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Côte d’Ivoire: Sexual violence and other human rights abuses must stop

Human rights violations including sexual violence and unlawful killings are being perpetrated by forces loyal to both Côte d’Ivoire’s outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo and internationally recognized incumbent Alassane Ouattara, an Amnesty International investigation has revealed.

Victims and eyewitnesses first-hand accounts of the ongoing abuses, which follow the disputed November 2010 election, are contained in a six-page summary of preliminary findings compiled by Amnesty International researchers during a four-week visit to Côte d’Ivoire.

“In the west of the country, women told us that they have been gang-raped in January 2011 in their homes in view of their children and others told us they were raped on their way to the market. Eyewitnesses have also seen men beaten and deliberately killed in the street,” said Gaëtan Mootoo, one of the two researchers who carried out the investigation.

“The eyes of the world may have shifted from the political stalemate in Côte d’Ivoire, but the abuses are clearly continuing.”

“Both the security forces and the Forces Nouvelles are committing these horrific acts and their victims have no recourse to justice. This reign of terror must end.

An estimated 70,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in the west of the country and settle in displacement sites or refugee camps across the border in neighbouring countries, as tensions between ethnic groups have been exacerbated by the political standoff between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara.

In some areas in the west, residents told Amnesty International that attacks on people were targeted and based on ethnicity and alleged political affiliations.

In the town of Duékoué (500 kilometres west of Abidjan), Amnesty International’s researchers found that scores of people were killed, several women raped and hundreds of homes burned and looted in January.

One woman described to Amnesty International delegates how she suffered an attack on January 3, 2011:

“They came early in the morning...they had knives and machetes. They broke the door and grabbed me. Their faces were blackened with charcoal.

“They said nothing, threw themselves on me and did horrible things to me. They raped me, three or four of them. They burned my house - the house of my family - and they killed my brother.

“They stole everything from my shop and then burned it down. We fled the same day.”

Amnesty International urges both the security forces loyal to Laurent Gbagbo and the Forces Nouvelles to issue clear, public instructions to their members that human rights must be respected and that anyone found to be responsible for ordering, carrying out, or failing to prevent any abuses will be held accountable for their actions.

The security forces must also reveal the whereabouts and fate of all those who have disappeared after having been detained.

“The current crisis in Côte d’Ivoire has created a human rights black hole in the country,” said Gaëtan Mootoo.

“The very serious human rights abuses that we have documented both in Abidjan and the west of the country must be immediately and impartially investigated.”