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Côte d'Ivoire: Lethal Crime Wave, Security Vacuum

Protect Bouaké Residents, Disarm Former Combatants

March 5, 2012

(Nairobi) – The Ivorian government should urgently address the rising violent crime in and around the central town of Bouaké, the country's second largest city, Human Rights Watch said today. The government should take urgent steps to disarm the former combatants widely believed to be implicated in the attacks and adequately equip the police and gendarmes to protect the population and investigate violent crimes, Human Rights Watch said.

Since early December 2011, at least 22 people have been murdered in central Côte d'Ivoire during attacks on passengers travelling on motorbikes or in commercial vehicles. Victims and witnesses from Bouaké interviewed by Human Rights Watch described 15 such attacks during which at least 13 men were shot and killed and five women raped. Bouaké residents said the road banditry occurs daily and is part of a striking rise in violent crime that has crippled daily life. Residents said police and gendarmes have neither protected them from, nor properly investigated, the violent attacks.

"The Ivorian people have suffered countless horrors," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The government needs to show it intends to end this violence by disarming former combatants and ensuring that police and gendarmes are equipped to protect Ivorians and stem the rampant criminality around Bouaké."

Victims said that attackers armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles work in groups of two to eight, blocking roads with wood or cars, and then systematically robbing people in passing vehicles. Witnesses said that passengers who glanced at the attackers' faces, tried to flee, or failed to give them money had been killed. Several women interviewed by Human Rights Watch described being stripped as the bandits looked for cash, then raped. One woman was raped in front of other passengers after her father was gunned down in front of her, while another woman described being forced into the surrounding vegetation and raped by two men.

The victims who spoke to Human Rights Watch, all of whom had lived in Bouaké for years, universally believed the attackers were associated with the Republican Forces. The term "Republican Forces" now signifies the official Ivorian military, but is also commonly used to describe tens of thousands more youth who took up arms in 2011 to remove former President Laurent Gbagbo from power after he refused to recognize President Alassane Ouattara's electoral victory and unleashed a torrent of abuse against Ouattara supporters.

Bouaké is the former capital of the Forces Nouvelles (New Forces) armed group that effectively controlled the northern half of the country beginning in September 2002 and constituted the bulk of the Republican Forces during the post-election period.

In linking the attackers to the Republican Forces, victims cited the type of weapons the attackers used, the fact

that some wore military pants or boots, and the quasi-military nature of the attacks. The victims also referred to the ubiquity of the Republican Forces and former New Forces combatants in Bouaké, and the attackers' apparent lack of fear that the Republican Forces troops who exert effective control within Bouaké would stop them.

The Ivorian government has commendably acknowledged the problem of road banditry and violent crime, and publicly made a commitment to address the issue, Human Rights Watch said. Representatives from Ivorian civil society and the United Nations Operations in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) likewise told Human Rights Watch that since the December 2011 killing of five people by Republican Forces soldiers in the town of Vavoua, the government has taken a few meaningful steps to address problems of indiscipline within the Republican Forces. These include creating a military police unit, which has arrested some soldiers engaged in crime, and improvements in unifying the formerly belligerent armed forces into a military with some chain of command.

People in Bouaké made clear, however, that their security situation has progressively worsened. One Bouaké resident told Human Rights Watch on February 23, 2012, that the previous two weeks had been the worst so far, with violent robberies every day throughout the town. She said that at least five people had been killed during that period and that attacks had occurred on Western Union and key businesses, prompting a strike by traders and storekeepers. The right to security is protected under article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and article 6 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, both ratified by Côte d'Ivoire. These provisions require authorities to take reasonable steps to protect everyone in Côte d'Ivoire from violence by anyone else, when the authorities are aware that certain individuals or groups are at specific risk.

Victims told Human Rights Watch that when they reported to the police or gendarmerie incidents of road banditry, often including murder or rape, the authorities responded that they are unarmed and ill-equipped to tackle the problem, and they failed to investigate the reports. Several people involved in inter-city transport in Bouaké said that the security vacuum is being filled in part by members of the regular Republican Forces, whom they now pay for protection.

Human Rights Watch called on the government to quickly provide sufficient material support for the police and gendarmes to undertake basic security functions. The government should also ensure that the military defers to and respects the primacy of the police and gendarmes who are responsible for protecting the population and bringing those responsible to book, Human Rights Watch said.

