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Côte d'Ivoire: Warning of 'human rights catastrophe' as forces reach Abidjan

Côte d'Ivoire civilians are at immediate risk of massive human rights violations Amnesty International warned today, as forces loyal to Alassane Ouattara reach the country's commercial capital Abidjan.

"Abidjan is on the brink of a human right catastrophe and total chaos," said Salvatore Saguès, Amnesty International's researcher on West Africa.

"Côte d'Ivoire is facing a major humanitarian crisis. The parties to the conflict must immediately stop targeting the civilian population," said Salvatore Saguès. "The international community must take immediate steps to protect the civilian population."

Since the beginning of the week, the Republican Forces loyal to internationally recognized president Alassane Ouattara have launched a general offensive against the forces loyal to outgoing president Laurent Gbagbo, who has refused to cede power.

As the Republican Forces advance in the west and in the centre of the country, violence has escalated.

A recent flashpoint has been in the town of Guiglo, 600 km west of Abidjan, where sources have told Amnesty International that uncontrolled armed elements loyal to Laurent Gbagbo, including Liberian mercenaries, burned and looted houses, and shot and wounded several civilians yesterday.

"The escalation of this conflict, and increased reliance on mercenaries and untrained recruits, means there is a huge and immediate risk of massive human rights violations in the coming days as the Republican Forces advance on Abidjan," said Salvatore Saguès.

On 19 March, Gbagbo's minister for youth Charles Blé Goudé, called on Gbagbo's Young Patriot movement members to volunteer as militiamen to 'liberate' the country. The Young Patriots have announced that they have recruited 20,000 soldiers.

Amnesty International has also received reports of retribution attacks against civilians committed by both sides in the western town of Duékoué.

Local sources have told Amnesty International's delegation currently in Côte d'Ivoire that dead bodies are still lying in the streets of Duékoué, and tens of thousands of civilians are still sheltering in the Catholic Mission without adequate food, water, sanitation and medical care.

On 29 March, the Republican Forces killed civilian Jean Louana, election campaign director of one of the current ministers appointed by Laurent Gbagbo. They also shot down a Pastor of an evangelical church along with eight members of his congregation.

Two other civilians, a Muslim imam and a national of Burkina Faso, were killed on 28 March, by militiamen loyal to Laurent Gbagbo during fighting for control of Duékoué.

Amnesty International is calling on both sides of the conflict to strictly abide by international humanitarian law and take all necessary precautions to protect civilians.

Violence has escalated in Côte d'Ivoire in the wake of the disputed presidential election of November 2010.