

Ivory Coast's Ethnic Lines Harden, Hobbling Economy

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FENGOLO, [Ivory Coast](#), Oct. 28 - There was a time when each of Diéka Issa Outtara's 20 hectares of lush, fertile land would produce nearly eight tons of cocoa, which he would load in big burlap sacks onto trucks bound for San Pedro, a southern port city. Each harvest season would add to his prosperity, making him one of the village's most eminent citizens.

But this year he has struggled to eke a ton and a half out of each hectare, about 2.5 acres. He has been getting about 25 cents a pound, a third less than the official price. He also must pay the truck driver \$2,000 to take the cocoa south, half of it bribes for the soldiers and militias along the road.

"This is the price we pay for the war," Mr. Outtara said, sitting on a bench outside his house in this small western village as sweaty young men hoisted this year's modest harvest onto a truck. "We cannot buy fertilizer. We cannot move freely. There is no peace, we are in war. But it is a cold war."

Once West Africa's most prosperous nation, Ivory Coast has been in the grip of an on-and-off civil war since 2002, when rebels seized the northern half of the country. Their grievances were numerous. But ethnic tension over fertile cocoa and coffee land is at the heart of the conflict, between those who see themselves as native Ivorians, mainly southern Christians and animists who control the government, and those, mostly Muslim, whose forebears came from neighboring countries or who are native northerners.

The initial bout of fighting only lasted a few months, ending with a peace treaty and the arrival of French troops to keep the rebel-held north and the government-held south apart until a political solution could be found. But that solution, found many times on paper, has yet to materialize on the ground.

Under the latest deal, elections to replace President Laurent Gbagbo, a southerner whom many blame for inciting ethnic violence, were to take place on Sunday. Squabbles between the sides over disarmament and preparing for the voting forced the postponement of the elections. The African Union and the United Nations Security Council have endorsed a new plan to allow Mr. Gbagbo to remain in power for another year, on the condition that he appoint a new prime minister agreed upon by all the parties and organize elections. The rebels, known as the New Forces, have rejected the plan and withdrawn from the power-sharing government.

So Ivory Coast is suspended between war and peace, its economy in shambles, its infrastructure crumbling and its future uncertain. Ethnic divisions have hardened into deep hatreds, setting off

attacks and massacres. At least 100 people were killed in June in villages surrounding Duékoué, a few miles south of here.

"This is country where you have a lot of Machiavellis and a lot of machetes," said Pierre Schori, chief of the United Nations mission here. "There is the political savvy of Machiavelli but they don't hesitate to use the brutality of the machete. So people are afraid."

The conflict has cultivated its own political and economic logic, from the leaders who incite ethnic strife for political gain to the soldiers who extort bribes on the roads; from the rebels who smuggle cocoa, timber and arms across the Liberian and Guinean borders to the unpaid pro-government militiamen who moonlight as highwaymen. Previously penniless youth leaders suddenly have expensive four-wheel-drive trucks and own gas stations, a popular investment among government supporters.

"All sides seem to have found a niche in this no-war-no-peace situation," said Mike McGovern of the International Crisis Group, an advocacy group focusing on conflict resolution. "In that context, the incentive for peace is diminished."

This combination of ethnic strife, economic decline and corruption has proved a combustible mix, particularly in the volatile west, Ivory Coast's agricultural heartland and the source of its wealth. In villages like Fengolo, where the Dioula, from the north, and the Guéré, from the west, had lived in relative harmony and prospered for generations, these tensions have exploded into violence many times over the past two years.

Sandwiched between the lawless rebel-held town of Man and the pro-government militia stronghold of Guiglo in the no-man's land between the rebel-held north and government-controlled south, Fengolo's residents struggle to live beside one another in the poisonous atmosphere of suspicion and ethnic strife that has flourished since the war began. They frequently turn on one another in tit-for-tat violence. The Dioula, who emigrated here from the north to work the land, outnumber the Guéré and are typically wealthier, which is a source of tension.

Young men from each side are periodically found dead. In February, the bodies of several of the Dioula men were found, and Guéré men were suspected of killing them.

"When they discovered their brothers have been found dead in a well, killed by the Guérés, the population revolted," Mr. Outtara said. In their fury, they burned the Guéré side of the village, destroying 213 houses and 324 mud huts.

Victor Kpondé, chief of Fengolo's Guéré, said, "All we had since our birth we lost it." He added, "Some of the women were bathing, and left without clothes, running away naked."

The Guéré villagers did not return until this month, coaxed back by a small United Nations program that is rebuilding their houses and trying to reconcile the two communities. A peace committee has been formed, and the two sides are talking again.

But the whispers persist, with heated language on both sides. The Dioula insist that the mostly animist Guéré are savage cannibals who eat Muslim children. The Guéré insist that the Dioula are interlopers who have no place in the Guéré heartland. "They are foreigners and cannot own land here," Chief Kpondé said of his neighbors, many of whom have lived here for generations. "This place belongs to the Guéré."

In this hothouse environment, tensions are mounting. Pro-government militias are recruiting mercenaries and child soldiers from neighboring [Liberia](#), according to a recent Human Rights Watch report, and these guns for hire are being told to gird up for a big offensive.

Because militants on each side demand bribes on the roads in the areas they control, people are not free to move about as they wish, which deepens divisions.

"All the country is turning in on itself, because of this lack of mobility," said Maurizio Crivellaro of the International Rescue Committee, an aid organization working in this region. "This can only increase the tension and sense of separation among the ethnic groups."

In Fengolo, villagers say they are determined to reconcile, because they have little choice short of wiping one another out.

"We are condemned to live together because we cannot leave this land," Mr. Outtara said. "We are obliged to work hand in hand. We are obliged to be brothers."