

COTE D'IVOIRE : Amnesty International appeal to all parties

“Human rights violations and very serious disturbances have caused the death of at least 40 people in Abidjan, the economic capital, and in other towns in the country, on Thursday 26 October 2000”, Amnesty International has confirmed today. These disturbances arise principally from conflict between members and sympathisers of two political parties, the Rassemblement des Républicains (RDR), Republican Assembly, of Alassane Ouattara and the-Front populaire ivoirien (FPI), Ivorian Popular Front, of Laurent Gbagbo.

The organization demands that those responsible for the security forces protect the human rights of the whole population, including foreign nationals who have been targeted by other civilians or by certain members of the security forces.

Amnesty International also calls on all political office holders, and in particular Laurent Gbagbo, who was invested as President of the Republic on Thursday 26 October, and Alassane Ouattara to require their supporters to respect human rights.

Following these incidents, security forces were deployed throughout the country and the Minister for Security, General Augustin Asso Akawa, extended until Saturday 28 October, the curfew and state of emergency declared some days previously by the then Head of State, General Robert Gueï, on the eve of the presidential election of 22 October.

Responsibility for ensuring civil peace is all the more important given the sometimes ambiguous role of the security forces throughout the events of 26 October. According to information received by Amnesty International, in certain cases, the security forces joined with FPI

supporters in street fighting against members of the RDR, in other cases, gendarmes protected members of the RDR threatened with lynching. Among other incidents, gendarmes directed automatic fire at the residence of Alassane Ouattara who was obliged to take refuge in the German Embassy, the neighbouring building to his home.

“The threat of civil war is hanging over Côte d’Ivoire”, the organization claims today. “All political, military and religious leaders should join together to dispel the spectre of ethnic and religious divisions which would inevitably lead to an intensification of human rights violations.”

Amnesty International welcomes the first appeals for calm jointly launched on national television yesterday by the Catholic and Islamic religious authorities, which appealed in particular for the political confrontation between the FPI and RDR not to be transformed into ethnic and religious violence.

A little later in the day, two senior officials of the FPI and the RDR appeared together on television to appeal to their activists for calm and to announce a first meeting between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara.

“Our sole concern is respect for human rights and we will continue to monitor the human rights situation in this country in future, as we have done in the past, independently of which Head of State or government is in place. We reiterate our demand that an independent and impartial inquiry that respects international standards be set up into the events that have taken place in Côte d’Ivoire since the military coup in December 1999”. Amnesty International confirmed today.

Context

Amnesty International does not favour a particular type of government but insists to those in power that human rights be respected throughout the world and this includes the right to life and the right not to be a victim of torture, whatever the case or the circumstances. Over the last year the organization has repeatedly called for justice and redress for unfairly sentenced RDR members, harassed and tortured family members of the former President, Henri Konan Bédié and for civilian victims of military groups, some of whom formed part of the General Gueï's presidential guard. Most recently, it has called for clarification in relation to those military personnel arrested following the attack on the residence of General Gueï in September 2000, whose families remained without news.

The presidential election of 22 October 2000 once again plunged Côte d'Ivoire into chaos, at a time when the country was experiencing permanent instability following the military coup of December 1999 which removed President Henri Konan Bédié from power.

*General Robert Gueï, installed in power by mutinous military forces, launched an extensive review of legal texts which led to a new Constitution, adopted by referendum in July 2000. But throughout his six months in power, General Gueï allowed certain military groups to commit, often with complete impunity, human rights violations against family members of Henri Konan Bédié, and against lawyers and journalists. The armed forces also delivered up to summary execution presumed lawbreakers, sometimes in public and after these individuals had been stripped naked. In September 2000, Amnesty International published a report, entitled: *Côte d'Ivoire: some military personnel believe they have impunity above the law*, which denounces human rights violations.*

In this report, Amnesty International recalled "that it takes no position on the eligibility conditions for the presidency of the Republic, proposed in the Constitution, which have given rise to numerous debates between different political parties, because this would go beyond its mandate". However, the organization confirmed that it would remain "alert to possible abuses that may lead, from a tendentious interpretation of these eligibility conditions, to discrimination against certain sectors of the population, who originate from neighbouring countries". "The underlying debate about the definition of "Ivorian" and about the extensive presence in certain economic sectors, of individuals originating from neighbouring countries is in danger of fuelling tension". The events of yesterday show, unfortunately, that these fears were well founded.

The presidential election of 22 October 2000 has led to new political upheaval, since General Gueï was removed from power following demonstrations organised by the FPI which was demanding recognition of the election results giving victory to Laurent Gbagbo. Two of the three main parties, the RDR and the former party in power, the *Parti démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire*, Côte d'Ivoire Democratic Party, had called for a boycott of the election because their candidates had been judged ineligible by the Supreme Court. Yesterday, Thursday 26 October, Laurent Gbagbo was invested as President of the Republic, despite protests from Alassane Ouattara's supporters who were demanding new elections. Laurent Gbagbo ruled out the possibility of new elections but announced the formation of an "initial government" and also announced that he would respect the electoral calendar fixing the holding of legislative elections for 10 December next.

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