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Côte d'Ivoire Divided: Civil War Reprise?

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Summary

A stalled, fragile peace process in Côte d'Ivoire ("Ivory Coast"), split between north and south since a 2002 rebellion, is unraveling, and the threat of renewed civil war looms in the West African nation. This report provides an overview of the ongoing political/economic crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. It draws on news sources, private sector analyses, and data collections and information, both written and oral, from the U.S. and foreign governments, and from multilateral entities. It will be updated as events warrant.

Recent Events. In late September 2004, Côte d'Ivoire's parliament ended a special session without passing key legal reforms required under a July 2004 peace roadmap (*Accra III*), which laid out an agenda for implementing a January 2003 political-military accord, the Linas-Marcoussis Agreement (discussed below). In mid-October 2004, the northern rebel side, the New Forces (FN in French, used in some acronyms below) refused to disarm, as planned under Accra III, until the reforms are passed. President Laurent Gbagbo (*bag-bo*), however, restating a long-held position, said he would reconsider the reforms only if the FN begins to disarm. In late October, political tensions rose. Mobs attacked the opposition press, volatile rhetoric and street protests by anti-FN militants increased, and the FN recalled its ministerial delegation from Côte d'Ivoire's interim government of national reconciliation. The recall followed the FN's declaration of a state of emergency in the north after it discovered arms caches smuggled into its stronghold, the central city of Bouaké. The FN charged that the government was preparing for renewed war by sending the arms to rebel rivals of the FN and by massing troops.

On November 4, the government launched air attacks on Bouaké, and in Abidjan, the commercial capital, mobs attacked opposition party offices. In the following days, air strikes on northern targets continued, and the government began northward troop movements, which United Nations (U.N.) and French peacekeepers intercepted and halted. On November 6, government planes bombed a French military base in Bouaké, killing nine French peacekeepers and a U.S. civilian. The French force immediately retaliated by destroying the Ivoirian air force (four fighter jets and five military helicopters) and two civilian jets. This action angered many pro-Gbagbo supporters, who massed in anti-French protests that turned into riots, during which French-owned and

other businesses and properties were looted and burned, and French and other foreigners attacked in Abidjan and elsewhere. In response, France deployed two auxiliary battalions to Côte d'Ivoire to bolster its military force, and provided military protection and air assets for the voluntary departure from Côte d'Ivoire of about 4,000 French nationals, as well as other foreigners. French officials report that these actions caused a total of 20 Ivoirian civilian and military deaths. Separately, about 10,000 Ivoirians fled west to Liberia. France has denied pro-government supporters' charge that it seeks to topple the Gbagbo government. The African Union (AU), which has been involved in numerous, ongoing efforts to end the crisis, dispatched South African President Thabo Mbeki to mediate in the crisis. He later hosted talks among the Ivoirian parties in South Africa.

The Ivoirian government has offered no clear rationale for its air attack on the French base, which it has called accidental and regretful, but the strikes, reportedly carried out by Belorussian pilots employed by a Ukrainian firm, appear to have been deliberate. French official sources assert that the base was clearly marked and identifiable from the air as a French military base, and that the attacking jets made two low-altitude observation overflights before attacking. They are uncertain which Ivoirian authorities ordered the strikes, but postulate that Gbagbo himself likely did not. The United States condemned the street violence and the government's military attacks, and called the French retaliation "necessary to prevent further attacks and violence," mirroring a statement by the U.N. Security Council. It later imposed AU-supported arms sanctions on Côte d'Ivoire, which the government has since been accused of breaking.

Background. Côte d'Ivoire, a former French colony that gained independence in 1960, was politically stable for most of its post-colonial period. It had among the strongest economies in sub-Saharan Africa and was a key regional business hub. It attracted foreign investment, notably from France, and was a leading world producer of cocoa and coffee, among other exports. Its economic success was built on agriculture-friendly policies, generally favorable export prices, expansions in production, extensive French investment, and the labor of immigrants from its northern neighbors. They worked cheaply in exchange for jobs and access to land and farming rights in the south. There, a dynamic multi-ethnic society evolved, contributing to strong economic ties between Côte d'Ivoire and its neighbors. These outcomes were largely the legacy of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the Ivoirian president from 1960 until his death in 1993. His patriarchal, semi-authoritarian tenure was long marked by stability. Periodic internal strife and political dissent, which grew during his final years in office, were suppressed or averted through the use of a mix of state police power and political co-optation. Houphouët's policies, which employed the strategic use of political patronage, emphasized the collective benefits of national intra-regional elite cooperation, broad socio-economic inclusiveness, and reinvestment of national wealth in the economy. The military played almost no role in national affairs and did not threaten the ruling regime. National defense was largely entrusted to France, with which Côte d'Ivoire has a mutual defense pact.

