

AI Index: PRE 01/136/2013
20 March 2013

Arms proliferation and abuse shatter communities in Côte d'Ivoire

Reckless and illegal arms supplies from Europe, Africa and China to the warring parties in Côte d'Ivoire over the past decade continue to fuel grave human rights abuses and violent crime in the country, Amnesty International said in a detailed report launched at the United Nations headquarters.

The 33-page report, *Communities shattered by arms proliferation and abuse in Côte d'Ivoire*, documents how a handful of states and a network of multinational arms traffickers supplied weapons and munitions to both sides in the conflict who committed war crimes and a range of human rights abuses including horrific violence against women and girls.

The arms transfers took place both before and after the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on the country in November 2004.

“Côte d'Ivoire provides a chilling reminder of how even a UN embargo can fail to halt arms from flowing freely to warring parties, with devastating consequences for the civilian population,” said Salil Shetty, Amnesty International’s Secretary General.

“All the world’s governments can prevent the failure of future UN arms embargo and stop atrocities from happening. They must adopt a strong, effective and comprehensive Arms Trade Treaty based on respect for human rights and humanitarian law.”

A robust global Arms Trade Treaty, which UN member states are currently negotiating in New York, would regulate international transfers of conventional weapons, technology and ammunition.

Since armed violence escalated in early 2011 after contested presidential elections, hundreds of Ivoirians have been killed – often targeted on the basis of ethnicity or political affiliation – women and girls have been subjected to sexual violence including rape, and hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes.

Amnesty International and the UN Group of Experts investigating violations of the embargo have documented how irresponsible and illegal arms transfers dating back to 2002 have fuelled such atrocities and abuses. These abuses continue.

Arms transfers to Ivorian security forces

After a military mutiny in 2002 split the country into two, the Ivorian government under President Laurent Gbagbo embarked on a frenzied arms-acquisition programme.

From September 2002 to December 2003, spending on military hardware rose to US\$175 million – accounting for more than a tenth of the national budget in 2004-2005.

Amnesty International believes that those arms transfers were highly irresponsible, as they took place in the context of a fragile ceasefire. They also violated a voluntary moratorium on arms imports put in place by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1998.

Among the countries that supplied weapons and munitions to the Ivorian government during that period were Angola (armoured vehicles and tanks), China (small arms and light weapons), Belarus (aircraft, armoured vehicles, mortars and rocket launchers), Bulgaria (aircraft, mortars and light weapons, including Kalashnikov-style assault rifles), Ukraine (armoured vehicles) and Israel (drones).

According to a UN Group of Experts report in April 2012, even after the UN embargo was in place, the Ivorian security forces received illegal arms supplies until 2009. UN investigators found evidence of an elaborate arms-trafficking network involving companies and individuals in several countries, including Senegal, Guinea, Tunisia and Latvia.

Amnesty International has clear evidence that weapons supplied since 2002 not only had an immediate impact on hostilities at the time, but were later used to target civilians when armed conflict again broke out in early 2011.

This included the use of live ammunition, fragmentation grenades and rocket-propelled grenades against protesters in several areas of the economic capital Abidjan in January and February 2011. The main targets were people from the northern Dioula community, generally perceived to be opposed to Gbagbo.

In the city's Abobo area in February and March 2011, pro-Gbagbo security forces mortar bombed densely populated areas and fired recklessly at unarmed civilians. A single bombing attack on a marketplace in Abobo on 17 March 2011 killed at least 20 people and wounded 60 more, mainly women.

Arms transfers to the New Forces

Research into arms transfers to the New Forces – an alliance of opposition armed groups who controlled the north of the country after the 2002 military mutiny – is less clear cut.

Any weapons that have been observed in the New Forces' possession have had their serial numbers removed, making it difficult to draw conclusions about their provenance and supply route.

New Forces fighters are known to have used a range of Chinese, Russian and Polish assault rifles of various origins and calibres. And it is believed that Burkina Faso played a leading role in transferring arms to them, both before and after the 2004 arms embargo.

Quantities of 2005-manufactured Romanian 7.62 x 39 mm ammunition circulating in the country in 2011 and 2012 resulted from the illicit diversion of this ammunition from Burkina Faso.

There is growing evidence that forces opposed to Gbagbo, including the New Forces, were responsible for unlawful killings, often of men and boys who were singled out based on their ethnicity or political affiliation.

Such killings appear to have continued after the New Forces' integration into the Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI), created in March 2001 by the current President Alassane Ouattara.

Among the worst cases of arbitrary killings by the FRCI took place in and around the western city of Duékoué in March 2011, aided by an armed militia of traditional hunters known as the Dozos.

The groups led a manhunt in the city's Quartier Carrefour area, rounding up ethnic Guérés – suspected of being pro-Gbagbo – and summarily executed hundreds of men of all ages.

Amnesty International has gathered more than 100 witness statements from residents who survived the

massacres in Duékoué and nearby villages – all point to the systematic and targeted nature of the killings carried out by the FRCI and the Dozos.

“On several visits to Côte d'Ivoire since the violence in early 2011, Amnesty International has been able to identify a clear connection between the abuses by all sides and the arms stockpiled years earlier through irresponsible and – in some cases – illegal transfers,” said Brian Wood, Amnesty International’s Head of Arms Control.

“Our message to world leaders is simple – rein in the arms free-for-all that is shattering communities in Côte d'Ivoire and around the world. The way to stop this is to adopt a strong Arms Trade Treaty to block international transfers when there is a substantial risk the arms would be used to facilitate or commit serious violations of human rights or war crimes.”