

Ivory Coast: protests erupt vs. French military strikes

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9 November 2004

France has destroyed the entire air force of Ivory Coast, its former West African colony, during clashes at the weekend. The death toll is as yet unknown.

The French military attacked Abidjan airport on the evening of Saturday, November 6, destroying two Sukhoi 25 fighter planes and three helicopter gunships. Two more military helicopters were destroyed in fighting over Abidjan on Sunday.

The French attack was in retaliation for Ivorian forces bombing a French military base near the town of Bouake in the north of the country. Nine French soldiers and one American consultant were killed in the attack. Thirty-one people are reported to have been wounded. Ivorian government sources claimed that the bombing of the French base was a mistake.

Within hours, French President Jacques Chirac personally ordered the destruction of the tiny Ivorian air force and the seizure of the airport. France immediately flew in 300 reinforcements and put three Mirage jet fighters based in nearby Gabon on standby. More French reinforcements were drafted in from the political capital of Yamoussoukro from where a convoy of 20 military trucks was reported to be heading to Abidjan. France already has 4,000 troops in the country. In total, there are 10,000 foreign troops in Ivory Coast under the auspices of the United Nations.

"Ivory Coast has become an overseas territory in Jacques Chirac's head," National Assembly President Mamadou Koulibaly told state television.

French helicopters flew over Abidjan dropping concussion grenades and tear gas on crowds that had come out onto the streets. Ground forces in armoured cars drove groups of youths from the bridges that link the working class and business districts to the airport. Gunboats have been positioned under the bridges. Three people are reported dead.

By Sunday night, fighting continued in Abidjan and French forces still did not have the city under control, despite their heavy-handed action. Protesters set up burning roadblocks and looted French property. There are 14,000 French citizens in the Ivory Coast. "We are at war. France attacked us," one protester told state television.

Some of the demonstrators compared the situation to the Algerian War of Independence. "It is better to burn them, like in Algeria. They burned the whites—that's why they're

respected," one said, according to Associated Press.

Mamadou Koulibaly was reported on the BBC as saying, "Today's events mark a point of change—Vietnam will be as nothing compared with what we are going to do here."

French civilians were airlifted from the roof of a luxury hotel and apartment blocks in Abidjan. One of them described how he had scrambled into a helicopter, as youths armed with machetes burst onto the roof of his apartment. "I have shoes, jeans, a shirt, watch and wedding ring. Everything else has gone," he said.

Crowds of angry youths were reported to have entered the residential district near the French military base where many French civilians live. "We are all terrified, and try to reassure each other," one resident told reporters by phone. Smoke was seen rising from two schools that had been set alight. French families reported that their homes were under attack, but there is no word on casualties.

Power and phone lines to the French embassy were cut on Sunday night. International radio stations including the BBC are off the air.

French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier told French television that Ivory Coast President Gbagbo was "personally responsible for what has happened," and declared that the violence was "unexplainable, unjustifiable."

In fact, there is nothing inexplicable about the violence, after France unleashed what the *Washington Post* called "overwhelming force" against the population of its former colony.

France has been supported in its actions by the United States, the European Union and the UN Security Council. An emergency session of the UN Security Council gave French armed forces the go-ahead to use "all necessary means" in suppressing the population of Ivory Coast.

UN secretary general Kofi Annan called on Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo to end hostilities, ignoring Ivorian appeals for the international community to defend their sovereignty.

US ambassador to the UN John Danforth said that French actions were "fully within the understanding of the Security Council." France, he said, had the right to defend French citizens and French troops.

What these international statements of support ignore is that it

is the French government that has put its citizens and other foreign nationals in harm's way by its conduct in Ivory Coast. In seizing the airport and destroying the air force, France has launched an attack on a small, impoverished country. The excuse that Ivorian government forces bombed a French military base in no way justifies what it did. Not only was the severity of the action completely out of proportion, but not once did the French government attempt to use diplomatic channels to find out if the bombing was indeed accidental, as the Ivorian government claimed.

Laurent Gbagbo's government was breaking a ceasefire in the civil war between his government and rebel forces based in the north when his air force bombed the French base, but that did not give France the right to throw its vastly superior force into the equation. And it should also be noted that Chirac, who publicly sets so much store by UN resolutions, had no UN mandate to shoot down or destroy Ivorian planes on the ground.

Chirac's actions are an assertion of naked imperialist might, designed to reassert French control over its former colony and to ensure the Gbagbo's full compliance with Western economic and political dictates.

This once-prosperous country has fallen into economic decline since France unilaterally devalued the CFA franc and allowed the International Monetary Fund to dictate economic policy. It remains the world's largest exporter of cocoa, but as prices have fallen its income has declined. Poverty and employment have provided fertile ground for racist and chauvinist movements.

France created Ivory Coast out of its colony of French West Africa. In dividing up its possessions in this region, France deliberately created a relatively prosperous, predominantly Christian state surrounded by poorer Muslim states whose citizens had to seek work in Ivory Coast cocoa plantations.

Laurent Gbagbo has cynically used anti-Muslim chauvinism to maintain power. He has targeted immigrant labourers who came to Ivory Coast from neighbouring Burkina Faso in the 1960s and 1970s as scapegoats for the declining economic situation. Ivory Coast has sunk from 156th place on the UN Human Development Index in 2002 to 163 out of 177 in 2004.

Civil war erupted in 2000 when Gbagbo excluded the northern-based politician Alassane Outarra from standing in the presidential election on the grounds that his parents were not born in Ivory Coast. The French government recognised Gbagbo's election nonetheless because of the connections this former trade union leader had with Lionel Jospin and the French Socialist Party.

Since then Gbagbo has maintained his rule by the most brutal methods. In March of this year, government forces killed at least 120 people when they suppressed an opposition demonstration. A French-Canadian journalist, Guy-Andre Kieffer, disappeared and was reportedly taken to a government militia camp near Abidjan, where he was tortured and died.

Throughout his presidency, the French government has

collaborated with Gbagbo's corruption, from which French companies have benefited. But relations deteriorated as Gbagbo sabotaged repeated attempts to establish a power-sharing regime that included northerners. After a brief rapprochement when he visited France in early 2004, Gbagbo launched an assault on northern rebel forces a few weeks ago, during which the French base was hit.

Northern rebel leaders have been calling for Gbagbo to be removed in the same way that Haiti's President Aristide was toppled by outside intervention, even though he had been elected. France seems to have moved closer to this option with its decision to seize the airport and destroy Gbagbo's air force.

The Chirac government has blatantly sought to reestablish colonial control of Ivory Coast while the attention of the world's media is focused on the US attack on Fallujah. Washington will no doubt seek some form of quid pro quo support for its actions in Iraq in return for endorsing the actions of Paris.

Ivory Coast is not a country rich in oil, but it is strategically vital to the region and gives France a foothold in West Africa, where the UK has already reestablished itself in Sierra Leone and the US has extensive interests in oil fields that are becoming ever more vital to world supplies.

For all its past differences with the Bush administration, the French government has now sought US support for its own acts of neo-colonial aggression. Anyone who thought that French foreign policy was substantially different from that of Washington should have been rudely disabused of this illusion by the action taken in Ivory Coast, which is no less illegal than the invasion of Iraq. A hurried Security Council meeting after the event cannot confer legality on this act of aggression. Nor can a benediction from the US ambassador to the UN, whose own government is engaged in levelling the town of Fallujah.



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