Social & Political Divisions. Calls for increased democratization, accompanied by episodic social unrest and political tensions, emerged in the mid-1980s. These were spurred by long-term cocoa price and production declines, the 1980s debt crisis, and declining availability of new farm land, leading to slow economic decline, fiscal austerity measures, and growing political and economic rivalries and segmentation. While resource scarcities largely underlay these divisions, they increasingly began to be expressed in terms of ethnicity, regional chauvinism, and religious affiliation. The onset of multiparty

elections in 1990 fueled these tendencies by generating political parties that mobilized support around these parochial sources of affinity. The large, mostly Muslim populations of immigrant workers, their Ivoirian-born offspring, and northern Ivoirians resident in the south faced increasing resistance by southerners and the state to their full incorporation into civic life and citizenship. Multi-party political competition intensified after Houphouët-Boigny's death, which led to rivalries over leadership succession rights. His successor, Henri Konan-Bédié, adopted exclusionary politics as a means of building his political base. He promoted a xenophobic, nationalist ideology known as *Ivoirité*. It defined southerners as “authentic” Ivoirians, in opposition to “circumstantial” Ivoirians, i.e., northerners and immigrants. His politics created dissent within his party, the Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire (PDCI), causing some PDCI elements to form a new party, the Rally of the Republicans (RDR) under Alassane Ouattara (*wáht-aa-rah*), a former prime minister, multilateral financial institution official, and a key politician of northern ethnic origins. National politics has since remained prone to periodic volatility generated by combinations of electoral politics; military, student, and labor unrest; religious, inter-regional, and ethnic conflict; and sometimes violent mass protests.

Gbagbo Takes Power. President Gbagbo won a divisive, violent election in late 2000, taking power with a small electoral plurality from the military dictator Robert Guéï who had ousted Bédié in a 1999 coup. After Guéï attempted to rig the vote count in his own favor, Gbagbo's Ivoirian Popular Front (FPI) party called its supporters into the streets and gained the support of key security force elements. Guéï (who was later killed in the 2002 uprising) then fled and Gbagbo took power. The election set the stage for a growing divide between north and south. Electoral restrictions, both in 2000 and previously, had barred the electoral candidacy of Ouattara, breeding northern resentments. Despite social and political tensions, in 2001 and 2002 Côte d’Ivoire made limited progress toward regenerating national reconciliation and political compromise. In late 2001, for instance, key representatives from all major parties and national constituencies participated in a government-hosted, multi-faceted National Reconciliation Forum. But in July 2002, local elections were marked by some violence, boycotts, and irregularities.

September 2002 Rebellion. Guarded optimism about Côte d’Ivoire’s path was undercut in September 2002, when a military rebellion that initially appeared to concern military working conditions, pay, and retrenchment, grew into an attempted coup d’etat against Gbagbo by soldiers of mostly northern ethnic origin. Loyalist military and police units successfully guarded key state installations from rebel takeover, but could not suppress the rebellion. After clashes near Abidjan, and elsewhere, the rebels withdrew to Bouaké, and quickly gained control of the northern half of the country. Periodic, sometimes fierce fighting ensued, as the government unsuccessfully attempted to retake towns along the north-south front line. The country has since remained divided and often tense, though fighting had subsided until November 2004. The northern rebels formed a political organization, the Patriotic Movement of Côte d’Ivoire (MPCI), later called the New Forces, laid out their political demands, and attempted to set up local governance structures. They formed an alliance with two small rebel groups in western Côte d’Ivoire. These now-marginal groups, which reportedly included many Liberians and Sierra Leonean fighters, announced their existence in November 2002 by seizing several towns in the west. Since late 2002, the west has periodically experienced armed clashes over territory; communal violence related to immigrants’ land and residency rights; and violent criminality. International peacekeepers have occasionally clashed with the western rebels.

While civil and commercial life in the north resumed after disruptions caused by the rebellion, economic activity and access to social services sharply declined under rebel administration, and remain poor. Rivalries and armed clashes within rebel ranks have repeatedly occurred, and rebel elements and some French peacekeepers have engaged in criminal activities in the north. In the south, many northerners, opposition party supporters, foreign-born workers and their Ivoirian-born off-spring, have periodically faced mob violence by pro-Gbagbo militants, arson attacks on their homes, and harassment by security officials. Death squads have reportedly killed some opposition supporters. Such violence induced a large exodus to the north and to nearby countries of targeted populations, and caused a decline in regional trade and financial flows.