In addition to empowering the security forces, a successful disarmament, demobilization, and reinsertion program (known as DDR) for the tens of thousands of men who took up arms during the post-election crisis is essential to tackle the worrying rise in violent criminality, Human Rights Watch said. Some important progress has been made in disarming men who took up arms during the post-election crisis, Human Rights Watch said. And UN officials said that the Ouattara government's current efforts were a significant improvement from three failed disarmament programs during Gbagbo's presidency. The disarmament of certain high-risk armed groups in Abidjan and the western part of the country – the majority formerly associated with Gbagbo's side – has indeed begun, with close involvement from the UN.

However, several UN officials said that certain influential members of the government with close ties to the Republican Forces appeared to be "stalling," or "slow-moving," in disarming the forces that swept it to power. An estimated 40,000 "volunteers," according to media reports citing diplomats, fought with the Republican Forces.

UN officials told Human Rights Watch that UN-monitored disarmament of these former combatants has yet to start, as the government says it is yet to arrive at decisions regarding military reform and has not finished registering and profiling all of these former combatants. As one UN official said, the UN could not assist disarmament of the Republican Forces "until the government tells us who to disarm."

UN officials blamed part of the problem on the proliferation of state institutions implicated in DDR – 17 involved currently in some capacity – and called for a centralized, national program with the authority to organize and move the process forward. One UN expert on the subject said, "The process needs to be integrated and coherent from the moment a person is disarmed until reinsertion, with transparent access [for the UN] to the list that shows the ex-combatants' progress, using unique biometric DDR [identification] cards.... This needs to be Côte d'Ivoire's last DDR program, so it must be rigorous."

Human Rights Watch called on the Ivorian government to ensure that the UN operations in the country and other international actors can monitor the DDR process from the identification and registration of former combatants through disarmament and reinsertion programs.

"The proliferation of arms and widespread recruitment by both sides during the post-election conflict has created a dire security vacuum in parts of the country," Dufka said. "The Ivorian government urgently needs to disarm former combatants and hold to account those engaged in criminal activity."

Violent Attacks on Vehicles

Human Rights Watch interviewed victims from 15 incidents of road banditry between December and February in and around Bouaké. Thirteen men were killed and five women were raped during these attacks. Credible reports

from Ivorian media and Bouaké residents provided details of 12 more attacks on vehicles and businesses in central Côte d'Ivoire during which at least another nine people were killed in similar circumstances. Residents said nighttime inter-city travel in the region has become almost impossible due to the dangers, though they said attacks often occur during the daytime as well.

Criminality, and armed robbery in particular, has been an acute problem in Côte d'Ivoire for years, particularly in the northern and western regions. Both the independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2011 to monitor Côte d'Ivoire's human rights situation, and officials from the UN Operations in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) have expressed concern about rampant criminality in the aftermath of the post-election violence. UNOCI officials told Human Rights Watch in January that while criminality in Abidjan had decreased by late 2011, incidents around Bouaké and Yamoussoukro in particular have increased.

Two forms of transportation appear to be particular targets: inter-city transport vehicles, and motorbikes. On January 23, Ibrahim Karim was shot and killed on the outskirts of Bouaké as he rode his motorbike, which was then stolen by the attackers, witnesses said. On January 14, at around 6 p.m., a 42-year-old woman told Human Rights Watch she was returning home from a Bouaké market on her motorbike when two men, also on a motorbike, began following her. She said: "The man in the back was armed, and they demanded that I stop and get off the bike. They said that if I didn't get down, they were going to kill me. They saw my cell phone, and took it and my money as well. I cried out, but no one intervened." One woman who lives in Bouaké told Human Rights Watch that it is impossible for women to travel in the region on a motorbike anymore.

A 57-year-old trader described a December 15 attack on an inter-city transport vehicle, similar to several others documented by Human Rights Watch, in which one person was killed:

Around 7 p.m. we were traveling from Bouaké to Sakassou, around 60 kilometers away. The attackers blocked the road with their car, and were standing there with big guns. There were six of them. They stopped our truck and yelled at us to get out and lie down on the ground. They took everything – our mobile phones, money, all the merchandise in the truck. They searched through all the baggage and put it in the taxi they were in.

While lying on our stomachs, one man turned his head and looked back at them. One of them immediately came up to the man and shot him with his gun; it wasn't a pistol, it was a bigger gun, the type the military guys carry in town. The guy they shot was around 45 years old. They were masked; we couldn't identify them.

