government militias in the west when the New Forces declared that they would suspend disarmament due to obstacles in the identification process. By the end of 2006, no further progress on the implementation of the DDR program had been reported.

Human rights violations by security forces

The security forces were responsible for arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial executions of detainees suspected of supporting the New Forces.

- In January, in Abidjan, members of the CECOS arrested Dioulas and nationals of neighbouring countries and accused them of financing the rebels. Some detainees were reportedly tortured and at least one, Diallo Ouatreini, died as a result.

Several cases of arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment and torture were reported in the context of widespread extortion at check

points and during inspections of identity documents. Dioulas and nationals of neighbouring countries were reportedly targeted.

- In February, Moustapha Tounkara and Arthur Vincent, two young mobile phone salesmen, were arrested in Abidjan by members of the CECOS. Their bodies were found the next day, riddled with bullets.

Abuses by the New Forces

Members and supporters of the New Forces were responsible for human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment. A climate of impunity prevailed due to the absence of a functioning judicial system in the north.

- In January, Khalil Coulibaly, Fane Zakaria and Yeo Ibrahime, a former member of the New Forces, were arrested in Korhogo by elements of the New Forces. An eyewitness saw them in detention, but they then disappeared.
- In August, at least 15 militants of a new party, the National Union of Ivorians for Renewal (Union nationale des Ivoiriens du renouveau, UNIR), led by Ibrahim Coulibaly, were reported to have been arbitrarily arrested by New Forces in Seguela, in the northwest, and accused of destabilizing the region. Those arrested were reportedly wearing T-shirts in the colours of their party. They were released one week later.

The New Forces also extorted money from civilians on a large scale, severely limiting freedom of movement by requiring villagers to pay a "tax" in order to enter or leave their villages.

Ethnic clashes in the west

In the west, antagonism between the indigenous population and farmers from other regions or from neighbouring countries, including Burkina Faso, continued to provoke conflict over land ownership and ethnic clashes. Xenophobic rhetoric employed by politicians and the news media aggravated the hostility.

- In March, intercommunal clashes occurred in several villages including Gohouo, Zagna, Baïbly and Doekpe alongside the zone controlled by French soldiers and UNOCI. Clashes broke out after members of the indigenous Guéré ethnic group attempted to repossess plantations occupied by Burkinabè planters. A number of people were killed and thousands displaced.

Freedom of expression under attack

Journalists and media organizations were harassed and attacked by the security forces and by pro-government militias, notably during the January anti-UN demonstrations.

- In January, Young Patriots attempted to set fire to a car in which journalists of the newspaper 24 Heures were travelling on their way to a meeting of the International Working Group.
- In November, members of the security forces entered the premises of state-owned Ivorian Radio and Television (Radio-télévision ivoirienne, RTI) by force and prevented a statement by Prime Minister Charles Konan Banny from being rebroadcast. The Director-General and the management board of RTI were dismissed by presidential decree.

Freedom of expression was also limited in the area held by the New Forces. In Bouaké, the New Forces' stronghold, certain programmes on national radio and television continued to be banned.

- In February, an independent journalist was beaten and forced to crawl 40 metres while being sprayed with water inside the General Secretariat of the New Forces in Bouaké.

AI country reports/visits

Reports

- Côte d'Ivoire: Provide protection to journalists! (AI Index: AFR 31/002/2006)
- Côte d'Ivoire: Clashes between peacekeeping forces and civilians - lessons for the future (AI Index: AFR 31/005/2006)

Visit

In April, an AI delegation visited Côte d'Ivoire to investigate reports of human rights abuses during the January 2006 anti-UN demonstrations and the alleged use of excessive force by UNOCI peacekeeping forces.

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