

UN and US back French intervention in Ivory Coast

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France has received international backing for its intervention in its former colony, Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) where a civil war has been raging for five months. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that “welcomes the deployment of Ecomog (Economic Community of West African States) forces and French troops” and endorses the peace agreement signed by both the government and rebels in the current civil war.

Ecomog countries have been very reluctant to be involved in the conflict and have so far sent only 200 troops, though this is set to increase to 1,500. Imposition of a power-sharing government that is supposed to end the conflict is very much a French effort, whose troops in the country now number more than 3,000. The deal has met with little success as President Laurent Gbagbo, on his return from signing up to it in Paris, claimed it was only a series of “proposals”. His supporters have attacked French citizens and their property.

UN backing is vital to the French intervention, giving the necessary gloss that they are acting on behalf of the “international community”. Supporters of both sides in the conflict, especially the pro-government demonstrators, have charged France with neo-colonialism, and within France itself fears have been raised of being drawn into a Vietnam-type situation. President Jacques Chirac and Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin are both keen to reassert French influence in Africa. Not only was the Ivory Coast a key focus for French investment and a centre of economic activity in West Africa, but new discoveries of oil and increasing oil production in West Africa lend the region strategic importance.

The Security Council resolution could not have been passed without the backing of the United States. The

decision to support France marks a shift from the position at the beginning of January when US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that UN backing for Ecomog or French troops in Ivory Coast was “inappropriate”. Taken together with British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s comments at the recent Franco-British summit (“I express my full and complete solidarity with France for its treatment of the situation in Ivory Coast”), the change in US attitude may well be part of horse trading in winning French backing for war against Iraq.

As the *Washington Post* put it, explaining the resistance in Ivory Coast to the Paris peace deal: “Chirac might well explain to President Bush that some foreign interventions are worth the risk, nevertheless. To which the American leader might respond: *Cher ami*, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you about Iraq.”

The US had also previously “expressed concern” that the two rebel groups operating in the west of Ivory Coast were receiving support from Liberia, a charge also made by the Ivorian government. Liberia is regarded as a “rogue state”, being under UN sanctions for its role in trading so-called “conflict diamonds” and supporting the rebels in neighbouring Sierra Leone. Yet France invited Liberian president Charles Taylor to its Paris peace talks, and brought the rebel factions from the west into the peace agreement along with the main rebel group, the Patriotic Movement of the Ivory Coast (MPCI), that controls the north of the country.

Although the previous Jospin government in France ignored dubious elections and recognised the Gbagbo government as legitimate two years earlier—there are close connections between the Socialist Party in France and Gbagbo—Chirac calculated that a government including the rebels as well as opposition leader

Alassane Ouattara, whose support is in the Muslim north, was the best way of achieving a measure of stability. Gbagbo and his supporters have been stoking up a chauvinistic campaign based on the Christian south, and their own Bete ethnic group, against northern Muslims and immigrants. To have given full backing to the government could well have placed France in the same situation as in Rwanda in 1994—supporting a regime that was committing mass ethnic slaughter.

The United Nations human rights agency has just released a report revealing that death squads operating in the Ivory Coast are made up of “elements close to the government, the presidential guard and a tribal militia from the Bete ethnic group of President Gbagbo.” Attacks on Muslims and foreigners have been organised by government supporters and bodies of executed people have been found in a forest near to the commercial capital Abidjan.

Last week the body of a well-known comedian and political opponent of the government, Kamara Yerefe, was found riddled with bullets in Abidjan. His family say that he was taken away for questioning by government gendarmes. For the first time in the last few weeks a demonstration of oppositionists took to the streets of the city and attacked police.

There have been signs that the Gbagbo regime, which had recognised the weakness of France’s position prior to its receiving UN and US backing, is now retreating from outright opposition to the Paris agreement. For two weeks there have been daily protests in Abidjan by government supporters against the agreement, and Gbagbo’s wife, a leader of Gbagbo’s parliamentary grouping, said on radio that the agreement has been rejected by “all Ivorians” and that “France should mind its own business.”

But when Gbagbo eventually made his expected television speech to the country, he stated that the agreement was “a basis to work on.” His shift in attitude doubtless reflected the new US willingness to support France. However he continued to maintain that MPCJ rebels could not be given the key defence and interior ministerial posts in a new unity government, though rebel leaders insist this was a key part of the Paris agreement. If relations between France and the US continue to deteriorate over the question of Iraq, it is probable that Gbagbo’s attitude may change again.

The situation in Ivory Coast remains highly volatile. It seems unlikely that France can impose stability on the country in the immediate future because the country is becoming the focus for much wider international differences between France and the US.

A meeting of Ecowas leaders in the political capital of Ivory Coast, Yamoussoukro, to begin putting together a coalition government, was boycotted by the rebel groups. Rebel leaders said there was no need to reopen negotiations and accused Gbagbo of refusing to accept the Paris agreement in full. They are threatening to march on Abidjan within a week, warning, “If France is not capable of making President Gbagbo apply the accord, then it must face the consequences.”

Thousands of westerners and French citizens have now fled from Ivory Coast, although about 15,000 French still remain. Several hundred people have been killed in the civil war and more than a million displaced. Whilst the cease-fire between the government and the northern rebels appears to be holding, there are reports of fresh fighting in the west of the country, close to the Liberian border.



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