When they finished putting everything in the car, they roughed us up a little. They struck us on the back and the head with their guns, their boots.... When we think about it, we think it's the FRCI [Republican Forces] doing this. I've been in Bouaké for a long time, but I couldn't recognize them. They hid their faces, with balaclavas, scarves, whatever they have. And if you look at them, they'll kill you.

At each moment, there are attacks like this. It has become so serious. We don't have the courage to take a [motorbike] to go 10 kilometers. Even in the middle of the city, they will kill you. In the night, it's especially dangerous. They rob homes, this is perhaps even more numerous than vehicles.... In the bush, they'll attack even in the middle of the day. And they're killing people, with the big guns. There are so many roads on which they attack. There were robberies and rapes before [the post-election crisis], but not like this.

Several victims and witnesses said they believed the criminal groups are organized, and at times target specific vehicles and individuals. A 25-year-old man who was robbed between 8 and 9 p.m. on January 18 on the road between Bouaké and Katiola said that men armed with Kalashnikovs stopped the gbaka (minibus) he was traveling in and appeared to target an older man in particular – removing him from the vehicle and taking him with them. The witness said the older man was a prominent businessman who he was told had been carrying a substantial amount of cash. The victims and several others were robbed of their money and mobile phones, then allowed to continue in the gbaka toward Katiola.

Another Bouaké resident who works at one of the city's transport hubs told Human Rights Watch that he and his colleagues believed strongly that there were informers at the station – as vehicles with passengers who appeared to be wealthy tended to be attacked. The criminal gangs have likewise targeted several of the city's most important companies, including the Société Ivoirienne des Tabacs (SITAB), which in late January was robbed of millions of CFA francs in broad daylight.

Sexual Violence

Human Rights Watch documented five cases of rape during these incidents of road banditry. A 27-year-old woman told Human Rights Watch that she was raped by two men during an attack on a minibus on the main road from Bouaké to Korhogo on January 4. Eight attackers, four of them armed with Kalashnikovs, stopped the minibus at around 7:30 p.m. Two attackers undressed the victim to look for her money, and then took her into the surrounding vegetation and each raped her. She believed she was the only woman raped during the attack.

A 20-year-old woman from Bouaké described a similar attack on December 23 in which her father was killed, and then she and several other women were raped as the bandits took the passengers' money and belongings:

We were in a 22-seat truck leaving Bouaké to go to Botro, around 45 kilometers away. It was around 9 p.m. when we saw a big piece of wood blocking the road. We stopped, and the attackers came out. Four were in civilian clothes, one in military. They had the big guns of the military men we see around town, and they yelled at us, "Get out! Get out!"

As we got out, my father and I started running, and they fired on us. They fired twice, killing my father. I froze when the gunshots were fired, and they grabbed me, brought me back and put me down on the ground. They took money, mobile phones – everything of value in our bags, the truck and on people. They searched everyone.

As one of them searched me, he took my clothes off and raped me. There were five attackers, but it was one who raped me. He raped several other women as he searched them; it was four or five women in all. Only one attacker committed rape, but the others saw it – it was out in the open. He hit me as he raped me, told me I better give him all the money I had. The attackers weren't masked, but it was dark and people were too scared to look. They kill people that look at them. I saw the face of the one who raped me, but I didn't recognize him.

They had a green Peugeot 205. They put all the stuff in there and then left around 10, maybe 11 p.m. We got back in the truck and took my father to the hospital, where he died.... Things like this are happening all the time. They attack houses as well, but it's only at night. The robberies on the road, they happen every day, even during the day. It's becoming very serious, very serious.

The Attackers

Victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch universally believed that the perpetrators were associated with the Republican Forces, although the attackers were generally dressed in civilian attire and hid their faces. The term "Republican Forces" here indicates both the longtime rebel forces in the now-unified Ivorian army as well as other "volunteer" combatants who fought with these soldiers to remove Gbagbo. Residents repeatedly remarked that the town is flooded with people associated with the Republican Forces. Victims also cited as a basis for their belief the type of weapons used, the fact that some attackers wore parts of military uniforms, the quasi-military nature of the attacks, and the apparent lack of fear that the Republican Forces troops who exert effective control within Bouaké would take effective steps to curb the attacks.

One Bouaké resident who was victim of a late-December armed robbery on a mini-bus said: "There are so many military men. During the day, we see the guns in their hands. And at night, we see the same types of guns in the hands of the attackers. We sleep in fear. We live in fear."

Another victim of a January 4 robbery said, "Whether it is men from the real army or the volunteers that fought with them, I don't know. We can't distinguish them; they're always together around the military barracks during the day. What we know is that they're the only ones with lots of guns like the attackers have."

