

Côte d'Ivoire: The Worst May Be Yet to Come

Africa Report N°90

24 March 2005

This report is currently only available in French.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The next seven months are a time of great danger for Côte d'Ivoire. Under pressure of an increasingly suspect 15 October 2005 election deadline, its political class may lose control of the cyclical violence it has orchestrated during the on-again, off-again civil war that has divided the country since September 2002. With both UN and French (Licorne) peacekeeping mandates expiring on 4 April, the international community must act decisively to renegotiate key aspects of its involvement to prevent an explosion. The African Union (AU) and its mediator, South African President Thabo Mbeki, should work to organise in close cooperation with the UN the implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) program, voter registration and a new schedule for three polls -- presidential and legislative elections preceded by a referendum on a key constitutional article determining who is eligible for the presidency. It is imperative that a clear agenda be set now to allow the international community to achieve its redefined objectives in Côte d'Ivoire within the next eighteen months.

While this may push back the electoral timetable -- presidential elections are currently set for October, legislative elections for December -- by a few months, it is necessary because the present situation is so polarised that no Ivorian electoral commission can be expected to operate independently and effectively. Taking charge of elections, as Prime Minister Seydou Diarra requested the UN do after his 3 March meeting with President Mbeki, is more than an organisational task; it is a political imperative. Those actors whose interest is not to have free and fair elections can be expected to actively block the process. The Security Council should strengthen President Mbeki by publishing immediately the report of its commission of inquiry (finished since October 2004) and making clear it is prepared to apply targeted sanctions to all who attempt to block the process, as indicated in Resolution 1572 (15 November 2004).

The international community faces a clear dilemma: it can either apply strong pressure to compel the belligerent parties to do what they will not do willingly, or disengage and let matters run their course. Since it does not appear either side is strong enough to win militarily, the most probable result in the second scenario would be a long, ugly war of attrition, accompanied by large-scale massacres. The pressures building as a result of the actions of the armed militias, the drumbeat of hate media, and the political extremism that characterise the Ivorian scene are such that a middle course between coercion and inaction is not viable.

The protagonists of the Ivorian crisis are adept at pleasing diplomats by giving the impression they are cooperating under the peace process framework. However, this has nearly always meant one step forward, two steps back. The explosion of violence that follows a period of relative calm has become more serious each time. Not many more cycles will be needed before the dynamic morphs into qualitatively worse violence, probably including large-scale ethnic cleansing. That would be a tragedy for more than Côte d'Ivoire: Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso would likely be drawn into a regional conflict. The greatest damage could be done to Liberia's fragile peace process, which is meant to culminate in presidential and legislative elections just four days before Côte d'Ivoire's scheduled presidential vote.

The composition of the international peacekeeping forces should also change, reflecting the events of November 2004, during which the Ivorian armed forces killed French troops and the French responded by destroying the Ivorian air force and killing between twenty and 57 civilians.[1] These events undermined the impartial stance of the French contingent. Without judging whether the Ivorian attack was intentional or the French response justified, the Licorne peacekeepers have become too vulnerable and controversial to be able to perform their work with the effectiveness required in the an explosive an environment as that prevailing in Côte d'Ivoire.

In order to give a peacekeeping mission that is accepted by all parties a chance to succeed, the French government should begin negotiations with the UN about a gradual drawdown of its contingent, and a parallel substantial strengthening of the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI). The new UN troop deployment must include a robust

rapid reaction unit, well-equipped, with helicopters in particular, as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan requested on 9 December 2004. South Africa should play a crucial role in strengthening UNOCI, adding to its political commitment in the name of the African Union (AU), a strong military engagement. In the absence of this suggested recomposition of peacekeeping troops, it is imperative that the French government maintain its military presence in support of UNOCI.

In November 2004, a lid was placed on the bubbling violence because the UN, the AU, ECOWAS, France and the U.S. spoke with one voice. There is a grave risk that unless the international community acts in unison again to provide an alternative to the political uncertainty, Côte d'Ivoire's conflict is bound to get much worse in 2005.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the African Union (AU):

1. Organise, with the UN, and carry out over eighteen months:

(a) a referendum on changes to Article 35 of the constitution, determining the criteria for eligibility to run for the presidency;

(b) presidential elections;

(c) legislative elections; and

(d) a comprehensive DDR process, which includes the armed militias in the south.

2. Request the UN Security Council strengthen President Mbeki's mediation and request President Mbeki allow the application of targeted sanctions against those who constitute a threat to the peace and national reconciliation process in Côte d'Ivoire, as specified in Security Council Resolution 1572.

To the United Nations Security Council:

3. Apply targeted sanctions, as specified in Resolution 1572.

4. Pass a Resolution that:

(a) renews the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) with (i) more troops and a rapid reaction unit that can effectively replace departing Licorne troops; (ii) an expanded and strengthened mandate that focuses on organising and holding elections, and organising and undertaking DDR in collaboration with the AU; and (iii) a finite, eighteen-month timeframe;

(b) orders immediate publication of the report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Allegations of Serious Violations of Human Rights and of International Humanitarian Law in Côte d'Ivoire; and

(c) instructs the Secretary General to (i) plan in cooperation with the French Ministry of Defence the gradual withdrawal of French Licorne troops and their simultaneous and imperative replacement by qualified UNOCI peacekeepers, including troops from South Africa and, possibly, troops from EU member states with rapid reaction units, engaged either on the basis of national decisions or as a result of common action in the context of the European Security and Defence Policy; (ii) transfer some equipment from UN Missions in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) and Liberia (UNMIL) to UNOCI; and (iii) reinforce the Human Rights Division of UNOCI including by adding offices in Odienne, Korhogo, Bouna, and San Pedro.

To France:

5. Remain engaged with and continue to contribute to the Ivorian peace process and the UN peacekeeping mission in the accomplishment of its new tasks.

6. Do not begin withdrawing Licorne forces before they can be replaced by a credible, strengthened UN force with a rapid reaction unit.

To South Africa:

7. Deepen its political commitment to the Ivorian peace process with a strong military contribution to UNOCI.

To the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI):

8. Cease support for armed "patriotic" militias and use the Forces Armées Nationales de la Côte d'Ivoire (FANCI) to stop all breaches of the ceasefire between those militias and the Forces Nouvelles.

9. Support a referendum organised by the UN and the AU on changes to Article 35 of the constitution.

10. Abide by results of the referendum and participate in presidential and legislative elections organised by the UN and AU.

11. Disarm all armed "patriotic" militias, including the GPP, the FLGO, and the MILOCI.

To the Forces Nouvelles:

12. Return to the Government of National Reconciliation.

13. Support a referendum organised by the UN and the AU on changes to Article 35 of the constitution and abide by results of the referendum.

14. Guarantee freedom of movement and access to all AU and UN staff working on elections and DDR.

To all other political parties in Côte d'Ivoire:

15. Support a referendum on changes to Article 35 of the constitution, organised by the UN and the AU, and campaign for a "yes" vote with a view to encouraging reunification of Ivorian society.

16. Participate to the different votes organised by the AU and the UN.

Dakar/Brussels, 24 March 2005

Copyright 2005 International Crisis Group