Investiture of French-backed president in Ivory Coast

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On May 21 French President Nicolas Sarkozy attended the investiture ceremony of Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara in the capital, Yamoussoukro. He was offered a warm welcome with full military honours by Ouattara, a long-standing ally of the French ruling elite. Other participants in the ceremony included UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and representatives of US President Barack Obama.

Sarkozy was accompanied by French billionaire financiers Martin Bouygues and Vincent Bolloré, as well as other corporate leaders: Michel Roussin of Veolia and Alexandre Vilgrain, the chairman of CIAN—the French Council of Investors in Africa.

The list of attendees makes crystal-clear the imperialist motives behind French backing for Ouattara in this April's civil war, which saw the overthrow of incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo. Tensions between Ouattara and Gbagbo, whose forces held the north and the south of Ivory Coast respectively, flared after disputed November 2010 presidential elections. An ex-deputy director at the International Monetary Fund and a former governor of the Central Bank of West African States, Ouattara was recognised by France and other major powers as the winner of the election.

When fighting broke out between the two camps in April, French and UN forces intervened directly in the war, bombarding Gbagbo's residence and supporting Ouattara's forces as they assaulted the commercial capital, Abidjan.

In his inauguration speech, Ouattara praised France—the former colonial power in Ivory Coast—for sharing "historic ties and a common vision of the future. Mister President Sarkozy, the Ivorian people thank you".

After attending the inauguration, Sarkozy gave a speech to French nationals in Ivory Coast, at a military base in Abidjan. He praised France's military intervention both in Libya and Ivory Coast: "In these two crises, Ivorian and Libyan, faced with leaders who were massacring their own people, the international community decided to act with determination, and it is to France's honour that she has, with a few others, led this just struggle".

Sarkozy made clear that the intervention in Ivory Coast is part of a French broader policy of neo-colonial war, symbolized by its aggression against Libya in March. He said, "It's a new African policy we are putting into practice. It's even an entirely new foreign policy, of which our engagement in Ivory Coast has illustrated in recent months".

Sarkozy added, "We will always keep military forces here to guarantee the protection of our citizens". He also announced that France, which has some 1600 troops in Ivory Coast, would revise agreements on military cooperation between the two countries.

The French daily *Libération* commented, "In announcing the maintenance of a military presence in Abidjan, Sarkozy is killing two birds with one stone. He is answering insistent demands from his Ivorian counterpart and reassuring the French community, but also from economic operators who are determined to realize the economic benefits of the crucial role Paris played in Gbagbo's fall".

Paris aims to use Ouattara's victory to turn Ivory Coast into a completely subservient military and commercial outpost of French imperialism. *Libération* also reported that a French colonel has been appointed as Ouattara's military advisor. This officer's role is to

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reorganise the Ivorian national army, whose leaders will be selected by the Elysée, the French presidential palace.

French firms plan to sign a number of business deals with the Ouattara regime in coming months. French Prime Minister François Fillon is due to visit Ivory Coast on July 14, with a big delegation of businessmen. France remains the biggest trading partner of Ivory Coast, where some 600 French companies are present, which control 30 percent of the Ivory Coast's GDP.

The pseudo-democratic pretences of the Franco-UN intervention—based on claims France is protecting the Ivorian population and enforcing the legitimate results of the November 2010—are cynical and false. Whatever support northern warlords tied to Ouattara may enjoy in their fiefdoms, Ouattara has not historically enjoyed popular support in the south, notably in Abidjan. He depends on the support of French imperialism to remain in power.

Reports from human rights groups suggest that Ouattara is trying to rule Abidjan through a reign of terror directed against Gbagbo loyalists. In its June 2 report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) writes, "Armed forces loyal to President Alassane Ouattara have killed at least 149 real or perceived supporters of the former President Laurent Gbagbo since taking control of the commercial capital in mid-April".

HRW reported that Ouattara's Republican Forces of Ivory Coast killed at least 95 unarmed people in Abidjan during operations in late April and May, when they sealed off and searched areas formerly controlled by pro-Gbagbo forces. During its May 13-25 mission in Abidjan, HRW found that "Killings, torture, and inhumane treatment by Ouattara's armed forces continued".

Across the Ivory Coast, the post-election conflict has resulted in some 3000 deaths and the flight of an estimated 2 million people, leading to a catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

According to charity for orphaned and abandoned children organisation *SOS Children's Villages Canada*, "Many children are still displaced, living and sleeping in crowded spaces without enough food or adequate facilities. In and around the capital city of Abidjan, some families have enough food for only one meal a day. Sanitation conditions in displacement camps are poor, leaving residents vulnerable to communicable diseases".

Far from aiming to protect civilians, France's overthrow of Gbagbo was bound up with essential commercial geo-strategic interests of French imperialism, notably rising competition with China for influence in Africa.

French relations with Gbagbo had deteriorated in recent years—particularly as he developed closer economic ties to China, and his supporters protested the presence of French troops in Ivory Coast. Trade between Ivory Coast and China increased from €50 million in 2002 to €500 million in 2009.

On April 16, *Le Monde* published an article by Winson Saintelmy, a businessman in Canada, who wrote, "The triumph of Chinese economic diplomacy in West Africa in particular boosted the geopolitical proximity between Mr. Gbagbo and the Beijing gerontocracy. The Quai d'Orsay [the French Foreign Ministry] saw France's eviction by China in Ivory Coast and in Africa as an intolerable geopolitical snub. As a result, the ouster of Mr. Gbagbo was one of France's strategic priorities. In the Gbagbo-Ouattara conflict, one sees the geopolitics of the fluctuating relations between China and France".

He added, "Any Chinese breakthrough in West Africa or Ivory Coast leads to a palpable decrease in French influence in the region, from the Quai d'Orsay's standpoint".

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