

Civilians Massacred by Western-Backed Forces in Ivory Coast

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Up to 1,000 civilians have reportedly been massacred in the town of Duékoué in the West African country of Ivory Coast. This is the biggest loss of life in the former French colony since the disputed presidential election in November 2010.

There has been a standoff between the two rival presidential candidates since the election. The stalemate has now descended into civil war, as Alassane Ouattara, who is backed by France, the United States and international bodies, tries to oust the incumbent Laurent Gbagbo.

Ouattara's forces have seized most of the country, including the political capital, Yamassoukro, and the main port, San Pedro. They are now fighting to gain control of the commercial capital, Abidjan. Gbagbo retains the support of his 2,500-strong presidential guard, an unknown number of mercenaries and the Patriotic Youth movement. Many elements in the army have shifted their allegiance to Ouattara, following a United Nations Security Council resolution on March 30.

France and Nigeria sponsored the resolution that called on all state officials to recognise Ouattara. This was the signal for the beginning of Ouattara's military assault on Gbagbo's forces.

"In a sense, this resolution is maybe the last message that we wanted to send to Gbagbo which is very simple: Gbagbo must go," France's ambassador to the UN, Gerard Araud, said. "It is the only way to avoid a full-fledged civil war and maybe bloody violence in the streets of Abidjan," he claimed.

The exact opposite has been the case. The UN resolution has given the green light for a civil war with disastrous consequences for the civilian population. One million people are thought to have fled the Ivory Coast in recent months. The numbers have swelled in the last few days. Many of them have crossed the border into neighbouring Liberia, which now faces a major humanitarian crisis in overcrowded refugee camps. Abidjan residents are sheltering in their homes as heavy shelling continues around the presidential palace and armed youths roam the streets. Shops and petrol stations have been looted.

Henry Gray, a field coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières, told reporters, "We had been visiting clinics until a few days ago, but the situation on the streets has deteriorated to such an extent that it's just become too dangerous to go outside. There's a lot of pillaging and looting going on, and if you're out on the streets you're basically a target. There is a real atmosphere of fear, particularly in poorer areas."

France's policy in Ivory Coast follows the pattern set in Libya, where France and Britain secured a UN resolution for a no-fly zone under the pretext of protecting civilians. The military action in Libya and Ivory Coast reflects the increasingly aggressive attitude the Western powers are taking in Africa, where they find themselves in an ever more intense competition for resources with China and other emerging economies.

France has reinforced its military presence in Ivory Coast. Paris has maintained a military presence there under Operation Licorne since the previous civil war. Operation Licorne acts in coordination with the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI). Paris has now flown in 300 more troops, bringing the number of French troops to 1,400. It has taken control of the main airport.

AFP reported a statement from Colonel Thierry Burkhard, a spokesman for Operation Licorne, who said, "Licorne, in coordination with UNOCI, has taken control of Felix Houphouet-Boigny airport. UNOCI and Licorne troops are ensuring security and air traffic control at the airport." It would, Burkhard said, allow "civil and military aircraft to land at the airport so that foreigners wishing to leave Ivory Coast can do so."

There are some 12,000 French citizens in Ivory Coast, but no plans have been made to evacuate them. The UN has already evacuated its non-military personnel. It ordered its non-essential personnel out of the country several weeks ago, when UN facilities came under attack from Gbagbo's forces. The airport was previously in the hands of the UN and could have been used for an evacuation had that proved to be necessary. The French seizure of the airport is an act of colonial aggression. Under the cover of international legality and humanitarian concerns, France is in the process of reasserting direct control over Ivory Coast.

The deaths in Duékoué are the immediate result of this drive by France to re-establish imperial power in Africa. Responsibility should be laid at the door of the Elysée Palace, where on Sunday President Nicholas Sarkozy was holding a meeting to discuss the situation in Ivory Coast. The massacre took place as Ouattara's forces were taking control of the town.

