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U.S.-FRANCE ANALYSIS SERIES
March 2003

The Crisis in Côte d'Ivoire

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For nearly thirty years after its independence from France in 1960, Côte d'Ivoire presented a rare example of growth and stability in the often-troubled region of West Africa. Now, after fifteen years of economic downturn and three years of political turmoil, Côte d'Ivoire is in the midst of a full-fledged crisis. A new phase of the crisis began in September 2002 when a mutiny erupted in the administrative capital of Abidjan, while rebels in the north seized the cities of Bouaké and Korhogo. They eventually took control of the entire northern part of the country and have the potential, if unsatisfied by political progress, to someday march on Abidjan. (See map). France, the former colonial power, sent reinforcements for the 600 French troops already present in the country under a permanent defense agreement to help protect western African populations and to monitor a cease-fire between the rebels and the government.

In January 2003, the French government organized peace talks between the Ivorian government, the rebel groups and all political parties, resulting in the Marcoussis Agreements.[1] These agreements call for a "reconciliation government" that would include rebels under the leadership of a new prime minister and for the settlement of long-standing issues including access to Ivorian nationality, rules of eligibility and land ownership. The implementation of these agreements, unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 1464, ran into trouble when President Laurent Gbagbo, once back in Abidjan, seemed to renege on his part of the agreement.[2]

At the time of this writing, the situation is still extremely uncertain. In the last weeks, significant progress, including the formation of a government that includes ministers from the rebels ranks, co-exists with signs of persistent tensions. One thing is clear; the stakes for regional stability are high. Côte D'Ivoire has long served as a hub for West African economies and as a pillar of political stability. Its collapse would have dramatic consequences for neighboring populations and for political order in the region.[3]

A Society in Crisis

The social and political turmoil in Ivory Coast has many facets. Analyses that reduce the crisis to a religious war pitting Muslims against Christians mislead more than they inform.[4] Rather, the origins of the present crisis can be traced back to the end of the period of sustained economic growth in the 1980s and the subsequent breakdown of the delicate balance between social groups established by president Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the father of Ivorian independence.

In the 1960's and the 1970's, the Ivorian economy was booming thanks to a mix of openness to foreign investment, cheap immigrant labor from surrounding countries, and high prices of the country's main exports—coffee, cocoa, and wood. Even in the absence of real democracy, the Ivorian state played a large role in the boom, not only by building infrastructure, but also by redistributing wealth and ensuring social peace, sometimes by simple bribery. Immigrants, especially from Mali, Burkina-Faso and Ghana, were welcomed, especially in the North, and allowed to settle in the country, to own land, and to hold government jobs. Their presence

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[1] The name of the accord comes from the town of Linas-Marcoussis, near Paris, where the negotiations were held. See http://www.ambafrance-abidjan.org/marcoussis.htm (in French).

[2] See Resolution 1464 at http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2003/sc7657.doc.htm

[3] For background on the Côte d'Ivoire crisis see the special issue of *Politique Africaine*, "Côte d'Ivoire : la tentation ethnonationaliste", of June 2000 (summary available at http://www.politique-africaine.com), as well as Richard Banégas and Bruno Losch, "La Côte d'Ivoire au bord de l'implosion", *Politique africaine* n°87, novembre 2002.

[4] Among others, see David Ignatius, "A French Fiasco in Africa?" *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2003, and George Will, "Permission from the Powerless", *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2003.

symbolized the country's bright economy as well as the universalistic and pan-African ideology of its president.

However, Houphouët-Boigny's skillful management of the country's social balance was successful only as long as economic growth remained strong. In 1981, the country entered a period of stagnation and recession, culminating in 1987, when the state had to suspend the repayment of its external debt and had to submit to painful structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF and World Bank. The state lost much of its re-distributive capacity, and the whole social fabric began to unravel. Other effects of the economic crisis included pauperization, increased corruption, decreased tolerance of immigrants and immigration, and the rise of the concept of *ivoirité* (literally, "ivorianness"), soon to be used by politicians for electoral benefit. Though there was a return to economic growth for a couple of years following the dramatic devaluation of the currency in 1994, this downward trend continued. To make matters worse, Houphouët-Boigny died in 1993 and was replaced by Henri Konan Bédié, who was much less skillful at integrating and accommodating diverse social groups.

