

Ivory Coast: Two years of French and United Nations occupation

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Given the growing number of calls for a military intervention in Sudan—whether by Western troops, a United Nations force or the African Union (AU)—it is important to examine the recent history of such an operation in West Africa.

Such interventions—ostensibly to stop hundreds of thousands of people suffering a desperate humanitarian situation—rather than benefiting the economic and security situation of the masses, are driven by Western interests that only end up supporting the local corrupt politicians or warlords deemed most useful to this end.

In September 2002, Ivory Coast plunged into civil war when army rebels seized the northern part of the country after a failed coup attempt. France dispatched troops to its former colony, with up to 4,000 French troops policing a dividing line between the north and south of the country.

France initiated a peace deal between the rebels and the government of President Laurent Gbagbo at the beginning of 2003, and a new power-sharing government of National Reconciliation was to be put in place. Gbagbo and his cronies, however, continued to maintain power in the economically important south of the country through the National Assembly and the extensive security apparatus.

More than two years later, French forces are still there, now supplemented by 6,000 UN troops. The last attempt at getting both the rebels and representatives of the old Gbagbo regime together fell apart in March of this year, and the country remains divided. France is now working through the UN and the AU to bring the two sides together. Last week, after pressure from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and African leaders including Presidents Mbeki and Obasanjo from South Africa and Nigeria respectively, another attempt at power sharing began.

Whilst the intervention of France, the UN and the AU has so far meant that the military conflict in Ivory Coast has been kept to a relatively lower level than in the civil war period, a closer examination shows that all the components for war are still in place and no secure or economically viable future for the population has resulted.

The clique around Gbagbo continue to pursue ethnic chauvinism against the mainly Muslim immigrant labourers and their families who came into Ivory Coast from Burkina Faso and other countries in the 1960s and 1970s, when the economy—based mainly on cocoa of which Ivory Coast is the world's main producer—was one of the strongest in Africa.

Gbagbo is following the tradition of previous presidents, Henri Konan Bédié (1993-1999) and Robert Gueï (from the Christmas Eve coup in 1999 to 2000), in making an issue of Ivorian nationality. This excluded the popular northern-based politician Alassane Outarra from standing for president because allegedly both his parents were not born in Ivory Coast.

But “Ivoirité” nationalism was developed further by Gbagbo and his supporters in the security forces and in unofficial “parallel” militias into a central feature of political rule. Northerners (equated with foreign Muslims) are scapegoated for the country's ills, and attacks on them are organised. Seizure of their land in the countryside is also actively encouraged.

The elite led by Gbagbo in the south benefits from a corrupt system of patronage and corruption built up around the production of cocoa since independence in 1960. The recent International Crisis Group report on Ivory Coast* refers to a “kind of Enron-type structure of front companies, secret bank accounts, and transfer of funds with multiple layers of insulation between the criminal acts and their eventual beneficiaries.”

On March 25 and 26, tens of thousands of people opposed to Gbagbo assembled in working class areas of Abidjan ready to march in protest against his rule. They were prevented from leaving their neighborhoods, and more than 120 people were killed in attacks by militias and the security forces. A UN High Commission for Human Rights investigation concluded that the attack was a “carefully planned and executed operation by the security forces...and the so-called parallel forces under the direction and responsibility of the highest authorities of the state.”

After this attack organised by the Gbagbo elite, opposition

politicians and the representatives of the northern rebels—the so-called New Forces—pulled out of the power-sharing government until their return last week.

The New Forces led by Guillaume Soro, responding to the economic isolation of the north, have yielded to the pressure from France, the UN and the AU by coming back into the government of National Reconciliation. To do this, they appear to have dealt with those in their own ranks who criticised such a deal by brutally crushing all opposition.

At the beginning of this month, a team of UN human rights investigators discovered three mass graves containing the bodies of more than 100 people. Some had been shot. Others, according to eyewitness reports, died of asphyxiation. A survivor reported being packed with others in a shipping container with little air and no food or water. When it was opened, 75 dead bodies were found.

Soro had clashed with rival rebel leader Ibrahim Coulibaly (known as “IB”), who was held in France last year after attempting to raise a mercenary force to take over the whole Ivory Coast. Many of IB’s surviving supporters appear to have fled into neighbouring countries and may regroup with France, which has now allowed IB to leave.

Security in Ivory Coast, and the possibility of being involved in a wider West African conflict, is continually threatened by the existence of various militias in the west of the country, adjoining Liberia and Guinea. Some of these are ethnically based, others are from Liberia or Burkina Faso. Gbagbo’s regime has fuelled the conflict by supporting some of the warlords against others. The area is economically important, with much of the country’s cocoa and coffee grown in this region as well as gold, timber and rubber near the Liberian border.

As the US-backed peace deal has been imposed in Liberia, and before that the British secured the stooge regime of President Kabbah in Sierra Leone, warlords and militias from these countries have moved into Ivory Coast. Others are said to have moved into the jungles of Guinea—this being the only country in the region without UN occupation.

At the root of the destabilisation of Ivory Coast, and of the West African region as a whole, is a continuing economic decline. With the falling price of cocoa in the 1990s, and International Monetary Fund-imposed structural adjustment programmes, Ivory Coast lost its position as one of the most prosperous countries in West Africa with negative growth from 2000 on. From being the 156th country on the UN Human Development Index in 2002, Ivory Coast has now sunk to 163 out of 177 countries. (Sierra Leone, despite boasts by British Prime Minister Tony Blair that it is a success story, ranks 177.)

The Western powers are supporting the occupation of Ivory Coast by France and the UN—UN troops are due to

increase to 20,000 in Ivory Coast and Liberia—in an attempt to make the area stable enough for neocolonial economic exploitation.

In June, the Gbagbo regime was unable to pay \$20 million due to the West, and the World Bank was forced to suspend financial support. As well as the lack of debt repayments, cocoa exporters from the US, France and Britain are now threatened by falling production that has been disrupted by the conflict. French investments in telecommunications, electricity, water and transport (all privatised under IMF direction) are also at risk.

Gbagbo and his assorted thugs have attempted to whip up hostility to France, citing French economic control as the source of Ivory Coast’s decline. Attacks on the French and Westerners generally have been orchestrated.

While it is true that French imperialism is the major factor in Ivory Coast’s complete dependency on Western investment and markets, Gbagbo’s cynical demagoguery is completely fraudulent and designed for internal consumption only. After rigged elections in which the main opposition led by Outarra were excluded, Gbagbo could only take the presidency with French backing, and he still depends on French support. His major concern is to strengthen his position and that of his clique in the French-orchestrated power-sharing deal.

Only the most naïve could see any long-term benefit accruing to the majority of Ivory Coast’s population in the military occupation of the country by France and the UN.

The machinations of the Western powers, the UN and the AU combine cynical expediency with political bankruptcy. Putting Gbagbo and his cronies together with Soro’s New Forces into a future government shows complete disregard for the human rights and security of the people. It will do nothing to halt the growing poverty and unemployment or prevent the spread of militias and further military conflict in the West African region.

* International Crisis Group, “Côte D’Ivoire: No Peace in Sight,” 12 July 2004.



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