

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## For media attention

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## **Côte d'Ivoire: A country caught up in a turmoil for more than a month**

An Amnesty International delegation has just returned from a ten-day mission to Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire where it was able to investigate some of the events which have taken place since 19 September 2002 when some military groups in the north of the country rose up against the government. The delegation was also able to meet with the Minister of Justice.

*"The two parties to the conflict have particularly targeted civilians suspected of supporting the opposing side. As a result, tens of thousands of people have been displaced leading to a humanitarian crisis," Amnesty International said today.*

Many of these people have fled areas occupied by the military groups involved in the uprising while in Abidjan others have found themselves homeless after their houses were destroyed. Faced with a situation which could destabilize the whole sub-region, member countries of the *Communauté économique des Etats d'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEDEAO)*, Economic Community of Western African States, sent mediators to Côte d'Ivoire to try to resolve the crisis. They succeeded in obtaining a cease-fire agreement which officially came into force at midnight this morning, Friday, 18 October 2002.

The Amnesty International delegation collected information about violations committed by the security forces in Abidjan as well as about abuses committed by forces claiming to belong to the armed opposition group which controls part of the territory of Côte d'Ivoire and which, since 1 October 2002, has been known as the *Mouvement patriotique de la Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI)*, Côte d'Ivoire Patriotic Movement.

### **Human rights violations committed by the security forces**

#### The extrajudicial execution of General Gueï and others close to him (19 September 2002)

On the morning of 19 September 2002, General Gueï left his home to seek refuge in Abidjan Cathedral but, when he could not get in, he took refuge nearby. He was found there by members of the security forces at about 7am and shot dead

His wife, Rose Gueï, as well as other people close to him, who had gone into hiding not far from their home, were found by members of the security forces at about 2pm the same day. Rose Gueï was slapped on the face before being killed and left in a gutter. Eight other people, including General Gueï's aide-de-camp, Captain Fabien Coulibaly, and Georges Kouassi, a chauffeur employed by the family, who were at General Gueï's house that day, were arrested at about 1pm and taken to different locations where they were killed.

#### Other extrajudicial executions

The organization also investigated the cases of six other people, all foreigners, including three nationals of Burkina-Faso, who were killed by the security forces in the days immediately following the armed insurrection.

The three citizens from Burkina-Faso, Yabré Sebre, Massé Haidou and Massé Ali, were subjected to extrajudicial execution on 7 October 2002 in Riviera Palmeraie, a district of Abidjan. An eyewitness made the following statement:

*“On Monday 7 October, at about 7pm, gendarmes asked these three people to show them their identity cards and then took their money. They then asked them to lie down on the ground on their stomachs. One of the gendarmes took out his gun, the men from Burkina-Faso begged for forgiveness, the two other policemen tried to dissuade their colleague from shooting them but were not successful. Two of the men died instantly and the third died the next day. They were buried on Thursday, 10 October.”*

#### Arbitrary arrests and secret detentions

Despite the fact that the Minister of Justice had given his consent, the Amnesty International delegation was refused access to the people who have been held in secret since 19 September 2002. According to the Attorney General, the number of those detained has reached 59 and they include Aly Keita, deputy spokesman of the *Rassemblement des républicains* (RDR), Republican Assembly.

*“These secret detentions are very worrying because they are conducive to the use of torture and ill-treatment. We urge the authorities to grant the detainees immediate access to their relatives, lawyers and medical attention, should they require it. All those against whom no specific charges can be brought should be released immediately”,* Amnesty International said today.

#### The destruction of homes and extortion by the security forces

In the days immediately after the crisis broke out, the security forces decided to destroy several shanty towns and makeshift homes inhabited by Côte d'Ivoire nationals as well as members of communities from other countries of the sub-region on the grounds that these poor districts “were sheltering assailants”. The destruction of these houses has resulted in the displacement of thousands of people who have been left without a roof over their heads.

*“These events took place in an atmosphere of heightened nationalism stirred up by certain media, including the State radio and television service. This atmosphere may have acted as an incitement to civilians and soldiers to attack foreigners, especially those from Burkina-Faso”,* Amnesty International said today.

The Amnesty International delegation received testimonies from about fifty people who lived in several different districts where houses were destroyed and who were stripped of their possessions by the security forces.

Some witnesses described the physical violence used by the security forces.

