

Mounting prospect of military intervention in Ivory Coast

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The United States and its allies have stepped up their threats of military intervention in the West African country of Ivory Coast in the wake of the disputed election.

Both the incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo, and his challenger, Alassane Outtara, claim to have won the November, 2010 election. The US, the United Nations and the European Union have recognised Outtara's claims and called on Gbagbo to quit. Neighbouring West African states organised in ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) have threatened military action if he refuses.

US officials have let it be known that the Obama administration is preparing to evacuate embassy staff in what can only be interpreted as a prelude to armed intervention. Non-essential personnel have already left the country. It cannot be excluded that the administration is preparing an intervention similar to that in Liberia, where Marines were sent in under the pretext of rescuing US embassy staff in 2003. This was the prelude to an intervention by West African states. American military personnel are still in Liberia as advisors.

Another trigger point has become the Hotel du Golf, where Outtara and his rival government are based, under the protection of French and UN troops. UN representative Y.J Choi made it clear that they were ready for action. "They cannot possibly take the Golf Hotel," he said. "We are heavily armed and present and preparing ourselves. They will be defeated, they will be repulsed. There is no doubt about this."

Choi warned Gbagbo's regime, which has threatened to mobilise youth against the UN presence, that it risked stepping into a minefield if it did so.

President Obama spoke to President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria by phone last week. US-trained Nigerian troops would form the backbone of any West African force.

An invasion of Ivory Coast would be the most ambitious venture yet for ECOMOG, which is the military arm of ECOWAS. It is unlikely that the West African states would have even made the threat without a green light from Obama.

Raila Odinga, prime minister of Kenya in East Africa, has joined in the efforts to force out Gbagbo on behalf of the African Union. He met with the ECOWAS heads in Nigeria before going on to Ivory Coast with them. His presence is a sign that another piece of the diplomatic framework for a US-sponsored military intervention has been put in place and that care is being taken to present it as an African solution to an African problem.

The reality is different. The present situation in Ivory Coast is the result of recent US policy and the long history of colonial domination of this region. The deep social divisions which the French fostered between different ethnic and religious groups, and between wealthy acculturated Africans and the mass of the population, who were denied political rights and subjected to forced labour until 1945, have found repeated expression in current political conflicts. Those conflicts have been exacerbated by the economic dependence of the region.

Ultimately, the economic backwardness of the region can be traced to centuries of slave trading, which led to the deportation of millions of Africans across the Atlantic. Following the slave trade came direct European domination of West Africa and the destruction of local political formations by competing English, French and German empire builders. For more than half a century, West Africa was under colonial rule and used as a source of raw materials such as palm oil, groundnuts, coffee and cocoa.

Ivory Coast was the most prosperous part of French West Africa. When the colony was divided on independence in 1960, the fragmented states that emerged—Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger—lacked secure revenue and the most elementary infrastructure on which to build their economies. Even Senegal, the second wealthiest of these territories since it had a thriving export in groundnuts, relied heavily on French subsidies. For the elite of Ivory Coast, the division was an advantage because it gave them access to a share of the cocoa and coffee revenues which had sustained the administration of French West Africa before independence. For the rest, the balkanisation of French West Africa was an economic disaster and guaranteed their continued dependence on France.

Ivory Coast remained closely integrated with France under its first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and retained a leading role among the former colonial territories. The number of French residents actually increased after independence. French companies invested in Ivory Coast, attracted by tax concessions and the freedom to expatriate their profits. French advisers operated at all levels of the state. French teachers staffed the schools. What is often described as the Ivorian economic miracle produced annual growth rates averaging 7 percent.

The miracle ended abruptly in 1980, when world commodity prices fell, leaving Ivory Coast with a huge trade deficit and mounting debts. By 1987, Ivory Coast was insolvent. Houphouët-Boigny imposed austerity measures and suppressed all protests.