During their military offensive to remove Gbagbo from power, the Republican Forces provided arms to thousands of youth willing to fight. The Gbagbo side armed thousands more militiamen and mercenaries. While it is highly unlikely that pro-Gbagbo militants would now operate around Bouaké – the longtime capital of the New Forces – the large-scale distribution of guns by both sides has resulted in a proliferation of small arms, particularly Kalashnikovs. It is very likely that some of these are now in the hands of people who did not fight with either side, meaning that not all violent crime of this nature around Bouaké is necessarily connected to current or former members of the Republican Forces.

However, strong evidence does point to at least some involvement of former pro-Ouattara forces. In late November, the minister of war victims went to Bouaké to speak about the disarmament process with former Republican Forces combatants who authorities had determined were not to be incorporated into the Ivorian army. Local authorities, including the prefect, were at the meeting. A person who was there told Human Rights Watch that a disgruntled former Republican Forces combatant admitted at the meeting that former Republican Forces combatants were committing the robberies and threatened more. According to the witness, the former combatant said that he and his comrades were still armed and would remain armed, asserting that they were better trained than the police and gendarmes and knew how to fight.

Ineffective Police, Gendarme Response

After beginning their rebellion in late 2002, the then-rebel New Forces quickly controlled the northern half of the country. Through the 2010 presidential election, there was little to no state authority, including the police and judiciary, in northern Côte d'Ivoire, and these state functions were effectively taken over by the New Forces.

Nine months after the end of the post-election conflict, the Republican Forces continue to assume the primary crime-fighting role in many parts of the country – despite the government's repeated promises to return the military to their barracks and allow the police and gendarmes to resume their functions. Tensions over the continued pre-eminence of the military have on occasion turned deadly. Reuters reported that on February 13, three people were killed and 20 more injured during clashes in eastern Côte d'Ivoire set off by local protests over the ongoing use of the Republican Forces, rather than gendarmes, in basic security roles.

In addition, the Republican Forces' predominance has left the police and gendarmes almost wholly ineffective in

protecting the population and investigating crimes, particularly in northern Côte d'Ivoire. The independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council noted this continuing problem in his January 2012 report:

In certain areas, [the redeployment of state authorities] is moving satisfactorily with the cooperation of elements from the Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire [FRCI] who up until now have assumed the bulk of state functions. In other instances, notably in the zones formerly under the control of the Forces Nouvelles, like the North and some parts of the west of the country, tensions remain between the new authorities and the FRCI commanders. The police and gendarmerie lack the personnel and logistical means to properly assume their function of maintaining order. The police do not fully function and certain police stations are still occupied by elements of the FRCI.

All the victims in Bouaké interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that the police were not equipped to deal with crime – and that the Republican Forces continued to exert control over security functions. Victims who reported crimes to the police or gendarmes said that these forces respond by saying they are mostly unarmed and thus unable to respond. A 41-year-old victim of an attack on an inter-city transport vehicle in which one person was killed said: “The police are here, in their stations or to help with traffic. But they told us, ‘Look, we’re not armed. Your attackers are well armed. We can’t help.’”

A 46-year-old man from Bouaké who was in a truck attacked on December 24 said: “When we arrived in Satama-Sokoura, we went to the gendarmes. They told us they couldn’t do anything at the moment because they’re not armed.... They took the information, but said they couldn’t do an investigation, because the robbers are so well armed.”

This situation not only violates the victim’s right to security, but also requirements of international law for transparent investigations in murder cases.

For years, Forces Nouvelles soldiers have been very credibly implicated in widespread extortion and racketeering, including when carrying out police and judicial functions. The UN Group of Experts released a report in April 2011 describing the financial windfall for Forces Nouvelles commanders of millions of US dollars from extortion. A December 2011 report from the International Crisis Group described ongoing extortion and racketeering under certain Republican Forces commanders who were previously with the Forces Nouvelles.

Ouattara has commendably established a military police force to address inadequate discipline within the army, and there have been arrests. However, several victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that at least some members of the regular army are benefitting financially from the lack of security in Bouaké.

A victim of a late December robbery said that he and others in commercial transport made a decision to protect themselves: “We’ve decided to pay the FRCI to provide us protection.... If you are three trucks who are traveling to Daloa, Gagnoa, wherever, you pay around 125,000 CFA [US\$250]. We go in a convoy. It’s the real FRCI who we pay, the soldiers that are in the army.”