

Title	Senegal: No end in sight to Casamance conflict
Publisher	Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)
Country	Senegal
Publication Date	17 February 2012
Cite as	Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), <i>Senegal: No end in sight to Casamance conflict</i> , 17 February 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4f438f6d2.html [accessed 30 August 2012]
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Senegal: No end in sight to Casamance conflict

As the body count rises from the conflict between members of the separatist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) and the Senegalese army, Casamancais are starting to lose hope that they will ever see a path to peace.

The latest in a string of killings by rebels took place on 14 and 15 February in Sindian (near the Gambian border 100km north of the Casamance capital Ziguinchor), when four Senegalese soldiers were killed and nine wounded in clashes with the MFDC during a Senegalese army search mission for MFDC fighters and bases. Casualty numbers on the MFDC side are unknown.

Many civilians have fled the area as a result of the violence, though how many is not yet clear, say local NGOs.

This brings the number of soldiers dead in the past two weeks to seven, while in recent months MFDC rebels have also reportedly killed 22 soldiers, wounded dozens of others, and killed 14 civilians.

Meanwhile, on 14 February some 50 armed men, claiming to be part of the MFDC, allegedly looted all the businesses in the village of Baghagha, 25km east of Ziguinchor, and forced local men to help them carry their haul across the border to Guinea-Bissau. Residents demonstrated the next day, calling for a return of the Senegalese army camp which had been installed in the area until a month ago.

MFDC has been battling mainly for the independence of the region, but partly for more proactive efforts to boost development, since 1982.

Some say support among many Casamance residents for the separatist group is dwindling with the rise in violence. “The rebels must stop creating violence in the region; they must understand that it is their parents who have suffered now, for 30 years. They shouldn’t fight for the independence of Casamance and at the same time make people suffer in Casamance,” Moussa Sagna, a trader and resident of Ziguinchor, told IRIN.

While many say the spike in violence is linked to upcoming presidential elections, it is clear that separatists operating in the north, with a base across the border in Gambia, are increasingly “radicalizing” under their leader Salif Sadio, said Demba Keita, Secretary-General of local NGO APRAN-SDP, which has long served as an intermediary between the Senegalese government and the MFDC.

“Most of the extreme violence is with this faction, and they are turning to new tactics which are clearly copied by other groups,” he said, referring to the spike in killings, and the hostage-taking of six Senegalese soldiers in December (who are still being held).

Civilians also targeted

Civilians are also increasingly coming under direct attack, with a dozen civilians reportedly killed in November 2011 when they were collecting firewood in a forest in northern Casamance.

The collection of firewood is a key revenue source for MFDC factions as, allegedly, are other illicit activities such as the growing and selling of drugs, and drug-trafficking, said Keita and an analyst who preferred anonymity. While some groups may also be getting institutional support, this has not as yet been proven, Keita said.

MFDC is split into several rival factions - some with bases in France, one based in Germany, and at least five with representation in Casamance. Three faction leaders have formed an MFDC “contact group” in Ziguinchor.

Famara Pape Goudiaby, a member of this “contact group”, told IRIN weapons continue to flow thick and fast through Casamance, and “even as we speak” more were being brought up to the north.

President Abdoulaye Wade, who is campaigning for a controversial third term in elections on 26 February, announced a new “peace proposal” for Casamance while on the campaign trail in the region on 12-13 February.

However, on 14 February MFDC leaders in the “contact group” rejected the peace plan, demanding “frank and sincere” negotiations in a neutral setting and brokered by a neutral third party as their precondition for working towards peace. They said the proposal, given its timing, was merely an example of cynical politicking.

Landmines

Basic services and infrastructure in many conflict-affected areas continue to deteriorate, and many villages remain abandoned due to landmines.

“Whether it’s in the border areas with Gambia or Guinea-Bissau or in other mined areas, the population are suffering. Even up to now, there are no wells, no roofs, buildings are falling down because they are inaccessible... It creates many innocent victims, and... Senegal needs to do something,” said Keita.

[Landmines](#) have killed up to 800 people since 1988, and government efforts to demine have flagged, leaving much of the work to NGOs such as Handicap International. As of late 2011 just eight villages had been declared mine-free.

, while the continuation of conflict in the south is complicated for the president, even the upturn in violence has not persuaded him or his entourage to devise a more direct, political solution to the problem, said the analyst.

In his plan, Wade offered a “DDP” programme - disarmament, demining and “projects” - which would include investing in five agricultural projects across the region.

Failed peace initiatives

But this is the latest in a string of peace initiatives, all of which have failed, including one in 2004 which also stressed demining, and another Wade brought forward when he came to power in 2000.

A political rather than a military or development solution is what some MFDC factions are after, said Goudiaby. “We didn’t take up arms to push for development projects. The Casamance issue is purely political.” The president’s plan is “putting the cart before the horse,” he said, as he had announced it before any negotiations had taken place.

For some time now, several MFDC factions have been calling for independently-brokered peace negotiations to be held outside Senegal.

But negotiations will not work without the engagement of the governments of Guinea-Bissau and Gambia, stressed Keita. “Everyone knows that many of the fighters come from these countries... [Negotiators need] to get them to support initiatives in the country.”

Thus far, what the president has put on the table is in no way new, said Keita. “Talking about disarmament, about reintegration projects - that is not new,” he said. Many have blamed the president for being politically aloof from the problem.

Most residents of Ziguinchor IRIN spoke to, agree. “Wade has never succeeded despite spending millions of CFA francs on this, so he must realize these are not the right solutions. I think he isn’t prepared to seriously address the Casamance question,” said Albert Ndecky.

“People need to stop attacking us and stealing our things. We are tired of the attacks that we have had to put up with on our roads and in our villages,” said Ziguinchor resident Sagna.