Bédié picked up the concept of *ivoirité* to justify the predominance of his own ethnic group, the Akans, in the government and the military and to reserve public jobs for "true Ivorians," breaking with Houphouët's practice of ensuring access to power and wealth for diverse ethnic and regional groups. This concept of *ivoirité*—in a country where non-Ivorians, including many of who lived in the country before 1960, are 29% of the population— then took on a life of its own.[5] It was used by politicians and some media outlets (especially the nationalist press in Abidjan) to exclude immigrants and foreigners—many of them in the North, and many of them Muslims—from public life.

Box 1: Political parties and Rebel Groups

[5] Jean-Pierre Dozon, "La Côte d'Ivoire entre démocratie, nationalisme et ethnonationalisme", *Politique africaine* n°78, juin 2000

Main Political Parties	
FPI	Front populaire ivoirien; Leader: Laurent Gbagbo; party in power since 2000.
RDR	Rassemblement des républicains; Leader: Alassane Ouattara; main opposition party.
PDCI	Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire; Leader: ex-president Henri Konan Bédié; was the party of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the only legal party from 1960-1990; retained power until October–December 2000.
UPDPCI	Union pour la démocratie et le progrès en Côte d'Ivoire; Leader: Robert Gueï (killed on September 19, 2002).
Rebel Groups	
MPCI	Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire; the first and main rebel group with a political leadership; based in the North (Bouaké) of Côte d'Ivoire .
MPIGO	Mouvement populaire ivoirien du grand ouest; based in the West of Côte d'Ivoire.
MJP	Mouvement pour la justice et la paix; based in the West of Côte d'Ivoire.

Thus pre-existing differences, which had not mattered much in times of stability, became politically and symbolically significant, such as the generalized bitterness between a foreigner north—the people from the savanna and the desert, often Muslims—and an Ivorian south—the people from the forest and the coast, often Christians. As is often the case, economic and social crisis in Côte d'Ivoire led to a stigmatization of "the other" on ethnic, religious and regional bases, and identity was mobilized in the competition for power. In 2000, after Bédié was deposed by a coup (see chronology), Laurent Gbagbo, together with the leader of the junta General Robert Geï, endorsed a convenient disqualification of their main challenger, Alassane Ouattara, deeming him to have a "dubious nationality," despite having been a prime minister to Félix Houphouët-Boigny from 1990-93. This action further crystallized the tensions between the North and the South as Alassane Ouattara is both a Northerner and a Muslim.

The Role of the Armed Forces and of Neighboring Countries

Although *ivoirité* and the manipulation of identity play a decisive role, other factors also weigh in the current crisis. Unemployment, especially in Abidjan, the economic capital, means that many young men are available for political activity, such as the *Jeunes Patriotes*, followers of Laurent Gbagbo, whom the president uses, for example, to put pressure on the French embassy by asking them to demonstrate.

The armed forces of Ivory Coast (Forces armées nationales de Côte d'Ivoire, or FANCI) have undergone an increasing loss of social position since the 1960's. Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in numerous defense agreements between France and Côte d'Ivoire, essentially surrendered the external security of Ivory Coast to the French military.[6] He chose not to build a strong army—the current FANCI are not able to stop the rebels without the help of French troops and

[6] On the defense agreements, see http://www.rfi.fr/fichiers/MFI/PolitiqueDiplomatie/708.asp (in French).

mercenaries. Houphouët-Boigny was also careful to avoid antagonizing the soldiers, granting them decent pay and sometimes using bribery and other favors to stave off discontent. In the 1990's, the situation changed, as officers' traditional access to top public jobs waned and their pay and additional bribes, especially under Henri Konan Bédié, sharply decreased. Moreover, their participation in multinational peacekeeping operations exposed them to the better situation of the militaries of other countries and fed their criticism of bad governance and corruption in Ivory Coast. All this explains the mutiny of December 24, 1999, which turned into a *coup d'état* when General Robert Gueï was empowered by the mutineers and deposed Henri Konan Bédié. After this episode, many soldiers, apparently as many as 40%, chose not to return to their barracks.[7]