Mediation and Peace Accord. International conflict mediation efforts, notably by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), were initiated soon after the 2002 rebellion began. Little progress was made, however, until French-brokered peace talks near Paris led to the signing of a peace accord, the Linas-Marcoussis Agreement (available from the U.S. Institute of Peace online Peace Agreements archive), in late January 2003, following a rise in armed hostilities in the west. The accord kept Gbagbo in power, but provided for the creation of a government of national reconciliation (GNR) under a “consensus” prime minister. The accord gave the GNR a mandate to prepare for national elections and reform the armed forces, with external technical aid, to ensure ethnic and regional balance in the military. It required the “regrouping” and disarming of all forces, the deportation of foreign mercenaries, and called for an international accord monitoring committee, which was formed. An annex laid out a GNR agenda for resolving key issues underlying the crisis. It called for reform of electoral candidacy and citizenship eligibility rules, the electoral system, and land tenure and press laws; provided for the creation of a human rights abuse investigation panel; and called for nation-wide freedom of movement and for post-war economic recovery planning.

The accord was immediately opposed by many military and government officials, and by pro-FPI activists, who reacted vocally and at times violently; in some cases, protesters attacked French-owned businesses and homes. Accord critics asserted that it ceded too much power and made too many concessions to the rebels. A key issue of contention was an informal, verbal pledge by the government during the peace talks to give the MPCCI control of the defense and interior ministries, which the military rejected as “humiliating.” Gbagbo, under pressure to repudiate the accord, indicated that he had accepted the accord under foreign pressure and with great reluctance.

Accord Implementation Efforts. Despite such rhetorical misgivings, in compliance with the accord, Gbagbo appointed Seydou Diarra, a consensus nominee, as prime minister, a position that Diarra had held in a previous government. The Security Council endorsed the Linas-Marcoussis Agreement in February 2003 by passing Resolution 1464. It authorized two peacekeeping force deployments, a French one, *Operation Licorne*, and one mounted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), dubbed ECOMICI. The missions were charged with helping to implement the accord and resolve the conflict, and guaranteeing their own security and freedom of movement and the protection of civilians.

Despite many setbacks, including procedural boycotts and objections, and disputes over the defense and interior ministry nominations, implementation of the accord progressed until August 2003. A GNR cabinet was formed in March 2003, and on May

3, 2003, after fighting in the west, a cease-fire was signed. On May 13, the Security Council passed Resolution 1479. It created a cease-fire monitoring group, the U.N. Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (MINUCI), and urged implementation of the cease-fire and the underlying accord. A joint operation of French, FN, ECOMICI, and government troops was mounted to end on-going violence in the west. In late May, Diarra outlined a parliamentary peace-building governance agenda. A disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) committee and schedule were created; north-south military cooperation began; an end to war was declared; north-south transport links reopened, as did trade with neighboring countries; the cease-fire line was extended to the unstable west; and the government released some prisoners of war. In early August, the parliament passed a law amnestying those who had undermined state security from September 2000 to September 2002, a period that included Gbagbo's election and the FN rebellion.

Despite such positive signs, progress was often halting. The sides often accused one another of obstructionist acts and sought to blame one another for undermining progress toward peace. Agreements to withdraw forces from the cease-fire line, exchange prisoners, and initiate disarmament were initiated and failed several times. In mid-September 2003, Gbagbo appointed candidate ministers of defense and interior over the objections of opposition parties, and the FN, which accused Gbagbo of not ceding operational authority from its GNR ministers, withdrew from the GNR. Several months of high tension followed. Activists on both sides mounted raucous protests, despite a government ban. A decree disbanding hardline, often jingoistic pro-government youth groups produced limited results. In Abidjan a policeman murdered a French reporter covering opposition arrests, and opposition press facilities were attacked.

Key Legal Reforms. Notwithstanding such events, in late October 2003, the government agreed to “fast-track” key draft laws called for under the peace accord, at the urging of regional leaders seeking to promote the peace process. These would: reform constitutional presidential election candidate eligibility qualifications; give citizenship rights to certain immigrants and their offspring; and extend ownership rights to immigrant occupants of certain lands cultivated with local communities’ consent. The process for passing these laws is a key point of contention. Gbagbo favors passing all three laws by public referendum, though that process is required only to pass the candidate eligibility law, as it would amend Article 35 of the constitution. The other two could be passed by parliament, a process advocated by the FN, and U.N. and many foreign observers.