It was in this context that Laurent Gbagbo came to the fore. Teachers' protests became a focus for other sections of workers who were hit by the austerity measures. A French-educated professor of history, Gbagbo's experience in the National Trade Union of Research and Higher Education and a period in prison gave him the oppositional credentials that enabled him to build the Ivorian Popular Front. In 2000, he claimed victory in the presidential election and organised mass resistance to General Robert Guéï, who had taken power after a coup the previous year.

French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin ignored the irregularities of the election which, he said, had taken place "under special circumstances." France recognised Gbagbo as president, despite the fact that all other opposition candidates, including Outtara, had been excluded from the poll. Gbagbo is currently being criticised for his violent methods and using "death squads" to intimidate his opponents. But he used exactly the same methods in the past, when he was close to the French; they found him useful in opposing Houphouët-Boigny and keeping popular dissent in check.

With the economy continuing to deteriorate, Gbagbo no longer had the economic resources to maintain the system of patronage that had kept Houphouët-Boigny in power. Instead, he increasingly resorted to whipping up communal tensions and exploiting the divisions that existed between the mainly Christian south of the country and the predominantly Muslim north.

This division was a legacy of French colonialism and the disparate economic development of the region. In the period of Ivory Coast's boom, migrants had come to work in the cocoa plantations from other former French territories, especially Burkina Faso, which lay landlocked to the north. Burkina Faso has one of the lowest per capita gross domestic products in the world and is heavily dependent on aid.

Gbagbo whipped up racism against the Burkinabe and cultivated the concept of *Ivoiricité*, Ivorian nationalism. He attempted to exclude his rivals from political power and claimed that Outtara was a Burkinabe and not a genuine Ivorian. By 2002 these conflicts led to a civil war that has left the country divided.

France presents itself as an even-handed arbiter in the conflicts of Ivory Coast. An objective survey of the history of the region shows France to be the source of these conflicts, both before and after independence.

France backed Houphouët-Boigny, then Gbagbo, and now is attempting to throw its weight behind Outtara. This represents a certain shift in policy, which expresses the willingness of the French political elite to work ever more closely with the US in Africa.

West Africa is becoming increasingly important as a source of energy for the US. Currently, Nigeria is the fifth largest source of US oil imports and Angola is seventh, while Gabon ranks fifteenth. But new offshore discoveries have recently come on line in Ghana and further untapped reserves are thought to exist off the West African coast. Control of this entire region has become a strategic consideration for America. Establishing compliant and reliable governments in each of the states in West Africa is a priority for Washington and its allies.

As China, India and Russia make their presence felt in Africa, one-time rivals in Europe and America have increasingly come

together to defend their long-standing interests on the continent and stake a claim to natural resources which are assuming ever greater importance in the world economy. Ivory Coast's crude oil production is expected to reach 200,000 barrels per day by the end of the decade. It has, in addition, mineral resources inland and it is the world's largest producer of cocoa.

An area that was once the scene of intense rivalries between Britain and France now sees the two former colonial powers cooperating. Britain has sent a military liaison officer to work with the French forces in Ivory Coast. It staged its own military intervention in Sierra Leone in 2000, where ECOMOG was also brought into play.

France intervened into its former colony in 2002 and, in 2004, destroyed the entire Ivorian air force and dropped tear gas and concussion grenades on crowds of protestors in Abidjan. Britain and the US both backed this display of neo-colonial brutality, as did the UN. At that point, ECOMOG was reluctant to intervene. Its readiness to do so now suggests urging from Washington and a common determination on the part of the US and its allies to gain control of Ivory Coast.

Repeated interventions in West Africa reflect the renewed drive to colonial expansionism expressed in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The agenda of the US and its allies is no more humanitarian in West Africa than it has been in those countries. It represents an attempt to seize resources and positions of strategic advantage.

Outtara is not a democratic alternative to Gbagbo. He served for several years as prime minister under Houphouët-Boigny and is part of the political elite that has benefited from the wealth of Ivory Coast at the expense of the majority of the population.

His background as deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) makes him a reliable figure to represent the interests of the US and its allies in West Africa. As president, he would continue the privatizations and cuts in social spending prescribed by the International Monetary Fund.



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