

French, UN forces back military takeover of Ivory Coast, citing Libya war precedent

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Assisted by French and UN troops, northern forces led by Alassane Ouattara yesterday marched on the southern port city of Abidjan, and the economic and political centre of the regime of Laurent Gbagbo.

The military standoff between Gbagbo and Ouattara had flared up after the disputed November 28, 2010, elections, which both men claimed to have won. The Western powers backed Ouattara's claim against that of the incumbent, Gbagbo. The country had been partitioned between a rebel-held, majority-Muslim north and a loyalist, majority-Christian south since 2002, with French and UN forces maintaining an unstable truce.

After the second round of the November elections, the Western powers claimed that Ouattara had won the vote with 54 percent versus 46 percent for Gbagbo, but Gbagbo contested the results. He retained command of the bulk of the official armed forces. French and UN forces sided with Ouattara inside the country—guaranteeing his safety in the Golf Hotel in downtown Abidjan.

Ouattara's power grab centres on a battle for influence inside the Ivory Coast's officer corps, to convince them to desert the Gbagbo camp, together with the backing of the major imperialist powers that are citing the Libyan war as a pretext for intervention in Ivory Coast. As in Libya, the pretence of a fight to defend democracy is a thin disguise for an attempt to manipulate a bloody civil war to the advantage of the major imperialist powers.

Ouattara's offensive began on March 28. *Le Monde* reported, "On Monday, many columns were leaving their bases in the north of the country, with at their head the historic 'comzones' [zone commanders] of the movement created in September 2002, after the failure of a coup attempt that Laurent Gbagbo always attributed to Alassane Ouattara".

The Ivory Coast Republican Forces (FRCI) are a composite of the rebel New Forces, which have held the north of Ivory Coast since the 2002 coup after Laurent Gbagbo's election, and sections of the military that officially joined Ouattara on March 17.

On March 30 the UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution demanding that all state offices recognize Ouattara as president. The FRCI captured Yamassoukro, nominally the political capital though Gbagbo resides in Abidjan, after fighting on March 30-31. There were reports of large-scale defections by pro-Gbagbo forces, and that prices for second-hand clothing had increased by a factor of five, as troops abandoned their units and dumped their uniforms en masse. Rebel forces also seized the key southwestern cocoa-exporting port of San Pédro.

French troops deployed inside Abidjan late in the evening of March 31, claiming they were protecting French civilians, while UN forces took control of Abidjan's airport. The army chief of staff, General Philippe Mangou, fled to the South African embassy in Abidjan. According to *Le Parisien*, "France was doing everything it could, over several weeks, to get Mangou to jump ship".

Ouattara appealed yesterday to the armed forces to abandon Gbagbo, as his forces reached the roadblocks set up around Abidjan. Ouattara called on all military personnel "who are still hesitating" to "rejoin the camp of legality." His spokesmen told the media that "80 percent of the officer corps" had deserted Gbagbo for Ouattara's forces.

Yesterday pro-Ouattara "Invisible Commandos" reportedly began operating in Abidjan.

International media, notably in France, have presented Ouattara's victory as a foregone conclusion. *Le Parisien* titled its article, "Endgame for Gbagbo," and *Le Monde* declared that the Ivory Coast "has escaped" bloody fighting.

US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson called for restraint in Abidjan and said that the collapse of Gbagbo's forces was "imminent". "There is a clear indication that the military forces of Gbagbo have in fact started to disintegrate", he said. "The rapid pace at which Alassane Ouattara's forces have been able to move across the country from east to west and up to Abidjan suggests that there have been widespread desertions in the Gbagbo forces. The departure of his army commander lends greater credence to that".

Such declarations must be treated with caution. They are issued under conditions where Western governments have a powerful material interest in shaping the outcome of events by demoralizing soldiers and officers on Gbagbo's side with news of inevitable defeat. There are, in any case, many reports of continuing heavy fighting in Abidjan. The *Jeune Afrique* live blog carried reports of intense street fighting and heavy artillery firing inside several neighbourhoods yesterday evening, including in the Plateau and Cocody districts and the Agban camp.

Around 5 p.m. yesterday, one of Gbagbo's top counsellors, Alain Toussaint, issued a brief statement to *i-Télé*, saying, "President Gbagbo will not resign".

There were numerous complaints of looting by militias on both sides of the conflict. French citizens in Abidjan made numerous complaints regarding Gbagbo's forces, which have targeted French-owned property in Ivory Coast due to France's support for the rebel forces.

UN human rights spokesman Rupert Colville also issued a statement warning about atrocities by pro-Ouattara forces yesterday: "We've had unconfirmed reports of quite serious human rights violations committed by the Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire, pro-Ouattara forces, particularly in the Guiglo and Daloa area in the west". Colville mentioned "looting, extortion, but more seriously matters such as abduction, arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment of civilians, possibly other acts as well".

Despite the Western media campaign, Ouattara does not represent a "democratic" alternative to Laurent Gbagbo. A former high-ranking official at the International Monetary Fund, he will implement pro-market policies and depend critically on the threat of Western military intervention to retain power, amid the longstanding north-south tensions in Ivory Coast.

The war will deepen the major imperialist powers' leverage to economically loot the Ivory Coast. A country of 21 million people and a major exporter of cocoa, gold and natural gas, it is widely regarded as the single richest country among France's former African colonies. French troops have been deployed there since independence in 1960, by virtue of military accords signed between France and Ivory Coast in 1961.

As international diplomatic circles ratcheted up pressure on Gbagbo, Western corporations and military units moved against his regime. US, British and French banks starved Ivory Coast of funds under Western-backed sanctions, as the crucial cocoa trade ground to a halt in February. In March, the preparations for a full-scale intervention by the Western powers were well underway.

On March 10 the African Union (AU) voted to recognize

Ouattara as the winner of the Ivory Coast's elections, and on March 17, South African President Jacob Zuma declared that he agreed with the AU vote. Zuma was part of a five-person AU panel—which also included the leaders of Mauritania, Tanzania, Chad and Burkina Faso—tasked with mediating in the crisis.

French authorities invoked the same "responsibility to protect" civilians that they have used to justify aggression against Libya, and their promotion of the right-wing National Council rebels there, to justify operations against Gbagbo. On March 20 Henri Guaino, a top adviser of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, told RFI, "It seems as though we are on the right track to securing [Gbagbo's] departure from power".

Speaking to AFP, Guaino's spokeswoman Anne Ouloto added, "We can't understand that the international community has mobilized for Libya and can't take firm decisions on the Ivory Coast. It must be done immediately; it is a question of life or death".

On March 24, after the Brussels economic summit, Sarkozy said, "Every ruler should understand, and especially every Arab ruler should understand, that the reaction of the international community and of Europe will from this moment on, each time be the same: we will side with peaceful protesters who must not be repressed with violence." He demanded the banning of heavy weapons in Abidjan.

On March 25, France and Nigeria circulated a draft resolution to the UN Security Council to ban heavy weapons in Abidjan and impose sanctions on Gbagbo and senior figures of the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), Gbagbo's ruling party. It threatened that the 12,000-strong UN forces in Ivory Coast would use "all necessary means" to protect civilians in the country and proposed to "seize heavy weapons" in Abidjan.

Only few days later, Ouattara was launching a military assault all along the front dividing the northern and southern halves of the Ivory Coast.



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