

COTE D'IVOIRE

Without immediate international action, the country will descend into chaos

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From Bamako, the capital of Mali, an Amnesty International delegation that has just completed a research mission to the north of the Côte d'Ivoire today launches an urgent appeal to the international community to intervene immediately to end the constant massacres, displacement of populations and denial of the fundamental rights of tens of thousands of people. This situation has arisen due to the conflict that began in September 2002 after armed groups rebelled and took control of the northern half of the country.

This is the second research mission carried out by Amnesty International in Côte d'Ivoire since the beginning of the crisis. The first mission, which took place in October 2002, focused on the human rights situation in Abidjan.

The Amnesty International delegation gathered disquieting information about atrocities committed by armed opposition groups, including the *Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI), Côte d'Ivoire Patriotic Movement, which controls the north of the country. These atrocities include the arbitrary arrest and "disappearance" of government representatives and members of the security forces, the summary execution of civilians and presumed delinquents and the denial of certain essential rights such as the freedom of movement. In addition, the delegation visiting northern Côte d'Ivoire and the refugee camps in Mali gathered personal testimony from civilians, men, women and children, who have fled the areas held or retaken by government forces, who are responsible for the extra-judicial execution of dozens of people, mostly natives of northern Côte d'Ivoire or foreign nationals.

After the failure of the negotiations between the two parties in Lomé, Togo and the difficulties involved in replacing the French troops officially charged with maintaining the increasingly precarious cease-fire by an African intervention force, the risks of a conflagration throughout the country have never been so great. This could implode the country and result in massive atrocities against the civilian population. This situation could also seriously destabilize other countries in the sub-region.

The international community, starting with the United Nations and the African Union, are duty-bound to protect the civilian population of Côte d'Ivoire and those who have fled to neighbouring countries to escape incessant violence and increasingly insupportable living conditions.

SECURITY PROBLEMS FACED BY AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S DELEGATION

Despite the written assurances given by the MPCCI authorities with regard to the security of the Amnesty International delegation, and the written authorizations given to members of the delegation by officials responsible for MPCCI military operations, the investigation was made very difficult by the aggressive attitude of young armed soldiers, who regularly threatened delegation members with death at the numerous road check-points. The delegation was therefore forced to demand an escort, and this greatly limited its freedom of movement and the scope of its investigation. However, the delegation should highlight the responsible and courteous attitude of some military and civilian MPCCI representatives, who, despite everything, ensured that this mission was completed without major incident. The delegation also recalls that during the previous Amnesty International mission to Abidjan in October 2002, one member of the Amnesty International delegation was taken in for questioning for two hours before being released after the intervention of the Minister of Justice.

ATROCITIES COMMITTED BY THE MPCCI

Arbitrary detentions and "disappearances"

Since it took control of the northern half of the country, the MPCCI has detained dozens of people, notably government representatives, including the mayor of Korhogo, Nestor Kouakou; members of the security forces, including the police commissioner and a dozen gendarmes in Korhogo; and at least 12 members of the security forces, mainly gendarmes, in Bouaké.

Despite written assurances and verbal promises given by the MPCCI authorities to the Amnesty International delegation, it was not possible to meet the individuals detained in Korhogo. The conditions in which they are detained are therefore a cause for concern.

With regard to the individuals detained at Bouaké, the Amnesty International delegation learned from independent sources that on 6 October 2002, when government forces attacked the town, dozens of gendarmes, accompanied by some of their children, were arrested by armed members of the MPCCI.

Amnesty International's request to meet the detainees at Bouaké provoked some resistance. However, thanks to the intervention of the Head of Operations at Bouaké, the

delegation was able to visit the 3rd infantry battalion camp and speak confidentially with ten gendarmes, one soldier and one police officer arrested on 6 October 2002.

Apart from the twelve individuals who it was able to meet in prison, the Amnesty International delegation was not able to obtain details from the MPCCI on the fate of the dozens of other gendarmes and their children arrested on the same day. The organization issues a firm reminder that the security of the twelve prisoners of war it met at the Bouaké military camp must be ensured and asks that these prisoners be allowed regular visits from their relations and doctors.

