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Côte d'Ivoire power and water cuts deepen humanitarian crisis

Amnesty International has warned of a deepening humanitarian crisis in Côte d'Ivoire after electricity and water supplies were cut to large parts of the country earlier this week.

Central, northern and western areas of the country are now suffering from poor sanitation and disrupted medical facilities, according to information and eyewitness accounts gathered by Amnesty International.

On 3 March 2011, the Ivorian electricity company has denied any responsibility for the power cuts, which began on 28 February. The company said officials loyal to outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo had made the cuts "for national security reasons".

The areas affected are mostly controlled by forces loyal to Alassane Ouattara, the internationally recognized winner of the November 2010 presidential elections.

"Outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo must immediately order the reestablishment of water and electricity supplies in these areas," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International's West Africa researcher.

"The whole sanitary system in these areas is being affected and is stopping medical personnel from carrying out their work which could lead to the spread of disease," said Gaëtan Mootoo.

A senior doctor in the town of Man in the west of the country, told Amnesty International: "It's nearly impossible to carry out surgery as we only have one electric generator."

"We are running short of fuel. This will have dramatic consequences for people needing urgent care. This is particularly true for pregnant women needing emergency obstetric care including Caesarean sections."

The situation is worsening in the country's second largest city, Bouaké, in the north.

A senior doctor there told Amnesty International: "As we have no electricity, we cannot receive people who need urgent care during the night as we only have torches. The sick cannot wash themselves or go to the toilets in safe conditions."

The cuts are also affecting areas controlled by those authorities loyal to Laurent Gbagbo in the west.

In the town of Duékoué, a social worker told Amnesty International: "All the sanitary facilities are blocked. People are now getting water from wells and small ponds and rivers where water is unsafe. This could lead to widespread epidemics such as cholera."

A doctor in Duékoué told Amnesty International today that he can only work during day light.

Violence has recently escalated in Côte d'Ivoire in the wake of the disputed presidential election of November 2010. Opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara is the internationally recognized winner of the

poll but the outgoing President Gbagbo has refused to step down.

"Laurent Gbagbo's administration has shown a blatant disregard for the right to safe water and sanitation recognized by international law.

"The government is obliged to ensure continuous access to water and ensure that the right to health and right to adequate housing is not jeopardized by power cuts," said Gaëtan Mootoo.

During the last week, the situation has deteriorated further in several parts of the country, especially, in Abidjan where tens of thousands of people were forced to flee clashes between armed commandos and members of the security forces loyal to outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo.

Amnesty International sent a four week mission to Côte d'Ivoire in January and February and documented human rights violations and abuses both by the security forces loyal to Laurent Gbagbo and by the New Forces.

Documented violations include extra-judicial executions, ill treatment, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and sexual violence including rape.