Another decisive factor in the current crisis is the intervention of neighboring countries, a pattern in recent African conflicts. President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina-Faso and President Charles Taylor of Liberia have both been accused of harboring and helping rebel officers. The uprising of September 2002 indeed seems to have been partly prepared in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso.[8] Angola has also provided aid to Laurent Gbagbo. At the same time, the instability in neighboring Liberia provided a ready source of weapons and soldiers, including child soldiers, to both rebel groups and the government.

Last but not least, Ivory Coast is the West African country most affected by the AIDS pandemic, with its corroding effect on the State, on society and on the armed forces.

Thus, the current crisis cannot be easily traced to a single cause. The very fact that it took time for the rebellion to express itself politically and formulate clear demands demonstrates its complex causes. It also demonstrates that the rebels are not the expression of one political party (such as the RDR of Alassane Ouattara), but rather the symptom of a greater and multifaceted *malaise* in Ivorian society. Although the various ethnicities, regions and religions have coexisted peacefully in Ivory Coast in the past, discourses of hatred from some media outlets and from some politicians have greatly exacerbated the current situation. In other words, the genie may now be out of the bottle, and the risk of large-scale massacres is clearly present.

French African Policy and the Dilemma of Intervention

France has been criticized from all sides for its management of the Ivorian crisis. Some blame French President Jacques Chirac for not backing the elected government enough and for using French troops to enforce a cease-fire rather than have them beat back the rebels. Others point out Gbagbo's fundamental lack of legitimacy and his frequent resort to foul play. In the run-up to the 2000 presidential elections, he helped exclude a major and probably more popular contender, Alassane Ouattara. Abstention ran high in that election, at more than 62%. Thus, they argue, France is actually propping up a discredited and illegitimate regime, which survives only because of the presence of 3,000 French soldiers.

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[7] Guy-André Kieffer, "Armée ivoirienne : le refus du déclassement", *Politique africaine* n°78, juin 2000.

[8] Richard Banégas, Bruno Losch, op. cit.

Both sides in the conflict point to the violation of human rights by the party they dislike. Reports by Amnesty International have blamed the rebels for killing prisoners and endangering civilians.[9] Reports by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have shed light on Laurent Gbagbo's death squads.[10]

For French African policy, Côte d'Ivoire has been a dilemma in the recent years. It is estimated that about 20,000 French nationals live in Côte d'Ivoire in normal times, though many are now exiles. Those who remain serve as potential hostages for various factions, especially the *Jeunes patriotes* affiliated with Laurent Gbagbo in Abidjan. Non-intervention by France is thus not a realistic option.

Intervention, however, runs counter to the recent trend in French African policy towards putting an end to neocolonialism. After many setbacks in the Great Lakes region in the mid-1990's, Paris began in 1997 to implement a new African policy based on the slogan *ni ingérence, ni indifférence*—neither meddling in the domestic affairs of African countries nor indifference to their plight. By reducing its military presence, by helping African countries to build their own peacekeeping forces, by expanding its cooperation with Anglophone Africa, and by multilateralizing its assistance (through the European Union, the IMF and the World Bank), Paris has tried to break with its old habits of the post-colonial period.

The results have been mixed, with both progress and resistance to this phasing out of *Françafrique*.[11] Paris resisted the urge to intervene in Congo-Brazzaville in 1997, as well as in Côte d'Ivoire during the first coup in December 1999. But when confronted with the recent situation in Côte d'Ivoire, Chirac decided to intervene and to try to restore peace through a political process. He has done so at great risk to French troops, who are caught between the FANCI and the rebels, in what might become an intractable civil war. Chirac and French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, while condemning the rebels for taking up arms, know that the rebellion is a symptom of deeper political and social problems that Laurent Gbagbo must address; they also know that the rebels could overthrow him if the cease-fire came to an end, hence the fairly harsh terms of the Marcoussis talks. This position has had the full backing of the international community, especially the United Nations Security Council, the African Union and ECOWAS (Economic Community Of West African States).

