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country summary

Côte d'Ivoire

The March 2007 signature of a new peace accord, the Ouagadougou Agreement, has brought a palpable decrease in political tensions in Côte d'Ivoire, and prospects for resolution of the five-year political and military stalemate look brighter than a year ago. At the same time, the prevailing culture of impunity threatens long-term stability and the prospects for peaceful elections in the future.

Compared to previous years, 2007 saw fewer politically motivated attacks on journalists, northerners, and others perceived to be associated with the political opposition or the rebellion. Politically motivated hate speech also decreased. In September Radhika Coomaraswamy, United Nations special representative for children and armed conflict, announced that recruitment of child soldiers had not been detected in the past year. But other chronic human rights abuses persist and go unaddressed: most notably, government security forces and New Forces rebels continue to engage in widespread extortion at checkpoints and, on a more limited scale than in previous years, sexual violence against girls and women.

Meanwhile, underlying problems that have fomented and sustained the Ivorian conflict—the question of citizenship eligibility for some three million immigrant residents, harassment by security forces of residents living without national identity papers, and competition for land resources between “indigenous” and immigrant communities in the volatile western region—remain largely unresolved.

Efforts to End the Political-Military Stalemate

Since the crisis erupted, France, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union, and the United Nations have all spearheaded initiatives to end the political-military stalemate in Côte d'Ivoire.

Following a series of unfulfilled peace agreements and the October 2005 expiry of the five-year constitutional mandate of President Laurent Gbagbo, the UN Security Council postponed elections for one year under Resolution 1633 (2005). Then-Prime Minister Charles Konan Banny's efforts to implement a "roadmap" to elections soon deadlocked, however, making elections before October 2006 impossible. In response, the Security Council adopted resolution 1721 (2006) extending the mandates of President Gbagbo and Prime Minister Banny for a further 12 months, and granting sweeping powers to the prime minister. Soon after its adoption, however, President Gbagbo made clear that he would not accept key provisions of resolution 1721.

In March 2007 Gbagbo and rebel leader Guillaume Soro signed a peace accord negotiated with the help of Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré. The Ouagadougou Agreement is the first to have been directly negotiated by the country's main belligerents on their own initiative and resulted in the appointment of Guillaume Soro as prime minister in a unity government. Implementation efforts following signature resulted in important, if thus far largely symbolic milestones in the peace process. A buffer zone between north and south Côte d'Ivoire, formerly patrolled by French and UN troops, was dismantled and President Gbagbo visited the rebel capital Bouaké for the first time since the conflict erupted.

The Ouagadougou Agreement sets forth an ambitious 10-month timetable, which, if followed, would lead to citizen identification, voter registration, disarmament, and presidential elections by early 2008. For many observers the Agreement is the nation's best hope yet of resolving the crisis. However, since signature, target dates for the completion of disarmament and the identification process have been pushed further and further back. In September 2007 the head of the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) projected that presidential elections will not likely take place before October 2008, three years beyond the expiry of President Gbagbo's constitutional mandate.

Extortion and Racketeering

In the government-controlled south, members of the police, gendarmerie, army, customs, and the Security Operations Command Center (CECOS) continue to engage

in systematic and widespread extortion, racketeering, intimidation, and even physical assault at hundreds of roadside checkpoints. Although few residents are fully spared such abuses, the problem is particularly acute for travelers with names from northern ethnic groups and for West African immigrants. In the north, New Forces rebels regularly extort money from civilians in areas under their control, most commonly at the hundreds of roadblocks they maintain.

Sexual Abuse

Although the scale of abuse has diminished since its peak during the armed conflict of 2002-2003, members of government security forces and New Forces rebels continue to sexually abuse women and girls with impunity. The problem is most acute at checkpoints manned by these groups, where women and girls are subject to invasive body searches and rape. Specialist medical and psychological services for victims are all but non-existent, and courts often fail to enforce laws relating to sexual violence.

In July the UN suspended a Moroccan peacekeeping unit following an internal investigation into allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse, including of minors of both sexes, by some of its soldiers.

Impunity for Crimes Committed by Pro-Government Groups

In May members of the Students' Federation of Côte d'Ivoire (FESCI), a violent pro-government student union, ransacked the headquarters of two prominent Ivorian human rights groups they suspected of supporting a teachers' strike. One of these attacks took place in the presence of police officers who failed to intervene. FESCI members regularly rob and extort merchants and taxi drivers in the vicinity of university campuses and dormitories, often in plain view of security forces.

Rule of Law

In the government-controlled south, striking deficiencies in the judicial system, including lack of independence of the judicial branch from the executive and widespread corruption, constitute a significant impediment to victims seeking justice and to rebuilding respect for the rule of law. Those unable to bribe judges and

other officials are routinely denied justice. Some of these bribes take the form of sexual favors. In the north, where most judicial infrastructure was destroyed during the armed conflict of 2002-2003, many individuals accused of common crimes are arbitrarily held in prisons and informal detention centers for extended periods. There are also credible reports that New Forces officials increasingly use torture to extract confessions from those accused of common crimes.

Internal Displacement

Some 750,000 people have been displaced since the crisis began in 2002. Although many were able to return home in 2007, they continue to suffer dire economic hardship. In the west, resettlement of some groups, particularly Burkinabe, is sometimes accomplished through signature of locally administered reconciliation agreements in which “indigenous” inhabitants impose discriminatory conditions on displaced immigrant groups as a condition of return. For example, some formerly displaced immigrants are now prohibited from residing outside of what is deemed to be their “host” village, despite the fact that the areas where they lived and earned their livelihood before the crisis began are tens of kilometers away.

Accountability

Throughout 2007 neither the government nor the rebel leadership took significant steps to discipline, investigate, or hold accountable those responsible for recent crimes, much less atrocities committed during the 2002-2003 civil war. In April 2007 President Gbagbo signed an ordinance granting amnesty to soldiers who deserted to join the rebels in 2002, among others. Though the ordinance has several ambiguous provisions, Gbagbo has publicly stated that the amnesty does not apply to “crimes against human kind,” reinforcing that the ordinance does not extend to serious crimes under international law, for which amnesties are in any event not permissible.

The UN Security Council has still not made public or discussed the findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry report into serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law since September 2002, which was handed to the UN secretary-general in November 2004.

In September 2003 the Ivorian government accepted the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court over serious crimes. However, in 2006 and 2007 it consistently undermined a planned ICC mission to assess the possibility of opening an investigation into such crimes.

Key International Actors

In 2007 efforts of regional actors to resolve the Ivorian crisis, most notably those of President Compaoré of Burkina Faso in his capacity as ECOWAS chairman, took center stage. At the same time, President Gbagbo used the success of the Ouagadougou Agreement to press for a reduction in the prominence of the role played by the UN. For example, in early 2007 Gbagbo successfully pressed for the departure of Pierre Schori as special representative for the UN secretary-general in Côte d'Ivoire. In addition, Gbagbo demanded the removal of the UN high representative for elections, and in July Security Council resolution 1765 (2007) terminated the post.

The signature of the Ouagadougou Agreement was soon followed by the withdrawal of 500 out of some 3,500 French peacekeepers. They back up approximately 8,000 UN peacekeepers.