

France helps seize Gbagbo in Ivory Coast

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12 April 2011

Laurent Gbagbo, the incumbent president of Ivory Coast, was taken prisoner yesterday and is in the custody of forces loyal to his opponent, Alassane Ouattara.

French ambassador Jean-Marc Simon announced on Monday afternoon that Gbagbo had been captured in the capital city, Abidjan—the commercial capital, where Gbagbo's forces had made a last stand against Ouattara's northern-based forces. "Laurent Gbagbo was arrested by the republican forces of Ivory Coast and has been taken to the Hotel du Golfe", he said. Protected by French-led UN troops in Abidjan, the hotel has been Ouattara's base since the disputed presidential election of November 2010.

In fact, the French government moved in decisively to attack and arrest Gbagbo, in flagrant violation of the UN resolutions that justify their presence in France's former colony. Neither the UN nor France has a mandate to arrest Gbagbo; they have no mandate for regime change in Ivory Coast. Under resolutions 1975 and 1962, they are permitted only to protect civilians and defend themselves from attack.

Ouattara's forces had been unable to take Gbagbo's residence for the past 10 days, and on Sunday it seemed that he was beginning to expand the area under his control. The concerted action on the part of the French and the UN mission in Ivory Coast, UNOCI, was designed to rapidly bring the fighting to a close.

According to media reports, French helicopters and tanks bombarded the compound, where Gbagbo had taken refuge during the fighting in Abidjan.

Supporters who were in phone contact with Gbagbo before his surrender insisted that he gave himself up to French troops. Toussaint Alain said that Gbagbo had been "arrested by French special-forces in his residence" and "handed over to the rebel leaders".

Gbagbo loyalist and adviser Zakaria Fellah said that the claim that Ouattara's forces had carried out the

operation was "absolutely untrue". He said, "This operation, the final assault, was carried out by the French troops."

Another Gbagbo supporter, Ahoua Don Mello, told reporters, "President Laurent Gbagbo came out of his bunker and surrendered to the French without resistance."

A French military spokesman claimed, "There was not one French soldier at the scene when Gbagbo was taken."

When Ouattara's envoy to the UN, Youssoufou Bamba, was asked whether French troops had captured Gbagbo he denied they had played any role. "I am clear about that. That's the Republican Forces of Cote d'Ivoire who have conducted the operation. Gbagbo is arrested. He is under our custody."

Everything points to a detailed coordination between France and pro-Ouattara forces. According to *Le Parisien's* live coverage, at 2:44 p.m. Gbagbo's compound had been breached, and only 38 minutes later, at 3:22 p.m., came the announcement of Gbagbo's capture from the French ambassador. At 3:54 p.m. it was reported that President Nicolas Sarkozy had a "long" telephone call with Ouattara.

Ouattara's camp paraded Gbagbo on television to prove that he really had been captured.

Gbagbo's supporters have accused France of wanting to assassinate him. He may also be in danger from Ouattara's followers. Ban Ki-moon tacitly admitted that Gbagbo's life was in danger when he stressed that his "physical safety should be ensured", adding: "I'm going to urge that."

Later in the day, 30 French tanks surrounded the compound and blocked key road intersections. Meanwhile forces loyal to his rival Alassane Ouattara seized the state television station. Reporters had seen new Kalashnikov rifles still in their transparent blue wrappers arriving for Ouattara's troops that morning.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon defended the assault, again claiming that the UN's aim was to protect the civilian population of Abidjan. "The continued use of heavy weapons against the civilian population and our peacekeepers, as well as the attack against the headquarters of the legitimate government, have compelled me, once again, to instruct UNOCI to use all necessary means to prevent the use of these weapons, pursuant to Security Council resolutions 1975 (2011) and 1962 (2010)", he said.

Hamadoun Toure, a UNOCI spokesperson, reiterated the claim that the rocket attacks on Laurent Gbagbo's residence were intended to neutralise heavy weapons that had been used to attack civilians. "We are not trying to take control of his residence.... Our objective is not to capture anybody", he said.

What will happen to Gbagbo now is uncertain. An anonymous diplomat told reporters, "I think they'll put him on a chopper as soon as possible, but nowhere in Abidjan is safe."

Gbagbo still has widespread support in Ivory Coast, especially the southern part that was previously held by his government and the official armed forces of the Ivory Coast. He won 46 percent of the vote in the November elections, according to a total endorsed by international observers. Gbagbo contested the tally.

Richard Downie from the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies warned putting Gbagbo on trial in Ivory Coast would "probably be a lightning rod for more unrest".

Not everyone is so cautious. A repulsive triumphalism is evident in the French press. *L'Express* claims that "the page of Françafrique is turning". Claude Guéant, minister of the interior, told *Le Parisien* that Ivory Coast will finally have "peace and a rebirth of economic development."

It is extremely unlikely that Ivory Coast will see any such transition to peace and economic development, under conditions where northern-based rebels have forcibly conquered the south, where Gbagbo retained significant electoral support.

Ouattara himself is under investigation for suspected war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by his followers in the western region of Ivory Coast.

International Criminal Court prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo has begun a preliminary examination of the evidence. This is the region that will present Ouattara

with the most problems when he assumes power, because it is the main region for the growing of cocoa—Ivory Coast's main export crop, along with gold and natural gas.

There is intense pressure for land reform. Former migrants want their claim to the land they occupy recognised. These tensions were the background to the massacres carried out in the region as Ouattara's forces advanced.



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