The delegation asked the MPCCI authorities about the discovery in December 2002 of a mass grave at Bouaké containing the bodies of dozens of gendarmes. The MPCCI said that these gendarmes were killed in combat on 6 October 2002. Despite its request, the delegation was unable to visit the place where the bodies had been buried. Amnesty International calls for an international inquiry into the circumstances in which these gendarmes were killed. Tuo Fozié, head of operations at Bouaké, accepted this proposal in principle, when interviewed by the delegation.

Summary executions of known or presumed delinquents

Amnesty International has gathered information about the systematic execution of known or presumed delinquents, summarily killed by the MPCCI.

The organization raised this issue with a military representative of the armed opposition movement, who recognized the systematic nature of these executions and justified them as being necessary to maintain order.

Amnesty International protests energetically against these summary executions. Such executions can in no circumstances constitute an acceptable response to crime and they violate the imprescriptible right to human life.

Failure to respect the right to freedom of movement

During its mission, the Amnesty International delegation learned of several cases in which people from the south of the country or with surnames different to those common in the north of the Côte d'Ivoire and neighbouring countries, were denied the right to leave the region.

A witness in Korhogo said:

“On 10 December 2002, I tried to leave the town to join my family in Abidjan, but at the coach station, the MPCCI people were checking identity cards and prevented me from boarding the bus. They told me: ‘We are keeping you as a human shield to stop the loyalists bombarding the town.’ ”

In another case, an official of the Water and Forests department of Niélé, a small town near the border with Mali, was forced to bring back part of his family that had sought refuge on the other side of the border, because local MPCCI representatives threatened to take two of his children hostage if he did not.

Enlistment of minors

During its mission, the Amnesty International delegation observed that hundreds of young people, including minors aged about 14, had been enlisted into the MPCCI armed forces.

Amnesty International raised the issue of the enlistment of minors with the MPCCI authorities. They denied this and affirmed that some new recruits might appear younger than they were because inadequate nutrition had held back their physical development. The MPCCI assured us it was not recruiting people under 18 and insisted that young people had enlisted on a voluntary basis.

However, a teacher in Korhogo told the Amnesty International delegation that he had recognized two of his pupils, aged 15, among the young people enlisted by the MPCCI. Such young people are often deployed at check-points along the region's roads and the delegation was able to observe to its cost, that these untrained recruits, suddenly in possession of arms, display aggressive and violent behaviour.

Amnesty International finds the phenomenon of the enlistment of minors concerning. It is contrary to all international standards in this matter.

VIOLATIONS COMMITTED BY GOVERNMENT TROOPS

In the north of Côte d'Ivoire and in Mali, the Amnesty International delegation gathered dozens of statements from people who had fled zones held or retaken by government forces. These people reported massive extra-judicial executions of civilians suspected of supporting the MPCCI or targeted because of their ethnic or foreign origin.

Extra-judicial executions and ill-treatment in the Daloa region

At the Modibo Keita stadium, in Bamako, the delegation met dozens of Mali nationals who had fled the Daloa area, where dozens of people were killed when the town was retaken by government forces on 16 October 2002. These new testimonies confirm the information published a few weeks ago by Amnesty International about the massacre of dozens of people at Daloa.

Dambele Wassa, a young Mali woman, 21, said:

“At 21.00 during the curfew, uniformed soldiers broke down the door of our house. They were looking for Lamine Koné, the head of our family. When they found him, they killed him in front of us. There were fourteen people in the house. They did not attack the women but made all the men go outside. They then stripped and beat the men.”

Another Mali refugee, Coulibaly Ousmane, from the village of Dokoué, not far from Daloa, who, in 1978, bought fifteen hectares of a cocoa plantation that he worked with all his family, said:

“On Monday, 21 October, soldiers accompanied by civilians of the Guéré ethnic group, with which we lived without any problems, came to my house. The civilians killed my brother Adama Coulibaly and my wife, Awa Coulibaly by hitting them with a wooden club. They also hit me but I managed to escape into the bush. I went to complain to the deputy mayor, who told me: ‘We have not done any killing so far but we are going to start now’. I then fled on foot to Daloa, where I boarded a bus to Mali.”

