

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 31/003/2004 (Public Document)
News Service No: 070
26 March 2004

Côte d'Ivoire: Excessive use of force to repress banned demonstration

Amnesty International is concerned at the excessive use of force by the security forces, who fired live ammunition at unarmed demonstrators in Abidjan on 25 March 2004. MI 24 helicopters were also used to launch tear gas grenades at the crowd.

The demonstration, called by several political parties, including the *Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI), Côte d'Ivoire Democratic Party, the former single party, the *Rassemblement des Républicain* (RDR), Republican Assembly and the *Forces Nouvelles* (FN), New Forces, that staged an uprising in September 2002 against the government of President Laurent Gbagbo, resulted in the death of at least 25 people, including three police officers. These clashes were the most violent that Abidjan has witnessed since the beginning of the armed uprising in September 2002. The demonstrators, who were protesting peacefully, clashed with security forces when they tried to stop them reaching the city centre.

The parties were demonstrating in favour of the implementation of the Linas-Marcoussis Accords, signed in January 2003 by all Ivorian parties, and were denouncing the head of state, President Gbagbo, who they blame for blocking the peace process. A few days before the demonstration, the president issued a decree banning all marches before 30 April 2004, and the security forces warned they would use all the means at their disposal to prevent the demonstration planned for 25 March 2004.

The security forces used force against PDCI militants who were trying to leave their party's headquarters, and sprayed them with tear gas. The security forces then surrounded the party's headquarters all day. Three hundred people were shut inside, including many women.

Several witnesses told Amnesty International that the security forces fired live ammunition at unarmed demonstrators. One witness told Amnesty International: "*towards 7.00 a.m., at Wassakara, in Yopougon (to the north of Abidjan), the security forces asked demonstrators to withdraw. When they refused, they first fired tear gas, then live ammunition at the demonstrators, who were unarmed. I saw two demonstrators fall: Ayemou Kouakou Jacques (hit in the throat) and Coulibaly Mamadou, a student doing a masters in geology, hit in the lower stomach.*"

Some demonstrators fought back against the security forces, especially in the district of Abobo, where they disarmed and killed two police officers. Some sources indicate that their bodies were then hacked to pieces by machete blows. The demonstrators finally dispersed towards the end of the day.

The opposition parties have called another demonstration for today, Friday 26 March 2004. In addition, the RDR and the FN announced that they had suspended their participation in the government of national reconciliation. The PDCI withdrew from the government at the beginning of March 2004. President Gbagbo's party, the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI), Côte d'Ivoire Popular Front, described the demonstration

as an "attempted armed insurrection".

"In the light of such serious events, and the fact that each side blames the other for the events that resulted in the death of at least 25 people, Amnesty International calls for the creation of an independent inquiry with a view to throwing light on the events and bringing those responsible for the excessive use of force to justice," affirms the organization.

The authorities have also put pressure on journalists in an attempt to prevent them covering the demonstration. The military have threatened foreign journalists, especially those working for the French television channel, France 2, to intimidate them and to dissuade them from covering the demonstration. Meanwhile, foreign radio stations, including RFI, BBC and Africa No 1 can no longer be received in Abidjan, as also happened at the beginning of the September 2002 armed uprising.

Amnesty International protests at the repeated manoeuvres by certain government authorities that are trying to restrict the freedom of information in Côte d'Ivoire. Four journalists were briefly questioned during the demonstration: Al Séni, Mesmer Agbola and Kady Sidibé from the *Patriote* newspaper, which is close to the RDR, and Liah Ignace, a journalist with the daily newspaper, *Le Nouveau Réveil*, which is close to the PDCI. A fifth person, Willy Aka, a photographer for the independent daily paper, *L'intelligent d'Abidjan*, was attacked by the security forces, who destroyed his material.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the fate of the many people arrested since yesterday and detained for questioning. *"These people run serious risk of torture and ill-treatment. After previous demonstrations, especially in December 2000, dozens of people were the victims of torture, including sexual abuse, and we appeal to the authorities to give strict orders to the security forces to respect the fundamental rights of all those arrested,"* affirms the organization.

In addition, Amnesty International asks the authorities to give the International Committee of the Red Cross immediate access to the detainees, so they can ensure their security is guaranteed and that they receive medical attention and rapid access to their families and lawyers.

The organization also requests the release of all prisoners of conscience that yesterday exercised their right to peaceful expression and were subsequently detained.

For more information, contact the Amnesty International press office in London, the United Kingdom, on +44 20 7413 5562 Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>