US, EU prepare military action against Ivory Coast

Ann Talbot
23 December 2010

The situation in the West African country of Ivory Coast continues to deteriorate after November's disputed election between incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo and his rival, Alassane Outtara.

The US State Department has imposed a travel ban on Gbagbo. US Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs William Fitzgerald said the US would impose the ban on Gbagbo, all members of his family and entourage and was considering imposing financial sanctions.

"He may very well be trying to ignore us and be hoping that we'll forget and go away or focus on another issue," Fitzgerald said. "I can only remind him that this is a unanimous international community. We're not going away, and we're not going to forget this."

A similar announcement came from the European Union (EU). It has frozen Gbagbo's assets and imposed a visa ban on him and his supporters.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council has extended the deployment of its troops in Ivory Coast for a further six months. This decision came in response to a demand from Gbagbo that the troops leave immediately.

US Ambassador Susan Rice, who is currently president of the Security Council and is a former US assistant secretary of state for African Affairs, issued a thinly veiled threat to Gbagbo and his supporters.

"Members of the Security Council warn all stakeholders that they will be held accountable for attacks against civilians and peacekeepers and will be brought to justice in accordance with international law and international humanitarian law."

The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office advised Britons to leave Ivory Coast. The US embassy in Abidjan has evacuated all nonessential staff and families.

Newcrest Mining has closed down operations at its Bonikro gold mine. Newcrest is Australia's largest gold mining company. Its Bonikro facility produces 120,000 ounces of gold a year. The company has evacuated its staff to Ghana, leaving only security personnel at the mine. It is clearly anticipating an intensification of military operations in Ivory Coast.

The US, EU and UN have recognised Gbagbo's rival Alassane Dramane Outtara as the winner of last month's presidential election. Outtara has established himself in the Hotel du Golf under the protection of UN troops and Gbagbo remains in the presidential palace. The coordinated announcements from the US, EU and UN are clearly intended to convey the message they are determined to establish firm control over this important West African state. The evacuation of civilians suggests that the US and its allies are moving rapidly towards further military intervention.

Between 2002 and 2004 Ivory Coast was in the grip of a civil war. In November 2004, France destroyed the Ivorian air force and seized control of the capital Abidjan. It still has almost 1,000 troops and gendarmes stationed there, mostly based at the airport. In addition, there are more than 9,000 UN personnel, including troops, military observers, police and civilian officials.

Regional powers have fallen into line behind the West. The Banque centrale des états d'Afrique de l'ouest has cut off funds to Gbagbo. The Economic Community of West African States, which has recognised Outtara as president, backs this action and has suspended Ivory Coast from membership. Ivory Coast is diplomatically isolated and Gbagbo may not be able to pay his troops beyond this month.

Tensions have escalated in recent days. Forces loyal to Gbagbo attacked UN troops at the Hotel du Golf. One Ivorian soldier was killed in the encounter. UN

© World Socialist Web Site

forces have since reinforced their position with two tanks. Gbagbo has prevented supplies from reaching the hotel. A spokesman for Outtara appealed for help from the international community. “We’re living on the hotel stock,” he said, “By Thursday, it will be finished. There won’t be anything left.”

In the centre of the country, there were clashes between the New Forces loyal to Outtara and government forces that have remained loyal to Gbagbo, despite Western efforts to engineer a split in the military command. This has raised the possibility that the civil war may be resumed.

According to the UN, some 200 people have been wounded and 50 killed over the last week. A UN statement alleged that people are being abducted from their homes by unidentified armed men loyal to Gbagbo.

UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, spoke of massive violations of human rights taking place in Ivory Coast.

“Abducted persons are reportedly taken by force to illegal places of detention where they are held incommunicado and without charge. Some have been found dead in questionable circumstances.”

Militias loyal to Gbagbo are said to be raiding houses and rounding people up in Abidjan. The UN alleges that a mass grave has been uncovered in the city.

As the situation deteriorates, civilians are preparing themselves for war. Almost 4,000 people have crossed the border into neighbouring Liberia in search of refuge.

It seems likely that there will be a military intervention of some kind soon. A case is being prepared to justify such action in terms of a defence of human rights. What form such an intervention will take is not yet clear. What is clear is that neither the US nor France can claim to be defenders of the Ivorian people.

The US and its allies may now be critical of Gbagbo but they have worked with him for decades. He has been president since 2000 and has supported International Monetary Fund and World Bank plans for structural adjustment and privatisation.

Throughout that time, he was far from a champion of human rights. He proved useful when it became necessary to challenge the hold of the entrenched political elite around Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who had been president of Ivory Coast from its independence in 1960. It appears that he has outlived his usefulness and has refused the offer of a comfortable retirement in Nigeria or South Africa.

What lies behind the changed attitude to Gbagbo is the possibility that sizeable offshore oil reserves exist in Ivory Coast waters. Gbagbo has forged close links with Angola and with the Russian oil company Lukoil. He believes he can use the revenue from oil to keep himself in power despite international disapproval.

Equally, the prospect that Ivory Coast has viable oil reserves makes it more important strategically for the West. France and the US want a trustworthy figure in control of a country that has a longstanding regional significance, is the world's largest cocoa producer, has many valuable natural resources and may now have the added importance of oil.

The *Financial Times* has warned against a French-led intervention as “unwise”. But it has called for an African intervention. This would mean *Economic Community Of West African States* or other African troops being sent into Ivory Coast with French and American backing. This would in no sense represent an “African solution to an African problem”, as the phrase goes. It would merely be a disguised imperialist invasion with Ivory Coast’s natural resources as the prize.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site