

America blocks UN operation in Ivory Coast conflict

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As fighting flared up in the western region of Ivory Coast America has blocked the setting up of a United Nations humanitarian and military mission to the country.

The move is directed against France, which had drafted a resolution to present to a UN Security Council debate. A small UN operation with over 200 civilian and military staff has been backed by UN Secretary General Kofi Anan. Anan has also requested that the 1,200 strong West African peacekeeping force in the country be tripled in size, appealing for \$48 million to sustain the operation.

US deputy ambassador to the UN, Richard Williamson, refused support ostensibly on economic grounds. The US is contributing \$4 million to the French West African peacekeeping mission—following a pledge it made in February when it was attempting to secure the support of Paris for the war in Iraq. Williamson refused to give more, saying, “I think the United States is putting up more than anybody, except probably France.”

France now has 3,900 troops in the Ivory Coast; its largest intervention in Africa for decades, backed by the UN sanctioned force from neighbouring West African countries. French troops were supposed to be eventually replaced by the West African forces but lack of financial support from the US and other western governments, as well as reluctance of many African countries to get involved, now make that unlikely.

Last weekend a French-brokered ceasefire was agreed between the former Ivory Coast government forces of President Laurent Gbagbo, the main rebel group that controls the north of the country—the Patriotic Movement of the Ivory Coast (MPCI), and two smaller rebel groups in the west—the Popular Movement of Ivory Coast’s Far West (MPIGO) and the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP).

Although there has been little conflict between the MPCI and former government forces since the French imposed a settlement earlier this year, interposing their

troops between the two sides, sporadic fighting has continued in the west. Before the latest ceasefire there were reports of a battle raging south of rebel-held Danane. According to an MPIGO spokesman, Gbagbo’s forces were attempting to retake positions before the ceasefire was imposed.

The French are now shoring up a “government of national unity” in the commercial capital of Abidjan that includes ministers from the rebel groups as well as from the former Gbagbo regime. It is hardly a stable government, with disputes having continued since it was first proposed in the Paris peace talks held in January over the control of the two key ministries of defence and security. French plans to disarm both sides in the conflict and establish a new integrated army have failed to materialise.

As with many other African countries, descent into civil war in the Ivory Coast began as the economy—developed under colonialism to produce commodities for export to the west, in this case cocoa—went into steep decline. With the price of cocoa falling and increasing debts to the IMF, Ivory Coast’s elite orchestrated a campaign of ethnic chauvinism against the Muslim population, many of them immigrants from neighboring countries who worked the cocoa plantations. A group of dissident soldiers attempted a coup last September. Although they were unsuccessful in removing the Gbagbo government, they fled to the mainly Muslim north and received popular support.

France was unable to continue its backing of the Gbagbo government as a bloody descent into ethnic massacres and possibly military defeat at the hands of the well-armed rebels would have ensued. However, both French President Jacques Chirac and Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin expressed their interest in increasing France’s role in Africa and dispatched the large force to keep the two sides apart last year.

The French intervention has been hampered by the

appearance of the two smaller groups in the west. These outfits are apparently less disciplined than the MPCl and have enlisted the support of Liberian fighters previously associated with the brutal Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel force in Sierra Leone. It is likely that they are backed by Liberian President Charles Taylor.

On the Ivorian government side, Gbagbo also enlisted the aid of Liberian mercenaries to fight in the west. It seems that he is financing a faction called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a group that is fighting in Liberia against the Taylor regime. Latest reports state that LURD, the main group of which is backed by Guinea, has now taken 60 percent of Liberia including the diamond producing areas and is close to Monrovia, the capital.

Just before the present peace deal the leader of MPIGO, Felix Doh, was shot dead. He had apparently agreed to the peace agreement but Liberians in his outfit, led by former RUF leader and confidant of Charles Taylor, Sam Bockarie aka Mosquito, wanted to continue fighting. MPIGO's modus operandi, as with the RUF in Sierra Leone, consists of terrorising and looting the local population. Another version of the incident is that Doh was killed by the MPCl who now want to drive the Liberians out of the area and saw Doh as an obstacle.

France's main neo-colonial rivals in West Africa, the US and Britain, are no doubt pleased to see France tied down by a civil war with the unstable "wild west" of the Ivory Coast involved in fighting that has spilled over from Liberia and Sierra Leone.

In contrast to France, Britain has been able to set up a virtual colonial administration in Sierra Leone with UN assistance. The Sierra Leone government's finance officer and chief of police are British, Britain trains the army and a British selected Truth and Reconciliation Commission is putting on trial leaders from the civil war period. Britain has carried this out with only a few hundred of its own troops (it currently has 300 Gurkha troops and a small training force), and with over 15,000 UN peacekeepers, the largest UN force in the world.

As for Liberia, appeals from the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) for the US to intervene in the one country in Africa that was once entirely dependent on it appear to have fallen on deaf ears. However the ICG point out that the LURD have bases in both Guinea and Sierra Leone, arms are often shipped through Sierra Leone and they forcibly recruit from refugee camps in Guinea. Given Britain's control over Sierra Leone and the fact that the US is training troops

from the Guinean army, it can be presumed that the US and Britain are covertly backing LURD to overthrow the "rogue regime" of Charles Taylor. An opposition politician from Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, was in Washington last week pleading with the US to send a peacekeeping force into Liberia. In an interview with allafrica.com she complained that "in the consultations I've been having on Capitol Hill, everyone's telling me 'don't think we're going to put up a stabilisation force and pay for it.'"

ICG are concerned that the military conflict and humanitarian disaster in Liberia will now spread throughout West Africa. They point out that rather than provide stability in the region; LURD is riven with "internal battles" and that in terms of human rights "the LURD is no different from those it seeks to replace in Monrovia".

Under severe pressure from both the Guinean and Ivory Coast factions of LURD, Charles Taylor has agreed with the Ivory Coast government that he will stop Liberians crossing the border to fight in the Ivory Coast war. Joint Liberian patrols with the French, the MPCl and former government army, are said to be going to impose peace in the border region. Whilst French-backed operations will no doubt be stepped up in the west, it is difficult to see that the Liberian regime has the ability or interest in policing the area.

The UN has pleaded for financial support for relief operations in Ivory Coast that have so far been severely underfunded. Some 2.8 million people are said to be in need of humanitarian assistance because of the civil war, 75,000 have been internally displaced and 400,000 people have been forced to flee to neighboring countries.



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