Another Area of French–American Cooperation

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[9] See http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/countries/côte+d'ivoire?OpenView&Start=1&Count=30&Expandall and Stephen Smith, "Amnesty International accuse les rebelles ivoiriens du massacre de prisonniers", *Le Monde*, February 27, 2003.

[10] See http://www.un.org./french/hr/ivory.pdf and Stephen Smith, "Côte d'Ivoire : enquête sur les exactions des "escadrons de la mort", *Le Monde*, February 7, 2003.

[11] See Guy Martin, "France's African policy in transition : disengagement and redeployment", March 3, 2000, http://www.afrst.uiuc.edu/SEMINAR/newFrench_African_Policy.pdf

French policy has also been heartily endorsed by the White House. The nationalist press in Côte d'Ivoire has tried to play Washington against Paris, but White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer has expressed President Bush's strong support for France's actions throughout the crisis, even when disagreement over Iraq was straining U.S.-French relations.[12] British Prime Minister Tony Blair also congratulated Paris for its handling of the situation at a meeting with President Chirac on February 4.[13] In Abidjan, the French and the American ambassadors are cooperating on a daily basis, for example they are both key players on the Monitoring Committee of the Marcoussis Agreements. Thus, even as differences over Iraq divided France and the U.S., the situation in Côte d'Ivoire demonstrated that many other issues of critical importance, such as the war on terrorism or regional contingencies such as Ivory Coast, require the continuation of strong French–American cooperation.

Appendix: Chronology of Events in Côte d'Ivoire

1960	Ivory Coast gains its independence. Félix Houphouët-Boigny is President.
1990	Competing political parties are authorized. Laurent Gbagbo challenges Houphouët-Boigny in the presidential election, but Houphouët-Boigny is reelected.
7 December 1993	Félix Houphouët-Boigny dies. Henri Konan Bédié replaces him as President.
24 December 1999	A mutiny turns into a coup, the first in Ivorian history. Henri Konan Bédié is deposed, and General Robert Gueï eventually heads the junta, becomes President, and promises elections.
6 October 2000	Based on the new constitution adopted in July, the Supreme Court bans Alassane Ouattara, a major contender (RDR party), from running in the upcoming elections because of his "dubious nationality". The RDR and the PDCI boycott the elections.
22 October 2000	Laurent Gbagbo is elected with 59.36% (but with an abstention rate of 62%.) General Gueï tries to manipulate the results and cling to power, but a popular urpising chases him out office.
10 December 2000	Gbagbo's FPI party wins the legislative elections, which the RDR boycotts.
19 September 2002	A military mutiny erupts in Abidjan. General Gueï and the Interior Minister are killed ; in the following days, rebels seize Bouaké and Korhogo. French troops evacuate foreigners from Bouaké.
17 October 2002	Rebels from the MPCI group and the government agree to a cease-fire, monitored by French troops. In October - November, two new rebel groups, the MPIGO and the MJP, appear in the West.
3 January 2003	MPIGO and MJP agree to a cease-fire with the government.

[12] Press briefing by Ari Fleischer, September 27, 2002 at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020927-7.html#2; Press briefing of February 3, 2003 at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030203-15.html

[13] Stephen Smith, "Les Nations unies placent la Côte d'Ivoire sous tutelle internationale", *Le Monde*, February 6, 2003.

15–24 January 2003	Negotiations between all political parties and rebels groups are held in Linas-Marcoussis near Paris and lead to an agreement on 24 January. It is formally endorsed by a "Conference of the Heads of State" in Paris on 25-26 January (including Secretary-General Kofi Annan for the UN, representatives from the Economic Community Of West African States and the African Union.)
4 February 2003	In Resolution 1464, the UN Security Council endorses the Linas-Marcoussis agreements and calls for their full implementation. Laurent Gbagbo seems unwilling to implement the part of the deal that calls for him to form a new government with ministers from the rebel groups.
8 March 2003	In Accra (Ghana), an agreement is made on the composition of the government, which includes representatives from the rebel groups, and whose Prime Minister is Seydou Diarra.