

New Year's Eve stampede kills 64 in Ivory Coast

Kumaran Ira
7 January 2013

At least 64 people were killed and over 200 injured in a stampede in the early morning of New Year's Day in Abidjan, the Ivory Coast's commercial capital. The tragic event occurred after thousands attended a fireworks display on New Year's Eve at Félix Houphouët-Boigny Stadium. Most of the victims were children aged between eight and fifteen. The stampede broke out when a crowd leaving the stadium after the fireworks display collided with another crowd approaching the stadium. Both crowds then encountered makeshift barricades that blocked people from moving along the main street, according to reports. The official AIP news agency said, "Rescue workers were at the scene two hours later but could not save the victims."

The leader of the military rescue workers, Lieutenant Colonel Issa Sako, said that the flow of people in the stadium caused a very large crush: "In the crush, people were walked over and suffocated by the crowd."

Many people were killed in an area that is normally open. One survivor reported, "Near the Justice Palace we were stopped by some people who put blockades of wood in the street. They told us we must stay in the Plateau area until morning. None of us accepted to stay in Plateau until the morning for a celebration that ended at around 1 a.m. "Then came the stampede of people behind us," she said. "My four children and I were knocked to the ground. I was hearing my kids calling me, but I was powerless and fighting against death. Two of my kids are in hospital with me, but two others are missing. They cannot be found." Evidence suggests that the Ivory Coast police bear heavy responsibility for the tragedy. Witnesses blamed the security forces for causing the stampede as they arrived to break up the crowd, triggering a panic in which many people fell and were trampled.

The Ivory Coast police have denied these claims. They claimed that "unknown people put tree trunks across the *Boulevard de la République*, where the trampling took place." However, the Associated Press cited another police officer who said, "For security, because there were so many important people at the event, we closed certain main streets ... After the fireworks we reopened the other streets, but we had not yet removed the tree trunks from the Boulevard de la République, in front of the Hotel Tiana near the National Assembly [parliament] building. That is where the stampede happened when people flooded in from the other streets." The New Year's Eve fireworks display was organised by President Alassane Ouattara to celebrate the "peace" after the installation of his government in April 2011. UN forces and France, the former colonial power in Ivory Coast, backed Ouattara in a brief civil war to oust incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo, whose supporters controlled the south of the country, where Abidjan is located.

Both Gbagbo and Ouattara had claimed victory after November 2010 presidential elections. This led to the outbreak of violence between Gbagbo's security forces and Ouattara's supporters, in which more than 1,000 people were killed. 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 2011, French and UN forces intervened directly in the war, bombarding Gbagbo's residence in Abidjan and supporting Ouattara. French Special Forces reportedly helped arrest Gbagbo in Abidjan. Gbagbo now faces trial at The Hague, in the Netherlands, accused of crimes against humanity for the civil unrest. After the New

Year's Eve stampede, Ouattara declared three days of national mourning and called for an investigation of the event. The government has claimed that the proper security measures were in place during the fireworks display.

On Saturday, the preliminary finding of the police investigation report said that the cause of the death in the stampede includes makeshift barricades, the narrowing of a major thoroughfare, bad lighting and a shortage of police officers.

Such claims do not answer obvious questions raised by the tragedy, such as whether the police indeed installed the barricades, why makeshift barricades that apparently could not be removed were installed in the first place, and why the rescue team took two hours to arrive.

Complaints have already been raised that the official investigation is being sabotaged by removal of and tampering with evidence at the scene. Mohamed Diaby, a member of a citizens' action group set up after the tragedy, told the *Guardian*: "At first people were sad, but now they are angry, and I am not sure that the investigation will tell us anything ... I have been on the ground in the days since this happened, and I saw that all the things that could explain what happened have been removed. How can you have an investigation when all evidence has been removed from the scene?"



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact