

Student protests erupt in Côte d'Ivoire

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Côte d'Ivoire (formerly the Ivory Coast) in West Africa has been the scene of a month-long conflict that has completely paralysed all education activity in the country. The 60,000 students organised in the Federation of Ivorian Students—also comprising high school pupils—are campaigning for a 12-point list of demands. The main call is for the “generalisation” of student scholarships, meaning that entry to higher education should be broad-based.

The federation called off its boycott of lectures and classes on Wednesday, May 19, with leaders saying that they had accepted a compromise and had provisionally ended the protest. But on May 21 a court in Abidjan, capital of Côte d'Ivoire, sentenced six student leaders to five years hard labour each, without appeal, as well as fines totalling 15 million francs. They were charged with “disturbing the public peace”. In response, the federation announced a renewal of nationwide protests, including meetings, sit-ins and demonstrations. “The government has demonstrated, by imposing the heavy sentences on our colleagues, that it is not prepared to resolve the educational crisis. We have therefore decided to enter into top gear,” said Bla Gouede, secretary general of the federation.

Other issues taken up by the students include the demand for the provision of free medical care; the lifting of examination requirements for entry to higher educational institutions; building more university halls of residences; removing conditions attached to student loans; suspension of insurance programs at high school, and lifting the payment of 50 percent school fees for those studying in private schools. The students are also demanding the return of Youpougon student residences that were taken over for use by the police two years ago. The government gives “more priority to security than to education”, they point out.

The protests over the last month began with boycotts and sit-ins in private and public schools and

universities across the country and escalated into collisions between students and the police. Côte d'Ivoire President Henri Konan Bedi banned his ministers, including Prime Minister Daniel Kablan Duncan, from travelling to the interior of the country because of concern for their safety.

The situation further deteriorated when the government placed a ban on all student meetings and sit-ins, in an attempt to stop the clashes. This was followed by the indefinite closure of all schools and universities. In a further response to the unrest President Bedi called a special meeting of the ruling Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire. He denounced the students for being used by political parties that were “movements of destruction and insurrection in character”. He insisted: “We should not minimise this situation, we have to react now.”

The police killed at least one student and injured many others. In the first week of protest the students, acting on a rumour that the police had lynched a fellow student, burned down the council offices and police station at the university community of Abobo, in Abidjan. In addition, the prime minister and several government officials have had their houses in their hometowns burnt down.

The Federation of Ivorian Students has a long history of organising protests since its formation in 1960. It has been banned on many occasions, operating underground for most of the last decade, until the ban was last lifted in 1997.

The background to the government's attack on education is a three-year programme of austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Côte d'Ivoire is burdened with a \$19 billion external debt; the servicing of which takes \$650 million a year—approximately 40 percent of the country's annual export income. A recent visit by the IMF earlier this month directed the Ivorian government to implement,

without delay, all economic and financial measures agreed under the first phase of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) over the last three years. Whilst “some progress has been made”, the IMF complained at the government's “inability to monitor public expenditure”. It called for stricter implementation of directives before the second phase of the SAP could be negotiated in July and August.

Côte d'Ivoire has a population of around 16.8 million and is among the 42 least developed countries in the world. After independence in 1960, the country became one of the fastest growing economies in sub-Saharan Africa, with a development program based on cash crops for export—cocoa, coffee and palm oil. With gross domestic product increases of between 8 and 12 percent a year, and a huge public sector investment program in the 1970s, it was described as an African "economic miracle".

After the collapse of world commodity prices in the 1980s and the high public spending program of President Felix Houphouët-Boigny (president from independence until 1993), the economy was left with huge debts and a much reduced income with which to repay them.

A World Bank report shows that the level of the population afflicted by poverty has risen from 11 percent in 1985 to a current level of 30 percent. The report attributes the high level of poverty to the unequal distribution of wealth, which is confirmed in a further report produced by the French Development Corporation. This report reveals that 95 percent of the wealth of the country is concentrated in the hands of just 5 percent of the population. This 5 percent is made up of 12 families, all of whom are members of the ruling Côte d'Ivoire Democratic Party.



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