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Côte d'Ivoire: Amnesty International expresses concern at the violent incidents and incitement to hatred in the election campaign

While the date of the presidential election is being continuously postponed, the last week has seen a wave of violence that could plunge this crisis-torn country into chaos again.

"All the ingredients that led to serious human rights violations in the past are present once again", Véronique Aubert, Deputy Director of the Amnesty International Africa Programme, said today. *"With none of the main Ivorian political actors showing any sign of wanting to avoid a deterioration in the situation, it is incumbent on the international community, especially the United Nations and the mediator in the Ivorian crisis, Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso, to put pressure on all Ivorian politicians to prioritize respect for human rights."*

The current wave of violence is associated with disputes about the compilation of an electoral roll for the presidential election, which has been repeatedly postponed since 2005. The opposition parties have denounced calls to exclude tens of thousands of people suspected of being foreign nationals because they bear Muslim family names.

On 3 February 2010, several thousand demonstrators organized protest marches in Divo, a town in the centre west of the country, some 200 km from Abidjan, the economic capital, in an attempt to prevent judges removing them from the electoral roll. The security forces opened fire on the demonstrators to disperse them, leaving eight wounded, including several with bullet wounds.

Supporters of President Laurent Gbagbo have denounced what they claim to be fraudulent attempts to add to the electoral roll the names of more than 400,000 electors whose nationality has not been fully verified. These suspicions of fraud led President Gbagbo to dissolve the Independent Electoral Commission and the government on 12 February 2010.

Some opposition political parties then called on their supporters *"to oppose the Laurent Gbagbo dictatorship by every means possible"*, which led to acts of violence and vandalism against premises and goods belonging to the Front populaire ivoirien (FPI), Ivorian Popular Front, the Head of State's political party.

The security forces have repressed several demonstrations, particularly in the town of Gagnoa (in the centre-west of the country), where at least five demonstrators were shot dead while protesting against President Gbagbo's decision to dissolve the government and the electoral commission.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the resurgence of a xenophobic discourse by self-proclaimed supporters of President Gbagbo, who have called for resistance against the "foreigners" who want to register on the electoral roll. In Divo, lawyers defending the head of state's position allegedly stated that *"the provisional electoral roll is infested. Every effort should be made to disinfect it."*

"It is essential to put an end to this xenophobic discourse, which is often promoted by the ideology of 'Ivoirité', one of the main reasons for division and human rights violations in Côte d'Ivoire since the beginning of the crisis in 2002", Véronique Aubert said today. "In this respect, it is incumbent on the Head of State to clearly indicate that this incitement to hatred, denounced time and time again by the United Nations, will not be tolerated."

Amnesty International is also concerned about the decision taken by the Ivorian media regulatory body on 22 February 2010 to "suspend" broadcasts by the television channel France 24, which was officially accused of "non-professional treatment of information" on the country's recent "political situation".

Background

After being postponed five times since 2005, the presidential election is scheduled to take place in 2010 and put an end to the crisis that began with the September 2002 armed uprising that resulted in the *de facto* partition of the country between the south, controlled by supporters of President Gbagbo and the north, in the hands of the Forces nouvelles, New Forces, the movement that came out of the armed uprising.

Under pressure from the international community, especially the United Nations and its mediator in the Ivorian crisis, Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso, an Independent Electoral Commission was created and began to prepare the electoral roll.

After weeks of arguments in which each side accused the other of trying to rig the electoral roll, President Gbagbo dissolved the Independent Electoral Commission and the government on 12 February 2010. The head of state reappointed his prime minister, Guillaume Soro, general secretary of the Forces nouvelles, and asked him to form a government. Soro is trying to convince opposition leaders to rejoin the government but they are demanding "reinstatement" of the electoral commission prior to any discussions on their participation in the government.