ATROCITIES COMMITTED BY THE PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT AFTER THE CAPTURE OR RECAPTURE OF TOWNS

More than a month ago, Amnesty International alerted international opinion to the risk of summary executions and even massacres in the event of either party to the conflict capturing or recapturing an area. Two recent examples in Monoko Zohi, near Vavoua and in the region of Man, near the Liberian border, have confirmed these fears.

Discovery of a mass grave at Monoko Zohi

On 5 December 2002, French soldiers discovered a mass grave containing dozens of corpses near Vavoua, in Monoko Zohi.

On the roads in northern Côte d'Ivoire, the Amnesty International delegation saw dozens of buses fleeing the Burkinabè region, where there was fighting between MPCCI forces and government troops who were occupying the area.

The Amnesty International delegation collected several comparable statements describing this situation:

“Uniformed soldiers attacked the village on Thursday 28 November. There were only six ‘rebels’ in the village and they all fled. The soldiers had a handwritten list of names and they asked civilians where they might find those people. They killed a lot of people, especially rich people, notably Adama Ouédraogo, a businessman, Ali Ouédraogo, Kafale Boukary and Podogo Ali. They threw some bodies in the wells. We buried the bodies then we fled because the wells had been poisoned.”

The two parties to the conflict, each of which held control of the village in turn, denied responsibility for these facts and called for an international inquiry.

Amnesty International calls for the establishment of an international commission of enquiry to intervene as quickly as possible before evidence disappears. The commission should include a team of forensic and ballistic experts able to determine the conditions in which these people were killed.

Atrocities committed in the Man region

On 28 November 2002, two new armed opposition groups, the *Mouvement populaire ivoirien du Grand Ouest* (MPIGO), the Western Côte d'Ivoire Popular Movement and the *Mouvement pour la paix et la Justice* (MPJ), Peace and Justice Movement, took control of some parts of the west of the country, not far from the border with Liberia, including the towns of Danané and Man.

At Bamako, the Amnesty International delegation met people who had fled the Man region and who reported atrocities by both the armed opposition groups that seized the town, and then by the government forces that recaptured it two days later.

One witness declared that the town of Man was simultaneously attacked by two armed groups on 28 November 2002, one coming from Danané, near to the border with Liberia and composed of people speaking English and other languages of the sub-region. This group, the MPIGO occupied northern parts of the town, whilst another group, the MPJ, coming from Sémien, seized the southern part.

This witness stated:

“The ‘rebels’ sought out the gendarmes who had hidden in the houses of civilians and killed them. They also killed people who had agreed to hide the gendarmes.”

Another witness stated:

“Civilians who had fled the areas held by the MPCCI were killed by the ‘rebels’ after being denounced because they were suspected of being sympathizers of Laurent Gbagbo [Head of State, Côte d’Ivoire]”

Moreover, other witnesses indicated that civilians who fled the town occupied by these two armed opposition groups were killed.

When the Ivorian army recaptured the town of Man, on Sunday 1 December 2002, they arrested many people, notably members of the *Rassemblement des républicains* (RDR), Republican Assembly, Alassane Ouattara’s party.

One delegate told the Amnesty International delegation:

“The soldiers had a list of 35 people and they went off looking for them. More than a dozen people were arrested and taken to an unknown place.”

Among the “disappeared” people are Maméry Soumahoro, President of the RDR district committee; Traoré Abdoulaye, local President of *Cercle Alassane Dramane Ouattara* (CADO), the Alassane Dramane Ouattara Circle; Bonsié Blaise, the “Le Nouvel Espoir” correspondent; and Kababou Cissé, head of the western transporters’ union. Amnesty International also obtained the names of at least two local RDR officers, Fofana Aboubakar, a teacher, and Issa Camara, who were apparently arrested at their homes and killed.

OTHER IMPACTS OF THE CONFLICT ON THE CIVILIAN POPULATION

The conflict that has been tearing Côte d’Ivoire apart during the last three months has drastically disrupted the lives of hundreds of thousands of the country’s inhabitants. Tens of thousands have left the conflict areas and fled either to the south or to neighbouring countries to escape the consequences of the war. Others have been deprived of their basic economic and social rights, such as their right to receive a wage or a pension and the right to education.

Tens of thousands of refugees and displaced people

The conflict has also provoked massive population movements. Many people fled the regions held by the MPCCI at the beginning of the crisis, in order to reach areas under government control. Others fled to neighbouring countries, especially Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea.

