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UN peacekeepers in Côte d'Ivoire must protect civilians caught in fightin

The United Nations peacekeeping force in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) must urgently protect thousands of displaced people sheltering in a Catholic mission in the west of the country amid fierce fighting, Amnesty International said today.

As many as 10,000 civilians are sheltering in the mission in the town of Duékoué, after fleeing fierce battles yesterday between forces supporting the internationally recognized elected President Alassane Ouattara and militiamen loyal to outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo.

“The UNOCI mandate in Côte d'Ivoire requires the peacekeepers to protect civilians at imminent threat of physical violence. They must act immediately to prevent further bloodshed,” said Veronique Aubert, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Africa.

“The UNOCI camp is only about 3 km away from Duékoué and we are urging them to use all means necessary to protect civilians against the violence taking place on their own doorstep.”

The situation in the west of Côte d'Ivoire has been volatile since the November 2010 contested presidential elections. All parties to the conflict have committed serious human rights violations including unlawful killings and rape and sexual violence against women.

Witnesses have told Amnesty International's delegation currently in Côte d'Ivoire that yesterday, forces loyal to Alassane Ouattara took partial or total control of Duékoué and Daloa, two towns located in the heart of the western cocoa belt.

Sources said electricity in Duékoué has also been cut, apparently as a result of the fighting, depriving people in the area of water.

Amnesty International fears that the displaced people as well as tens of thousands of other Duékoué residents could be at risk of a repeat of January violence, in which some 40 people were killed in fierce communal clashes and a number of women were victims of rape and sexual violence.

“The UN Security Council must make it clear to UNOCI peacekeepers that they must act immediately and effectively to protect internally displaced people and other civilians at risk in the area, according to their mandate” said Véronique Aubert.

UN peacekeepers in Côte d'Ivoire have frequently been prevented from protecting civilians since conflict began escalating last December in the wake of the disputed presidential election of November 2010.

Opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara is the internationally recognized winner of the poll but the outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo has refused to recognize these results.

“All parties to the conflict must adhere strictly to the rules of international humanitarian law (IHL). They must ensure their forces never target civilians, or launch indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks. Commanders must ensure that their forces take necessary precautions to protect civilians and make clear that violations of IHL will not be tolerated,” added Véronique Aubert.