

Social catastrophe follows French imperialist intervention in Ivory Coast

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Widespread social instability continues in the Ivory Coast one week after France and the UN helped forces loyal to the internationally recognized president Alassane Ouattara in the overthrow of the regime of former president Laurent Gbagbo. The UN and French forces intervened in a civil war, assisting pro-Ouattara forces in conquering territory held by Gbagbo supporters.

Two million people have fled the violence, creating a humanitarian crisis in the region, while pro-Ouattara forces try to eliminate remaining pockets of resistance in the south of the country, the region formerly held by Gbagbo.

Security in the densely populated port city Abidjan remains scarce, as the city's police stations were destroyed in the fighting and most officers refused to report for duty. Civil servants also refused calls by the new regime to return to work, leaving local residents without basic services.

Ouattara is a former deputy director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and former governor of the Central Bank of West African States. His forces took former president Gbagbo into custody on Monday, April 11, after French military forces intervened against Gbagbo in the street-by-street fighting in Abidjan.

The campaign ended with the capture of Gbagbo and his handover by French forces to forces loyal to Ouattara. This means the installation of a new president closely linked to international finance, powerful sections of the French ruling elite, and even French President Nicolas Sarkozy himself.

Showing signs of having been physically beaten, former president Gbagbo, his wife, and entourage were paraded before the Ivorian media after their capture, in

an attempt to further demoralize pro-Gbagbo forces. Gbagbo has since been moved to an undisclosed location in a Ouattara stronghold in the north, while his wife remains in custody in Abidjan. The former interior minister, Dsir Tagro, is reported by state radio to have died last Tuesday after being badly beaten by pro-Ouattara forces.

Claims by the French government that the intervention was one of a humanitarian defense of the Ivorian population and of promoting democracy are immediately refuted by the disastrous conditions facing masses of Ivorian people.

In the west of the country, an estimated 200,000 have fled their homes, trying to escape the violence. Medical staff have also fled the area, creating a dangerous lack of personnel to treat victims of the violence or to deal with outbreaks of disease.

In the town of Duékoué, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that 27,000 have taken refuge at the Catholic mission there. "There is no food, people are sleeping on the ground, there is nowhere else to go, there are no toilets or washing facilities and we have no drinking water," Father Vicente Grupeli, director of the St. Therese of the Child Jesus Mission in Duékoué, told the Catholic News Service.

Reports are emerging of a possible malaria outbreak at the mission, with five people dying of the mosquito-borne disease at the mission last week. The UN mission in Duékoué reports also that at least 800 were killed in the area from inter-communal violence there during the week.

Other communities in the west report a widespread lack of food, water, electricity, and sanitation services.

Jumbe Omari Jumbe, a spokesperson for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), reported that there are an estimated 800,000 refugees in western Ivory Coast alone.

“There is a shortage of relief items, like food, water, medicine, even shelter. There is fear that this could lead to an early outbreak of waterborne diseases, such as cholera and diarrhea. In fact, there are reports of an outbreak of cholera in some parts of Cote d’Ivoire [the Ivory Coast]. And we fear that this may happen also to Abidjan,” Jumbe told *Voice of America*.

Communities along the border in neighboring Liberia are reporting a ten-fold increase in their local population over the course of the week, straining resources.

Mohamed Bah, the director for Plan International in Liberia, a children’s charity operating in the region, said in a statement the organization’s web site: “The situation for children is very worrying. Some have had to walk through dense jungle for up to 4 days to reach Liberia and have witnessed violence and killings. These children and families are traumatised and need support to overcome the atrocities they have seen. The communities in Liberia also need help to cope with this.”

The UNHCR reports that 150,000 Ivorian refugees, two-thirds of whom are women and children, have fled to Liberia since the start of the crisis last winter. This is on top of the estimated one million displaced in and around Abidjan, and the estimated 200,000 displaced migrant workers from Mali, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Guinea, according to the IOM.

There continues to be a significant French military presence in Abidjan, the business center of the Ivory Coast. In an interview with Bloomberg news, one official at the port in Abidjan said on Monday that “We don’t have any customers this morning but the port is open and protected by French soldiers.”

Following the order to open the ports by Ouattara on Monday, cocoa, coffee, and other agricultural and mineral exports are set to resume from the city. According to Ivorian officials, the full resumption of shipments onto the world market could take months. However, ships from Moeller-Maersk A/S, the world’s

biggest container shipment company, are expected in port to begin loading Ivorian cocoa this weekend. On Tuesday, a Dutch butane tanker arrived, the first commercial ship in port since the recent eruption of violence.

The opening up of the ports of Abidjan has global economic implications, especially on the global cocoa market, at a time of record growth as demand for the commodity rises in Asia. Neighboring Ghana, the number two cocoa producer in the world, behind only the Ivory Coast, has seen cocoa exports rise 47 percent over last year. At the height of the crisis, an estimated 2 percent of annual global cocoa output sat in Abidjan and San Pedro harbors.

The opening up of Ivorian ports also has wide implications for the landlocked economies of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, all of which have been affected by the shutting down of the shipping lanes into Abidjan. Food shortages have been reported in each of these countries, while in the city of Ouagadougou, in Burkina Faso, tens of thousands demonstrated against high food prices.



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