On the roads in northern Côte d'Ivoire, the Amnesty International delegation saw for itself dozens of buses packed with people, men, women and children, fleeing towards Mali and Burkina Faso. On Sunday 15 December, near Ferkéssédougou, in the north of the country, the delegation encountered a Burkinabè bus fleeing from the Monoko Zohi region.

These people were exhausted after a very long journey, made even more difficult by the many check-points along the roads. One woman gave birth on the bus in inadequate sanitary conditions, which put the lives of the mother and the baby in danger.

The delegation also met dozens of Mali nationals, who, having lived their whole life in Côte d'Ivoire, were now having to flee the fighting. On 16 December 2002, ten buses carrying 955 people arrived at Bamako from the Daloa region.

The aid provided by the Mali government and especially the civil protection service is not enough to be able to help all these people, many of whom, although they are of Mali origin, were born in Côte d'Ivoire and have lived there all their life.

One young refugee, aged 20, and carrying a baby on her back told the Amnesty International delegation:

"I don't know anyone in Mali. I know that my parents have relations in Mopti but I don't know how to contact them."

The situation is also very difficult for people who fled from the areas held by the MPCCI after being threatened because they were not natives of the north of the country or because they were from other countries such as Nigeria, accused of supporting the government of Laurent Gbagbo.

The Amnesty International delegation visited a refugee camp at Sikasso, which provides shelter for more than 500 people of eight different nationalities. These people have been living in tents for three months and only receive very limited food aid from the Mali civil

protection service. If the situation persists, they all fear that the situation will become untenable when the rainy season begins, generally in June,.

The arrival of thousands of refugees in Mali risks causing a food crisis that could be especially serious given that rainfall levels have been very low this year and forecasts about the harvests are very pessimistic.

Attacks on the population's economic and social rights

Since the beginning of the crisis, banks and schools have been closed in the region held by the MPC. This deprives thousands of workers and pensioners of their wages or pensions.

Although supplies of food are still available, because this is still the harvest season, many civilians have no more money to feed themselves and food problems could become serious if the situation persists.

With regard to education, teachers and pupils have complained to Amnesty International about the closure of schools caused by the outbreak of the conflict.

A teacher in Korhogo said:

“Term started on 16 September and we had begun to distribute the books. Then, suddenly, after the beginning of the crisis on the 19th, parents did not dare to send their children to school any more. Several pupils came to see me to ask when they would be able to take up their studies again and young boys deprived of their education were forced to work as shoe-shine boys to help their parents, who had been deprived of their wages.”

If this situation persists, hundreds of thousands of children living in the areas held by the armed opposition groups will lose their right to education and lose at least one academic year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the disturbing apathy and indifference of the international community to the terrible suffering endured by the civilian population of Côte d'Ivoire and other countries in the sub-region who have had to take in large numbers of impoverished and traumatized refugees, Amnesty International warns the international community to act before it is too

late. If the international community does not mobilize immediately, hundreds of thousand of people living in the sub-region will suffer.

It is with the aim of avoiding a major disaster that Amnesty International has formulated the following recommendations. Amnesty International:

- Launches this urgent appeal to all parties to the conflict to respect Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and the provisions of the 2nd Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, ratified by the Ivory Coast in 1989. These stipulate the obligation to treat humanely civilians and soldiers who are wounded or unable to fight, whether the conflict is international or not;
- Insists on the protection of minors against any involvement in armed conflicts including their enlistment and deployment during the hostilities. It reminds the parties that this protection, established notably by the *optional protocol of the Convention on The Rights of the Child, on the involvement of children in armed conflicts*, adopted in 2000 and in force as from February 2002, also applies to armed groups other than the state's armed forces;
- Urges the United Nations and the African Union to play an active role in taking the immediate measures necessary to protect the civilian population of the Ivory Coast. This appeal is also and especially addressed to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which should act quickly to support displaced people in the north of the Ivory Coast, and provide aid to refugees who are moving towards or who have already reached Mali and Burkina Faso;
- Requests the United Nations to open an inquiry into all the atrocities that have taken place in the Ivory Coast since the beginning of this conflict.