

# Police murder French journalist in Ivory Coast

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The West African country Ivory Coast was taken nearer to the resumption of civil war when on October 21 Radio France International's (RFI's) veteran African correspondent, Jean Helene, was shot dead. A police sergeant shot Helene while he was waiting outside police headquarters to interview opposition politicians being released after four days of incarceration. The policeman was disarmed by his fellow officers, arrested and charged with murder.

France has 3,800 military personnel in the Ivory Coast, and alongside them are approximately 1,200 West African Ecomog troops enforcing a United Nations-backed peace agreement brokered in France in January. The agreement formed the basis for a coalition government established in office in April that came apart in September when ministers representing the rebel groups walked out.

Ivory Coast is divided into a mainly Muslim northern region controlled by the rebels and a predominantly Christian south controlled by forces loyal to President Laurent Gbagbo, with French and Ecomog troops patrolling the border between them. Everything points to the journalist's murder being carried out on behalf of Gbagbo supporters determined to obstruct the French plan.

According to the Media Foundation of West Africa, Jean Helene was killed by police sergeant Dago Cyrille Theodore of the VIP security unit (BSP). Helene was waiting in his vehicle when the police officer confronted him and asked him for his identity and purpose. The officer went into the headquarters and spoke with the director of the General Intelligence Unit, Commissioner Djable, who confirmed Helene's identity. Then, according to eyewitnesses, the police officer returned and shot the correspondent with his AK-47 rifle. In another report, Helene was shot twice in

the head after being hit in the stomach with a rifle butt.

Helene was to interview 11 active members of the opposition party Rally of the Republicans (RDR), led by northern politician Alassane Ouattara. The RDR members had been detained for an alleged conspiracy to assassinate members of Gbagbo's rump government.

The director of information of RFI, Jerome Bouvier, quoted in *Le Monde*, called for an independent inquiry: "We will go to Abidjan to request from the authorities all the explanations necessary on the death of our fellow member and friend. It is a man who acted under authority that perpetrated this assassination."

The press watchdog Reporters Sans Frontieres condemned the killing, criticised the recent erosion of press freedom in the country and demanded a full inquiry. RSF recently issued its report naming Ivory Coast as one of the three fastest-declining countries in regard to press freedom, now lying 137 out of 166 countries.

Gbagbo immediately sacked General Adolphe Baby, director general of the National Police. The security minister in the rump government, Martin Bleou, was quick to deny that the officer responsible for the killing was acting under orders. Gbagbo expressed regret at the killing but declared, "This is war and in wartime people get passionate." He would not give a commitment for the safety of international journalists.

The killing of Helene ties in with the campaign of Gbagbo supporters to suppress hostile media reporting. Earlier this month, the owner of *Le National*, the main pro-government newspaper, called for the boycott of several newspapers aligned with opposition political parties. The campaign was supported by militia-style youth groups known as the "Young Patriots," said to have about 20,000 members throughout the south. These groups conduct military-style training and claim

to have access to arms. They carry out attacks on immigrants originating from Burkina Faso and Mali, and promote Ivorian nationalism. Charles Ble Goude, head of one of the three factions in the Young Patriots, leads the youth movement of Gbagbo's party, the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), and is often seen in public with police bodyguards.

Earlier this month, the youth groups attacked French-owned water, electricity and mobile phone companies in the capital, Abidjan, and organised demonstrations against the peace agreement, demanding that the rebels be disarmed. Under pressure from France, the government has now banned demonstrations for three months and ordered the disbanding of one of the three youth groups said to have caused damage to French-owned property.

French president Jacques Chirac, who embarked on a four-day visit to Niger and Mali on October 22, the day after the assassination, deplored the killing and demanded the Ivorian authorities "shed all possible light on this murder." Three days later, Chirac's attitude appeared to have hardened. He said, "I call very firmly...on the Ivorian authorities to come to their senses and first put an end to these hotbeds of hatred and aggression." He also condemned the "irrational and irresponsible behaviour of certain Ivorian leaders."

France is clearly running out of patience with the clique around Gbagbo that has continued to obstruct the setting up of the coalition government. Helene's murder occurred just as they appear to be on the point of persuading the rebels to return to the coalition government. France's problem is that the southern elite supports Gbagbo's anti-northern chauvinism and resents any encroachment on their control of the cocoa-producing southern region.

When the three rebel groups, now known as the New Force, withdrew their nine ministers from the coalition government, they insisted it was because Gbagbo had not delegated to them powers agreed at the January peace agreement. Gbagbo's response to the withdrawal was broadcast on television. He said that the nine rebel ministers would not be missed and compared them to houseboys living in their master's house and abusing his property.

Ghanaian president John Koufor, currently chairman of Ecowas, had instigated diplomatic efforts to get the peace process back on the road just before the arrests of

the RDR members. Gbagbo had flown to Ghana to have talks with Koufor and then onto Abuja to meet Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo. Rebel spokesman Amadou Kone told the IRIN news agency that they received several diplomatic overtures urging them to heal the rift with Gbagbo and were responding positively. Kone said, "We have received several invitations, which we are going to accept because we are open to discussion about resuming our place in the government of reconciliation."

French diplomats said that the rebels were simply making a political point, that they wanted the West to press Gbagbo to give the coalition government more authority. They also wanted to put more pressure on donors to provide more generous support for rebel fighters when they put down their guns. One senior French military observer, referring to the rebels, said, "I think they are on the hook. I cannot see them leaving [the coalition]. I would be surprised if they do."

The Bush administration has also strongly criticised the Ivorian government for shutting down a US-owned cellular telephone company, Western Wireless International, earlier this month. Apparently, the company offices were seized by an Alexander Galley, who claims to own the company, with the support of 25 policemen. US authorities describe Galley as a criminal with connections to former Liberian president Charles Taylor. The Ivory Coast government says it has "never expropriated a foreign company" and that it "deplores the incident," but the president of Western Wireless holds Gbagbo's regime responsible.



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