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Côte d'Ivoire: Climate of fear stopping return of displaced people

Côte d'Ivoire security forces and a state-backed militia are creating a climate of fear that is preventing hundreds of thousands of people displaced by post-election violence from returning to their homes, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

“We want to go home, but we can't” Côte d'Ivoire's continuing crisis of displacement and insecurity describes how ethnically targeted killings and attacks by the government security forces (FCRI) and a militia composed of Dozos (traditional hunters) have left the population unable to leave the relative safety of temporary camps.

“The stalemate that is keeping more than half a million people from their homes cannot be allowed to continue,” said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International's West Africa researcher.

“The authorities must act to establish a clear chain of command and disband militia groups who, despite the end of the conflict, continue to spread fear among the population.”

Amnesty International's report details how government security forces (FCRI) and the Dozo continued to kill and otherwise target people solely because of their ethnic group even after the inauguration of President Alassane Ouattara.

The Dozo appear to target the Guéré ethnic group, who are perceived to be supporters of former President Laurent Gbagbo. Particularly at risk are young, physically fit men who are considered likely to have been members of pro-Gbagbo militia groups.

In Duékoué's Carrefour area, where hundreds of civilians were killed at the end of March 2011 very few Guéré have dared return to their homes. Those who have returned told Amnesty International that armed Dozo fighters on motorcycles now frequently ride up and down the main street of the area.

One resident said:

“They don't have to do anything more than that. They don't even have to get off their motorcycles. Just coming through as often as they do with their arms is enough to keep us afraid. That is what they want.”

Amnesty International is concerned by the “security role” given to the Dozo militias by the official FRCI forces. Armed Dozos are manning checkpoints on major roads in west Côte d'Ivoire which is deterring displaced people from returning home.

“The freedom with which the Dozos now operate indicates that their actions are tolerated or even instigated at the request of the FCRI,” said Gaëtan Mootoo.

“President Ouattara and Prime Minister Guillaume Soro must work hard to create a security force that is impartial and who can protect all Ivorian citizens regardless of their ethnic group,” said Gaëtan Mootoo.

During the months of violence that followed disputed Presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire serious

human rights violations, including crimes against humanity and war crimes, were committed by both forces loyal to Ouattara and Gbagbo.

Amnesty International found that Liberian mercenaries and pro-Gbagbo militia fighters were responsible for killing dozens of real or alleged supporters of Ouattara when they retreated from Abidjan and headed to Liberia in early May 2011. Most of these people belonged to the Dioula community, who are considered loyal to Alassane Ouattara.

One Dioula survivor told Amnesty International how Liberian mercenaries killed 24 people in the village of Godjiboué (south-west of Abidjan) on 6 May 2011:

“When they arrived the villagers were panicking, every one was trying to escape and run into the bush. My father, who was old and couldn’t run quickly, took refuge in a house. The mercenaries chased him and shot him dead as well as another person.”