

Protests against UN and French occupation of Ivory Coast

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26 January 2006

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There are no reported casualties among the UN troops, whereas according to local doctors five people were killed and ten injured when UN troops opened fire on protesters in Guiglo in the west of the country. In the commercial capital of Abidjan, UN troops fired live rounds at protesters outside a hotel that has been turned into the headquarters of the UN mission in Ivory Coast. No one was reported injured in this incident.

The streets of Abidjan were blocked by barricades manned by protestors. A girl told reporters, “We are tired of foreign intervention. We are tired of neo-colonial attitudes.”

Protests began after the International Working Group (IWG), which answers to the UN Security Council, announced that the country’s National Assembly was to be dissolved and new elections held. This was seen as an attempt to strengthen the position of Prime Minister Konan Banny at the expense of President Laurent Gbagbo, whose party the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) currently dominates the National Assembly.

Konan Banny was appointed prime minister by the UN in December. A former president of the Banque Centrale des Etats de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, he is regarded as a reliable defender of French interests. A spokesman for the FPI said the UN decision to dissolve the National Assembly was a “constitutional coup-d’ état”.

The four days of protests did not reach the scale of those that followed the French destruction of the Ivorian air force in 2004, when France was forced to withdraw its nonessential civilians. But the movement was widespread throughout the government-controlled areas. UN troops were forced to evacuate bases in the towns of Guiglo and Duekoue near the border with Liberia and retreat towards the rebel held north of the country. The chief of the UN mission in Liberia was, at one point, considering whether to fortify the border with Ivory Coast.

There are currently 7,000 UN and 4,000 French soldiers and police in Ivory Coast. Most patrol the dividing line between the government forces in the south and west of the country and the rebels in the north. The UN mandate provides a cover for the French intervention in its former colony. Paris is backing the opposition alliance of Alassane Dramane Ouattara and Henri Konan Bédié. They style themselves on the Alliance de Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix—a name taken from Félix Houphouët-Boigny who was the first president of Ivory Coast. Relations between Houphouët-Boigny and France were close. There is said to be a tunnel between the presidential palace and the neighbouring French embassy. Since relations deteriorated it is rumoured to have been blocked.

Houphouët-Boigny ruled from independence in 1960 until his death

in 1993. He held the first multi-party elections in 1990. Bédié succeeded him as president and Ouattara, a former IMF official, became prime minister.

In 1999 Bédié was overthrown in a military coup led by General Robert Guei. The following year Guei held presidential elections and was replaced by Laurent Gbagbo. Although Ouattara was excluded from the election on the grounds of ethnicity, and their validity was challenged as a result, Gbagbo was accepted as president by France and the West.

Xenophobia became an increasingly prominent part of Ivory Coast politics as the economy deteriorated during the 1990s. The population is made up of numerous ethnic and linguistic groups and religious communities. In addition, an estimated 26 percent of the people are migrants, or descendants of migrants, from Burkina Faso and Mali, who came to work in the cocoa fields.

Ivory Coast was once the most prosperous country in West Africa. But with the devaluation of the CFA franc and the collapse of the cocoa price its economy has gone into steep decline. The response of the political elite was to scapegoat other ethnic groups for the deteriorating situation caused by the continued economic dominance of France and the world market. Since the 1990s Ivory Coast has seen an escalating spiral of violence, as competition for dwindling resources has intensified.

The recent street protests were organized by the pro-Gbagbo Jeunes Patriotes (Young Patriots), who are led by Charles Ble Goude. According to the BBC, the Young Patriots were in control of virtually all the main streets in Abidjan.

On January 18 Gbagbo called for the protests to end, but it was not until the morning of January 20, when Ble Goude gave the order, that the protests ceased. The Young Patriots are drawn from the many unemployed youth who have felt the full force of the collapse of the economy over the last two decades.

Gbagbo built a reputation for militancy as a trade union leader. Under Houphouët-Boigny he served terms of imprisonment and later exile. He has close ties with the French Socialist Party. He tries to maintain the support of the Young Patriots by anti-imperialist rhetoric, xenophobia and handing out banknotes. But fundamental economic and social issues lie behind their mobilization, which he is incapable of answering.

Shortly before the protests began there was growing evidence of rising xenophobia backed by Gbagbo’s government. Paramilitary gendarmes detained dozens of Burkina Faso nationals. They are said to be holding them in barracks in Abidjan. Three Burkinabe men have been found shot dead in unexplained circumstances.

The arrests followed incidents at two military camps outside

Abidjan. Rebels supposedly launched an attack on the bases. The army later released photographs of 32 naked and bloody detainees whom they said had attacked the bases. But local residents claimed that they were gardeners, carpenters and security guards. One of the supposed attackers, who was shot dead, has been identified as a member of the main opposition party, the Rally of the Republicans (RDR). He was said to be on his way to work as a security guard when he was stopped at a military checkpoint and summarily executed. Two unidentified bodies have been found near military checkpoints.