Washington has been obliged to criticise Ouattara, despite its political support for him. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed "concern" about the massacre at Duékoué and called "on the forces of President Ouattara to respect the rules of war and stop attacks on civilians."

Guillaume Ngefa, deputy head of the UNOCI, said that Ouattara's forces had carried out the killings in Duékoué. "We have evidence, we have pictures. This was retaliation."

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has spoken to Ouattara about the deaths. But the UN cannot sidestep its own responsibility. There were 200 UN peacekeepers conducting what they describe as "robust" patrols in the town at the time. UNOCI spokesman Hamadoun Toure claimed that the UN was "not aware" that civilians were being attacked and killed in the town. Yet in December, UNOCI established a 24-hour help line so that civilians could report attacks to them. UNOCI claims to have had 9,000 calls.

"We receive calls from all over the place, from the north, the east, the south, from Abijan and from villages as well," Guillaume Ngefa told Deutsche Welle.

Ngefa admitted that pro-Ouattara forces had been carrying out atrocities elsewhere. In one case, a whole village had been emptied of its inhabitants and replaced by Ouattara supporters. He knew that there had been cases of rape and that Gbagbo loyalists had “disappeared”. A UN helicopter had even been attacked by Ouattara forces in the north of the country, he said.

Despite this information, UNOCI claims not to have known what was happening in Duékoué. Yet the town was known to be a potential flash point. It dominates the cocoa-growing region of Ivory Coast and is a strategic prize. There have been longstanding tensions in the town between groups that consider themselves to be Ivory Coast natives and “foreigners” who come from the north of the country. In recent days, hundreds of displaced people have fled to the town, increasing tensions between rival communities.

Survivors say that when Ouattara’s forces entered the town, they made straight for the Carrefour district, which is known as a pro-Gbagbo neighbourhood. “There were massive killings, they set the place ablaze and burned down the [neighbourhood] completely,” said Patrick Nicholson of the Catholic charity Caritas.

The victims were shot or hacked to death with machetes. Retreating pro-Gbagbo forces and Liberian mercenaries then fell back on Guiglo, a town some 25 miles (40 kilometres) away, where they massacred migrant cocoa workers.

The full extent of what has happened in the district is not yet clear, but the massacre at Duékoué is well attested. Red Cross officials have been attempting to preserve the bodies for identification. Spokeswoman for the Red Cross (ICRC) Dorothea Krimitsas acknowledged, “There is no doubt that something on a large scale took place in this city, on which the ICRC is continuing to gather information. Everything seems to indicate that this was inter-ethnic violence.”

Bishop Gaspard Beby Gneba of Man reported on the situation of more than 1,500 people who have taken refuge in a local mission compound:

“There’s a traumatic humanitarian situation. They need food, medicine, water, sanitation. People have lost everything—houses, clothes—they do not even have a mat to sleep on.”

Refugees in Liberia told the BBC that fighters had attacked their villages with orders “to kill everyone and anyone”.

“I can’t go home, the rebels have guns. I don’t have a gun. They kill people and rape women. They can kill children and then they take the small children to go and fight. It’s impossible. I can’t go back,” one man said.

Clinton had no option but to warn Ouattara about the conduct of his troops, but Washington is nonetheless determined to replace Gbagbo and has made its support for Ouattara clear. Despite the massacre, she asserted that “Gbagbo is pushing Cote d’Ivoire into lawlessness. He must leave now so the conflict may end.”

Baroness Ashton of the European Union echoed Clinton’s call. “Alassane Ouattara is the democratically elected president of [Ivory Coast],” she said. “I urge Laurent Gbagbo to step down immediately and hand himself over to the legal authorities.”

What Ashton describes as “the legal authorities” are also carrying out atrocities and war crimes to the extent that the UN itself attributes the majority of deaths of civilians to Ouattara’s forces. Ouattara is supported only because he is acting as a proxy for the major powers that want to ensure that Ivory Coast remains under their domination.

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