One refugee from Sierra Leone said:

*“The gendarmes came at about 3pm on 19 September. They said that people who had attacked the Agban police station had passed by there and they ordered us to leave immediately. Some of us were beaten, others were forced to lie on the ground while the police shot at them between their legs. The gendarmes asked us for money and when people said they didn't have any, they were beaten. Then, the gendarmes threw grenades in the direction of the houses which caught fire. I slept in a church and the next day I went to the HCR [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], I am still afraid and I would like to go back to Sierra Leone.”*

In a speech broadcast on radio and television on 8 October 2002, President Gbagbo ordered the destruction of the shanty towns to stop and appealed for a halt to the attacks on foreigners, saying, *“I want to say to the people of Côte d'Ivoire that it is not the foreigners who are the problem for us today ... Our fight is a fight to liberate our country .. Do not attack foreigners. Don't get involved in the wrong fight.”* Despite this call for calm, the security forces continued to carry out raids in some deprived areas and to intimidate and extort money from the people who lived there.

### Human rights defenders taken in for questioning and journalists intimidated

On 13 October 2002, one of the members of the Amnesty International delegation International was taken in for questioning by members of the security forces in Haoussa Bougou, an area of Abidjan, together with a member of the *Mouvement ivoirien des droits de l'homme* (MIDH), Côte d'Ivoire Human Rights Movement. At the time of their arrest, the two human rights defenders were interviewing women whose homes had been razed to the ground a few days earlier. They were all taken to the central police headquarters where they were released an hour later following the intervention of the Minister of Justice of Côte d'Ivoire.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the harassment of both national and foreign journalists who have received death threats. Some have also been briefly held for questioning.

*"Amnesty International objects to the questioning of these human rights defenders, journalists and victims of violations who have dared to speak out and firmly reminds the authorities that it is their responsibility to ensure the protection of these people",* the organization said today.

### **Abuses committed by armed opposition groups**

The Amnesty International delegation was unable to visit the areas held by the MPCF forces. Nevertheless, information was obtained about several abuses committed by them, in particular the summary execution of members of the security forces and others suspected of supporting the government, the capture of several individuals and the recruitment of young people.

### Deliberate and arbitrary killings

Reports obtained by Amnesty International indicate that many members of the security forces found wearing uniform when not fighting have been shot dead in cold blood by MPCF forces.

One eyewitness told Amnesty International :

*"On Tuesday, 8 October, a soldier called N'Da was killed at his home in the district of Broukro, in Bouaké while hiding there. He was not wearing military uniform but someone had informed on him."*

Amnesty International has also received confirmation that the forces occupying Bouaké had incited the population to denounce anyone thought to be a military official or government sympathizer. Several such people were reportedly killed on the spot.

According to reports from several sources, a number of alleged "thieves" were also killed in Bouaké.

### Excessive use of force

On Tuesday 8 October 2002, after news had been received of the arrival in Bouaké of government forces, some of the inhabitants, including young people, showed their joy in the streets by organizing a march. This peaceful demonstration was disrupted when shots were fired blindly into the crowd by MPCF forces.

*"This excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators is contrary to all applicable international standards,"* Amnesty International said.

### Secret detentions

Amnesty International is also concerned about the fate of dozens of people, including members of the security forces, who have been arrested, especially in Bouaké, about whom there has been no news.

*“Such detentions are conducive to torture and ill-treatment and it is essential that these detainees have access to human rights bodies”,* the organization pointed out.

#### Recruitment of young people including minors

Witnesses contacted by Amnesty International claimed that they saw young people aged fourteen with weapons and having difficulties handling them.

*“Amnesty International is particularly concerned about this phenomenon of the recruitment of young people. It turns minors into child soldiers and is contrary to all applicable international standards,”* Amnesty International said today.

#### The capture of civilians

Several people, including the Minister of Sport, François Amichia, were held for several days by MPCF forces.

Amnesty International met with AFP correspondent Christophe Koffi who was held in Korhogo for almost a week. Martin Bléou, the President of the *Ligue ivoirienne des droits de l’Homme* (LIDHO), Côte d’Ivoire Human Rights League, who was in Bouaké when the town was taken by MPCF forces, was forcibly detained for several hours.

#### **Conclusion**

All these abuses committed by both sides, especially those committed against civilians who have been arbitrarily identified on the basis of their origin or their alleged political sympathies as belonging to the opposition, show the level of violence which is currently affecting Côte d’Ivoire.

Amnesty International is making an urgent appeal to the two parties to halt summary executions, arbitrary arrests and secret detention. It is calling on the two parties to protect civilians, especially human rights defenders, journalists and the victims of abuses, by reminding them of their obligations under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions which states that those who have been taken prisoner or who are no longer in a position to fight must be treated humanely. The organization would also like to remind them that forced recruitment into combat forces, particularly that of minors, is forbidden under international standards.