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**CÔTE D'IVOIRE. SILENCE AND IMPUNITY: THE ONLY RESPONSE TO
SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN**

Although the military conflict in Côte d'Ivoire seems to have subsided, it is still common for women and girls to be raped by all parties to the conflict. The security forces, the *Forces Nouvelles* (FN), New Forces, who control the northern half of the country, and pro-government militias sexually assault women and girls, knowing perfectly well that they will not be held accountable for their actions.

At least three cases of rape were reported during the last six months in Adiaké, near to the border with Ghana (a government-held zone). One woman was attacked and raped by five army commandos. A Defence and Security Forces (*Forces de défense et de sécurité* - FDS) base is located in the area. Mainly members of the *Brigade anti-émeute* (BAE), Anti-Riot Brigade and marines are stationed there. It seems that no one has been arrested as a result of the incident.

The number of rapes is particularly high in the west of the country, where the FN and pro-government militias hold adjacent areas of territory. In some regions, for example, Douékoué and Logoualé (about 600 km to the west of Abidjan), Amnesty International has gathered information on many cases involving the rape of women and girls by armed men who attack civilians and steal their belongings.

A peasant woman, 36, belonging to the Yacouba ethnic group, was attacked in September 2008 in her village, Binepleu, near Logoualé. She said: "*I was coming back from Logoualé market towards the evening. Three rebels stopped me on the path through the bush. They fell on me and then took my bags containing children's clothes, food and apples. Three other women from the village were also raped. Each time, the rebels attacked women in the bush. We are afraid of talking about it.*"

Militia men who are self-proclaimed supporters of President Laurent Gbagbo were also responsible for rapes in the region of Douékoué. In the night of 20-21 September 2008, alleged members of pro-government militias active in the area, armed with Kalashnikovs, calibre 12 guns and knives, attacked a courtyard in the Perethete neighbourhood of Douékoué to steal the villagers' possessions. Six of them raped two girls.

Local people are all the more terrified and helpless because they have no one to whom they can turn to demand justice and reparations. There seems to be almost total impunity and, in at least one case, the perpetrator of a rape not only escaped justice but was appointed to a position in the prison administration. On 15 April 2008, an FN soldier raped a peasant woman who was walking along a road to her village, near the town of

Katiola (400 km to the north of Abidjan). The woman was raped in a cotton storage building. The parents of the victim complained to the FN area commander, who ordered the arrest of the soldier. However, instead of the man in question being punished, he was subsequently appointed to a position as warder of Katiola prison.

These rapes inevitably have serious physical and psychological effects that are made worse by the absence of health care for most victims, caused by the collapse of health infrastructure. Some victims have died, although it is impossible to estimate their number. Rose, a girl aged 14, was raped by four FN soldiers at the beginning of April 2008 in Katiola. After raping the girl, the attackers broke her neck, killing her there and then.

At a time when many efforts are being made at the national and international levels to find a peaceful solution to the conflict that has divided Côte d'Ivoire for more than six years, Amnesty International believes it is indispensable to pay special attention to the victims of sexual violence and ensure their right to justice, health care and reparations. In order to stop rape, all parties must send a clear signal to their forces and supporters indicating that such acts will no longer be tolerated and that their perpetrators will be punished. Unless women are afforded justice and protection, it will be impossible to install a lasting peace in Côte d'Ivoire.