Press reports have speculated that there may have been a mutiny in the army. President Gbagbo's control over the army is limited. There have been previous mutinies over pay arrears. Former Chief of Staff Mathias Doué, who has fled to the north of the country, has called for an uprising against Gbagbo.

Gbagbo has been purging the army of opposition generals and breaking up unreliable units. Key posts have been put in the hands of members of his own ethnic group. He relies heavily on the Garde Républicaine, recruited at the outbreak of the civil war, the heavily armed riot police and private security companies that are alleged to be associated with his wife Simone Gbagbo. A new paramilitary force was set up last year called Centre de Commandement des Opérations de Sécurité (Cecos). A telephone number has been published to denounce "any suspect or suspicious attitude" to Cecos. The organization is said to have been involved in the recent deaths of alleged rebels. There are also unofficial militias known as Scorpions, who are loyal to Gbagbo. Their numbers have increased over the last year. In the west of the country, Gbagbo is said to be recruiting Liberian mercenaries, including former child soldiers.

Gbagbo's actions indicate that he is preparing for a renewed civil war and that he intends to step up the ethnic and inter-communal violence as a means of maintaining power. France presents itself as a neutral party in this conflict, but this is not the case. As the colonial power, it was largely responsible for establishing the animosities between the different communities in West Africa. It particularly fuelled the rivalry between the largely Christian southerners and northern Muslims in Ivory Coast.

At France's instigation the European Union has allocated €33 million (\$44 million) for the process of identifying the ethnic origin of residents of Ivory Coast and determining on this basis who will be allowed civil rights. This could easily become a spark for ethnic violence of the kind that was seen in Rwanda. It has been a consistent part of French colonial policy to foment ethnic rivalries. When it granted French West Africa independence in 1960, France divided up the colony into small units whose boundaries were deliberately drawn to cut across ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Its intention was to create countries that would be weak and internally divided.

Never far from the ethnic rivalry is the question of land. The inequitable distribution of land—the basis of cocoa production—is one of the most destructive legacies from the French colonial period.

Even after independence the countries that were once French West Africa remained economically dependent on France. Their currencies were controlled from Paris and their economies continued to be dominated by French companies.

France is intent on maintaining its presence on the West African coast, which has become a major source of oil. The UK has re-established itself in Sierra Leone and the United States in Liberia. Ivory Coast became an oil producer last summer when its Baobab field came on stream. France, which has limited supplies of fossil fuels, cannot afford to give way to rival imperialist powers.

Other rivals are emerging. China is stepping up its investments in West Africa. It financed the building of the new Ivory Coast Maison de Deputés (parliament building). Gbagbo is hoping that China will offer loans as it has done in Zimbabwe in return for access to Ivory Coast's oil and cocoa. Ivory Coast grows 40 percent of international cocoa production, making it the world's largest supplier.

France could not have intervened in Ivory Coast without the help of other African states. Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo negotiated the deal which brought an end to the recent protests. But Nigeria is not a disinterested party in the dispute. It has made clear that it wants to remove Gbagbo from the presidency. Usman Buagaje, chairman of the Nigerian House of Representatives, said, "We have to remove him [Gbagbo] from the scene."

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa brokered the agreement last year in Pretoria under which the UN set up the International Working Group that appointed Konan Banny prime minister without any election or consultation with the population of Ivory Coast. Nigerian Foreign Minister Oluyemi Adeniji sits on the IWG along with Pierre Schori of the UN.

Nigeria and South Africa are effectively acting on behalf of imperialism by policing the region. They no doubt hope to increase their own influence by doing so. But their actions are allowing a new phase of colonialism to emerge.

The ruling elite in Nigeria and South Africa as well as Ivory Coast have shown themselves to be incapable of defending Africa from imperialist depredation. Their first resort is always to seek a compromise that will ensure that they continue to enjoy their privileged position.

Gbagbo's descent into xenophobia and communal violence is an extreme expression of the bankruptcy of African nationalism. Almost half a century after the first one came to power, no African nationalist regime has succeeded in resolving the problems bequeathed to it by colonialism. Ivory Coast is still bedeviled by the land question and by communal rivalries. Its economy is still dependent on the big cocoa processors, French banks and the international financial system.

Gbagbo is attempting to play off France against the US and both of them against China in the hope of getting some concession from one of them in return for access to the country's resources. He cannot offer any real prospect of economic or social development on this basis. He must therefore blame immigrants and vulnerable ethnic groups for the country's economic collapse. An essential precondition for the defence of any African country against recolonisation is to unite all its oppressed peoples irrespective of ethnicity, language or religion in a common struggle. Gbagbo and his fellow nationalist leaders are inherently incapable of taking this route.

See Also:

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[9 November 2004]



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