

World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Senegal : Diola (Jola)

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Profile

Casamance is a small area between Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. It comprises Ziguinchor and Kolda, two of the country's eight administrative regions, and is almost completely separated from the state by Gambia. The majority ethnic group in Casamance is Diola (Jola), although they make up only around four per cent of Senegal's total population. There are also significant Diola populations in The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. Traditionally farmers, especially rice cultivators, and traders, there has been an increasing tendency for Diola youth to migrate, at least seasonally, to urban centres. Many Diola practice traditional beliefs, while others are Christians and a smaller number are Muslim. Christians and Muslims often mix those rites with traditional beliefs.

Historical context

Many Diola sold into slavery in the 17th century were taken to Britain's American colonies, where they were prized for their rice-growing skills. During and since the colonial period, Diola traditional culture and beliefs were eroded by Islam, Christianity and Western education. Casamance was part of the Gambia River complex and in 1889 was arbitrarily separated from Gambia. During the colonial and early independence period it was a distant and neglected region, and under pressure from Wolof cultural dominance in Senegal.

Several movements for the independence of Casamance from Senegal developed in the late 1960s and 1970s. A few separatist groups emerged in the early 1980s, spurred on by new government policies that transferred some traditional lands of subsistence farmers in Casamance to northern Muslims of Wolof, Serer or Peuhl ethnicity for use in growing cash crops. In 1982, mostly Diola Casamance separatists formed the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC).

From 1981 to 1989, Senegal and The Gambia formed the Senegambia Confederation, which allowed Diolas and others in Casamance to trade out of the Gambian capital, Banjul. However, when the confederation collapsed over Gambian fears of Senegalese dominance, farmers in Casamance were once again required to transport their products for sale to Dakar.

The MFDC developed an armed faction called Attika in 1992, sometimes operating from bases in Guinea-Bissau. In the 1990s it generally harassed Senegalese security forces and launched attacks on airports. Another faction called Front Sud, primarily composed of Diola youth, laid ambushes for troops and civilians. Sporadic violence between separatists and Senegalese security forces, between many cease-fire agreements, resulted in civilian deaths and frequent refugee flows, usually into Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia. Over the years, hundreds have been killed and thousands displaced by the conflict. However, Casamance continued to produce most of Senegal's main staple, rice, in addition to other crops for domestic consumption and export.

A faction of the MFDC under Salif Sadio opposed a peace agreement reached between its political leadership and the government of Senegal in 2004. In March 2006, this faction fought with the military of Guinea-Bissau, and by July 2006 was fighting in Casamance against the main faction of the MFDC, resulting in the deaths of over 100 rebels. Government troops entered the fray against Sadio's faction the following month. At the end of the year, President Wade pledged amnesty for the rebels and new development assistance for the region, but low-level violent skirmishes continued throughout 2007. A rebel ambush in December 2007 killed the President's peace envoy to Casamance. The Diolas of Casamance continued to live with the threat of sporadic violence on land that has increasingly been strewn with landmines.

Current Issues

The separatist struggle in Casamance -- generally of low intensity, but with periodic spikes of violence -- remains West Africa's longest-running civil conflict. Unexploded landmines in the fields and the aftermath of forced displacement due to fighting have damaged families' economic and social prospects and have contributed to refugee populations in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau and to urban migration and food insecurity in Casamance itself. In some areas, untended fields have been salinised by sea water; as a result of these factors, despite being Senegal's richest agricultural region, Casamance has also displayed the nation's highest levels of hunger.

Efforts to help those displaced in the region in past decades to either return to their villages and rebuild or permanently resettle were often underfunded, piecemeal and hamstrung by those with vested interests in seeing the conflict drag on. However, in a context of sporadic ongoing attacks, following his 2012 election President Micky Sall promised renewed efforts for Casamance, and in 2014, Catholic church-brokered peace talks led to announcement of a rebel ceasefire. Initiatives such as Handicap International's 2016 demining programme, aimed to reduce the dangers facing the region's 100,000 mine-threatened people, continued. As of 2016, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded 24,000 internally displaced in Senegal largely due to past fighting in Casamance and with no new displacement since 2012.

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