

France and UN Bear Responsibility for Massacres by Ouattara Forces in Ivory Coast

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Reports are emerging of systematic attacks on civilians in the west of Ivory Coast, the region where forces loyal to the Western-backed president-elect Alassane Ouattara launched an offensive last month.

Survivors who have escaped over the border into neighbouring Liberia tell of victims being shot or killed with machetes, being disembowelled alive, of women being gang-raped and having their throats cut. More than a million people have fled from their homes.

Initial reports suggested that up to 1,000 people had been killed. Human Rights Watch and the International Red Cross have positively confirmed the deaths of 230 people, including children, in the town of Duékoué. They indicate that there were several hundred more victims in surrounding villages. The final total is not yet known, since there are thought to be a number of mass graves. Survivors report that bodies were buried by bulldozers.

Civil war broke out in Ivory Coast last month, after a protracted dispute over the outcome of the November 2010 presidential elections. Incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo refused to recognise that his rival Ouattara had won the election. Ouattara's claim was recognised internationally. France, the former colonial power, the United Nations, the United States, the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) all declared him the victor and demanded that Gbagbo stand down.

In March Ouattara launched a major offensive against Gbagbo. His forces seized the cocoa-growing area, of which Duékoué is the centre, and rapidly took control of the commercial capital, Abidjan, where they attempted to storm Gbagbo's residence. Gbagbo repelled the assault and continues to hold out in a bunker. Over the weekend his forces took advantage of a ceasefire to take control of key positions and have attacked Ouattara's headquarters at the Hotel du Golf.

The role of French and UN forces in Ouattara's offensive is hotly disputed. Video shows massive explosions in Abidjan, as their aircraft hit Gbagbo's positions. His residence reportedly came under bombardment from French and UN aircraft. This is a breach of the UN mandate. United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) is officially a peacekeeping force and has no mandate to target Gbagbo. The French, who have maintained a military presence in Ivory Coast since it became independent in 1960, are mandated to assist UNOCI.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has accused the UN of exceeding its mandate in Ivory Coast and taking sides in support of Ouattara. The AU, which supports Ouattara's claim to the presidency, has also expressed concern at the actions of UNOCI.

Head of UN peacekeeping operations Alain Le Roy insisted that UNOCI had only attacked positions from which heavy weapons had shelled civilians and the UN forces and claimed that UNOCI had not targeted Gbagbo's residence, only heavy weapons close to it that had been shelling civilian areas in the city.

But diplomats expressed concern about the involvement of UNOCI in what appears to be giving close air support to Ouattara's assault on Gbagbo's residence. "We support the mandate of protecting innocent lives. But we're worried about whether the resolution is being strictly implemented. It's difficult to say because we don't have clear information in terms of what has been targeted", one African diplomat said.

The BBC pointed out that it was "Mr. Sarkozy who first floated the idea of banning heavy weapons in Ivory Coast. This, coupled with the leading role France played in advocating force in Libya, was seen by some as part of a more muscular military policy to bolster his domestic standing in an election year".

Writing in the Financial Times, Peggy Hollinger pointed to what she described as "the contradictions of French foreign policy" in Ivory Coast:

"The military operation is France's second on the African continent in less than a month, leaving many to wonder whether this signals a new, more interventionist policy to rid the continent of unpalatable dictators ... aerial strikes on the presidential palace and the national television station can hardly be described as taking out heavy artillery. There can be no doubt that the French attacks went beyond the principle of 'responsibility to protect' and were aimed at helping to oust Mr. Gbagbo and install Mr. Ouattara in his rightful place".

Hollinger quotes Phyllis Bennis of the Washington-based think tank Institute for Policy Studies, who points out that the timing of the UN-French airstrikes "strengthens the argument that the air strikes are more of a political than a humanitarian intervention". The operation gives the impression of aiming to "re-establish the French presence in Francophone Africa".

Hollinger questions whether France's intervention in Libya and Ivory Coast are part of a consistently new foreign policy, since each has arisen from quite different circumstances. But she recognises that "the impression that France is intervening more overtly in African affairs is having one serious consequence. Public opinion is growing resentful of what it sees as interference by a former colonial power".

That perception is likely to be enhanced by the association of France and the UN with forces that have carried out atrocities against civilians. The responsibility for the massacres of civilians must be laid at the door of France and the UN because they have condoned, and possibly actively supported, Ouattara's military campaign.

Survivors describe deliberate killings directed against ethnic groups that are perceived to be supporters of Gbagbo. Journalists are drawing parallels with Rwanda. The scale of the massacres is as yet smaller, but there too France was implicated in the killings.

The London Times quoted Emmanuel Guer who said, "We were marched to a compound in the town. When we arrived there were 150 people in the hall. At the front they were

dragging people out, men and women, in fives, five after five after five. Each time they were taken out we heard gunfire”.

Guer went on, “How can I describe what it was like? We were squeezed in like cattle, all you could see in the dark were bulging eyes, women were crying hysterically. People fought to get further back in the queue. They were killing us in a really thought-out way. It was extermination”.

“They were shooting them in the back of the head and then dragging the bodies off”, he said. “But it was taking a long time for them to do it. Eventually me and six others fought our way out of a back window and escaped over a fence. As we ran towards the highway, the road was lined with the dead. Many of the women had their throats cut”.

Pierre M’lehi, a cocoa planter, described a bulldozer digging mass graves in Duékoué: “The corpses lined up along the roadside were fresh and rotting. It was as if they had been put there as a warning”.

One woman described how elderly captives were taken out each day and shot. Old people seem to have particularly vulnerable because they were too feeble to escape. Crops and houses seem to have been burnt in at least 10 villages around Toulépleu and Bloléqui in the western region. Those targeted appear to belong mainly to the Guere ethnic group and are regarded as supporters of Gbagbo.

Youssoufou Bamba, Ouattara’s ambassador to the UN, claimed that pro-Gbagbo forces were responsible for atrocities. According to Bamba, UNOCI forces and the aid agencies had been forced to leave the area because of the poor security situation under Gbagbo.

“It was only when (Ouattara’s forces) came in that all the NGOs, as well as the UNOCI, could come back to monitor the situation”, he claimed.

Gbagbo’s forces had continued to commit atrocities, he alleged, as they retreated. He denied that communal violence between different ethnic groups in the area could be blamed on Ouattara’s forces.

In fact, UN forces were present in the area at the time of the massacres. What their role was is still not clear, but their mandate is to protect the civilian population and, at the very least, they failed in this.

Civilians are also at risk in Abidjan. Dead bodies can be seen in the streets. Militia groups loyal to Gbagbo and Ouattara are active in the city. How many died as a result of UN and French air attacks is not known. Huge explosions were caught on video, suggesting that the number of casualties when it is possible to count them will be significant.

Over the weekend many embassies began to evacuate their staff as the situation in Abidjan deteriorated. The US State Department repeated its travel warning for Ivory Coast because fighting had become “more intense in a number of neighborhoods”.

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