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Côte d'Ivoire: The recent ceasefire breakdown could lead to a resumption of hostilities

The recent violation, on 28 February 2005, of the ceasefire in the west of Côte d'Ivoire could be just the first sign of a resumption of hostilities, as indicated by the announcement yesterday of the launch of "an all-out guerrilla war" by a pro-government militia. Moreover, an appeal for all "patriots" to mobilize on Sunday 13 March in Abidjan threatens to arouse strong feelings and could lead to fresh confrontations which might give rise to serious abuses of fundamental rights.

"Amnesty International is convinced that, without immediate and energetic action on the part of the international community, the precarious status quo, which has been compromised repeatedly by calls for a resumption of the conflict, could collapse spectacularly and draw the country into irreversible chaos" said the organisation today.

The return of tension was illustrated, on 28 February 2005, when combatants, apparently members of the Movement for the Liberation of the West of Côte d'Ivoire (*Mouvement de Libération de l'Ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire (MILOCI)*), a pro-government militia led by "Pasteur Gammi", launched a surprise attack on the town of Logoualé (450 km north-west of Abidjan, not far from the ceasefire line), against a position held by the New Forces (*Forces Nouvelles*), (the name of the former armed opposition group under whose control the northern part of the country has come since the armed insurrection of September 2002). According to the New Forces, these hostilities have resulted in the deaths of more than thirty members of the pro-government militia.

"Amnesty International believes that it is essential for members of the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) to be able to investigate the circumstances surrounding these deaths, in particular with the help of forensic medical examinations, in order to ascertain whether these militiamen were killed in combat or whether they were the victims of summary executions after having been wounded or taken prisoner by the New Forces" the organisation said today.

Amnesty International recalls that all parties to the conflict are under an obligation to comply with common article 3 to the Geneva Conventions which states that "Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed *hors de combat* by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause, shall in all cases be treated humanely".

This new breakdown of the ceasefire resulted in the rapid intervention of UNOCI forces, who intercepted 87 armed combatants, suspected members of this pro-government militia, and put a stop

to the fighting hours after the attack was launched. Several days later, UNOCI delivered these armed combatants to the Police Chief in Guiglo (a town in the west of the country, under governmental control). When handing these people over to the Ivorian authorities, UNOCI publicly stated that it hoped "appropriate judicial measures would be taken against them". It appears that the guarantees demanded by UNOCI in this respect have not, for the moment, been granted.

However, information received by Amnesty International reveals that these people received a hero's welcome when they arrived at Guiglo. It appears that some of them have already been released and the majority, if not all of them, could escape judicial investigation, even though some of them were allegedly speaking English amongst themselves and could be mercenaries; the recruitment and use of mercenaries is prohibited by numerous international instruments, including the Organization of African Unity Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, which was adopted in 1977 and signed by Côte d'Ivoire on 27 February 2004.

Among the combatants intercepted by UNOCI were two children, aged ten and eleven, apparently of Liberian origin. These two children were handed over to UNICEF. *"Amnesty International is concerned at the presence of these children in an armed unit, engaged in combat, and recalls that since the start of the internal conflict in Côte d'Ivoire many child soldiers have been recruited by all parties to the conflict, especially from Liberian refugee camps in Côte d'Ivoire, in violation of every international instrument strictly prohibiting the participation of children under fifteen years of age in hostilities in any capacity whatsoever"*, said the organisation today, calling on all parties to the conflict to put an immediate stop to this practice of recruiting and using child soldiers.

Amnesty International is also concerned that, on 28 February 2005, UNOCI seized weapons from the combatants it had intercepted, including rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), Kalashnikovs (AK-47s) and pump-action shotguns. "The utmost urgency should be employed to determine the origin of these arms and any violation of the arms embargo that has been imposed by the United Nations Security Council on all parties to the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire since November 2004".

These militia currently constitute one of the biggest threats to the stability of the country and disarming them is one of the fundamental conditions for putting an end to the serious abuse of fundamental rights in Côte d'Ivoire. In this connection, a press release published on 2 March 2005, the day after news was received of the ceasefire breakdown, the Secretary General of the United Nations appealed "to the parties to call off all their militia and remind the leaders, and their followers, that they will all be held responsible for any premeditated attacks ...". The situation is all the more alarming in that "Pasteur Gammi", leader of the MILOCI, made a public announcement on 7 March 2005 that he was going to launch "an all-out guerrilla war", directed in particular at the West of the country, which is under the control of the New Forces.

During a recent fact-finding mission in Côte d'Ivoire, Amnesty International gathered corroborative information indicating that some pro-government armed militia were responsible for serious abuses, in particular ill-treatment and intimidation of the population, and racketeering.

« *"In this presidential election year, which is traditionally a high-risk period in Côte d'Ivoire, the role of the international community and UNOCI, its representative on the ground, is vital if we are to avoid the terrible countdown that some extremists have already started in their minds and with their words, with the risk of throwing Côte d'Ivoire into irreversible chaos, the consequences of which would be incalculable for the entire sub-region"*, claimed Amnesty International today.

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