The political process remained stalemated and volatile until December 2003, when tensions eased and limited demilitarization along the cease-fire line took place. The FN joined a cabinet meeting in early January 2004. French peacekeepers expanded their deployment in the north to bolster security, public service delivery, and moves toward disarmament. In spring of 2004, tensions again rose; opposition parties boycotted the GNR for diverse reasons. A key point of controversy was the shooting death by security forces of 37 opposition protesters, and possibly many more, which a U.N. probe later examined. In mid-April 2004, another French journalist, known for reporting on corruption in the cocoa sector, was reportedly murdered. In mid-May, Gbagbo dismissed opposition ministers boycotting the GNR for failure to carry out their duties. In early June 2004, there were clashes along the cease-fire line.

U.N. Role. In February 2004, as proposed by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1528. It laid out a peace-building roadmap

and authorized the U.N. Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), with a troop level of up to 6,240. UNOCI, which deployed in early April 2004, assumed the authority of MINUCI and ECOMICI, which were dissolved. UNOCI was mandated, together with the French military force and other U.N. missions in the region, to use "all necessary means" to: observe and monitor the May 2003 cease-fire accord, and probe breaches of it; assist in creating trust between the opposed Ivoirian parties; aid in DDR, border monitoring, and the national restoration of state civil, police, and judicial functions; promote human rights; engage in multi-faceted security maintenance operations and public information activities in support of peace and the transit of aid, goods, and people; and prepare for elections.

On November 15, 2004, after the government's air and land attacks, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1572. It condemned the military strikes as "flagrant violations of the cease-fire," which it demanded all the parties uphold, and endorsed the reactions of UNOCI and the French retaliation. It urged the protection of all persons and property, a resumption of all commitments by the parties to the Linas-Marcoussis accord and ancillary agreements, and demanded that the Ivoirian authorities halt media broadcasts inciting hatred, intolerance and violence. It also imposed sanctions. It immediately banned for 13 months the supply of arms or military matériel to Côte d'Ivoire; mandated the freezing of economic assets persons, or their proxies; and banned the overseas travel of persons who in Côte d'Ivoire "constitute a threat to the peace and national reconciliation process," seriously violate human rights, or incite "publicly hatred and violence," or violate Resolution 1572. The latter two sanctions were imposed for 12 months, as of December 15, 2004. Certain exceptions pertain to each sanction measure.

U.S. Policy. Key facets of U.S. policy on Côte d'Ivoire include resolving and mitigating the political-military crisis there, due to the threat it potentially poses to regional economic and humanitarian well-being, stability, and security, as well as to U.S. regional conflict resolution and democratization policy goals. Many nearby countries have close economic and social ties to Côte d'Ivoire, and might become involved in its conflict, should the security situation in Côte d'Ivoire threaten their citizens, territory, or national interests. Others are themselves undergoing post-civil war transitions, and are the recipients of U.S. and U.N. aid that could be imperiled by renewed regional instability. In recognition of the negative humanitarian and regional effects of the conflict, the United States has provided emergency aid to many people displaced by it. Though some observers have speculated that anti-French actions by pro-Gbagbo supporters represent an attempt to appeal to alleged U.S.-French foreign policy differences, U.S. policy appears generally supportive of French actions in Côte d'Ivoire. U.S. support also helped pass French-backed U.N. sanctions against Côte d'Ivoire, which is also subject to a ban on most forms of U.S. bilateral aid, with some exceptions, because it has not held legitimate democratic elections since the 1999 Guéi coup. In November 2004, Secretary Powell spoke to President Gbagbo in a conversation said by one columnist to have been "lengthy and tough" (Jim Hoagland, "Giving France A Hand," *Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 2004). The United States also supported the creation of UNOCI, though its backing was contingent on changes in the mission as originally proposed by other Security Council members, notably France. It also provided about \$9 million in aid to help ECOMICI deploy, and has repeatedly and persistently pressed the two parties to durably resolve their conflict. On November 2, 2004, the U.S.-backed World Bank suspended its support for Côte d'Ivoire because of its failure to repay its World Bank credits. A 133-member Peace Corps program was suspended after the volunteers were evacuated by U.S. and French forces after the 2002 rebellion; the program country office closed in May 2003.