

France intervenes in Ivory Coast's civil war

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In the last 24 hours, France has directly intervened in the fighting in Ivory Coast as it seeks to reassert its control over its former colony.

French helicopters bombarded forces loyal to President Laurent Gbagbo on Tuesday evening. On Wednesday afternoon, ground forces loyal to rival presidential claimant Alassane Ouattara were unleashed in an assault on the presidential residence. Nonetheless, as of late last night, Ouattara's troops had retreated after a failed assault on the bunkers where Gbagbo is thought to be hiding.

Ivory Coast's long-standing military standoff between Ouattara's northern forces and Gbagbo loyalists has flared since the disputed November 28 presidential election. France and the NATO powers recognized Ouattara as the winner of the election.

French representatives negotiated with Gbagbo through Tuesday night and Wednesday morning. The talks finally broke down in the afternoon and pro-Ouattara forces launched what they described as the "final assault" on the presidential residence. Their intention, they said, was to "fetch him out" of his bunker. The intensity of the fighting was shown by reports that windows had been blown out of the embassies in the diplomatic district.

A terrified resident speaking over the phone told Reuters, "The fighting is terrible here. The explosions are so heavy my building is shaking. We can hear automatic gunfire and also heavy weapons. There's shooting all over the place. Cars are speeding in all directions and so are the fighters".

A military spokesman denied that French armed forces were involved in the fighting. But residents reported seeing French tanks on the streets. UN helicopters were seen flying over the presidential residence as the fighting raged.

Video from several miles away shows huge explosions rocking the city of Abidjan, home to four

million people. Missiles can be seen flying past the camera suggesting that a munitions dump was hit. What the scale of damage was closer to the barracks is still unknown, but one resident reported that a rocket had gone through the roof of a house, killing three people.

The leader of the United Nations team in Ivory Coast (UNOCI), Hamadoun Toure, was already briefed to expect a rapid denouement when he spoke to the BBC's *Today* programme on Wednesday morning.

"We hope to find a solution very, very soon, so that it will be the end of the game," he said.

Edouard Guillaud of the French armed forces expressed a similar view later in the day. He told Europe 1 Radio that Gbagbo would go soon: "I believe it is a matter of hours, possibly during the day".

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé told Reuters, "The negotiations which were carried out for hours yesterday between the entourage of Laurent Gbagbo and Ivorian authorities have failed because of Gbagbo's intransigence".

Gbagbo had reportedly insisted that he should be allowed to remain in Ivory Coast and that he be given UN protection. Though Gbagbo won almost half the vote in November's election, according to international observers, these demands were apparently unacceptable to France.

France's intervention shatters all the French government's claims that its role in Ivory Coast was that of a bystander seeking to protect the population from harm. Instead, it is acting with the support of the US government to violently assert Western imperialist interests—in Ivory Coast and internationally.

France's role in Ivory Coast has been praised by Washington. President Barack Obama welcomed the role of the French and UN forces and called on Gbagbo to step down.

"To end this violence and prevent more bloodshed, former President Gbagbo must stand down

immediately, and direct those who are fighting on his behalf to lay down their arms”, Obama said. “I strongly support the role that United Nations peacekeepers are playing as they enforce their mandate to protect civilians, and I welcome the efforts of French forces who are supporting that mission”.

Since the start of the conflict in Ivory Coast, Paris and Washington have turned a blind eye to more substantial massacres of civilians by supporters of Ouattara—including one of up to 1,000 people in a single village. (See, “Civilians massacred by Western-backed forces in Ivory Coast”)

This is part of a broader explosion of French militarism in Africa. President Nicolas Sarkozy also led the way in calling for a no-fly zone in Libya. France was the first to recognize the Transitional National Council based in Benghazi as the rightful government of Libya. This has set a pattern for France in relation to Ivory Coast. France and Nigeria drafted UN resolution 1975, which gives UNOCI a mandate to protect civilians. It was drawn up on the same lines as the resolution that allowed NATO jets to attack military Libyan military positions.

Within days of the Ivory Coast resolution being agreed, France and UNOCI went into action in Abidjan. They bombarded the palace and presidential residence as well as Akueodo and Agban barracks on Tuesday. They justified their action by claiming that pro-Gbagbo forces had used heavy artillery against civilians.

The UN resolution did not authorize the French to attack, but UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon wrote to Sarkozy to request French help. “It is urgent to launch necessary military operations to put out of action the heavy arms which have been used against the civilian population and the peacekeepers”, Ban Ki-moon said.

Gbagbo has in the past worked closely with Paris. He has whipped up ethnic and communal hostilities in an attempt to remain in power, targeting immigrant labourers who came to Ivory Coast from neighbouring Burkina Faso in the 1960s and 1970s as scapegoats as the economy has declined. This lay the basis for a protracted conflict with Ouattara, a northerner whom he excluded from the 2000 presidential elections, claiming that Ouattara’s parents were not born in Ivory Coast.

Paris recognised Gbagbo’s election at the time, even though he had excluded Ouattara, because he had close

connections with then-Prime Minister Lionel Jospin and France’s Socialist Party.

Gbagbo’s relations with France deteriorated, however, when he blocked French attempts to impose a power-sharing regime that would include northerners to end the civil war. Gbagbo broke a cease-fire in 2004 and launched a military assault on the north, during which a French base was hit. Paris responded by destroying the entire Ivorian air force.

When crowds came out onto the streets of Abidjan to protest this action, French helicopters dropped tear gas and concussion grenades on them, armoured cars took up positions on the bridges and gunboats patrolled the river underneath them.

The arrogant way in which France has asserted its authority in this situation underscores its continuing imperialist oppression of its former colony. Ivory Coast was granted formal independence along with the rest of French West Africa in 1960. However, France has always retained a troop presence in Ivory Coast under the terms of a military agreement signed in 1961.



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