

## Cote d'Ivoire: Pro-Gbagbo Forces Abducting Opponents

Human Rights Watch 23 December 2010 (Dakar) - Security forces associated with Laurent Gbagbo are abducting and "disappearing" his rival's supporters, Human Rights Watch said today, citing statements from numerous witnesses. Alassane Ouattara, Gbagbo's rival, is widely believed to have won last month's disputed presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire. Ivorian leaders who order and encourage these kinds of grave human rights abuses could be held accountable by the International Criminal Court (ICC), Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch has spoken with families and neighbors in pro-Ouattara neighborhoods of Abidjan, the country's economic capital. These witnesses said that a combination of pro-Gbagbo security forces and unofficial militia have conducted nightly raids since December 16, 2010, dragging people away in official vehicles and taking them to undisclosed locations. Many of the abducted remain missing, and the security forces are refusing to reveal their whereabouts. Several witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch had come across bodies with bullet wounds of those arrested or abducted, leading to strong fears of extrajudicial executions. "Abducting, disappearing, and killing perceived political opponents are horrific human rights crimes, which can and should be punished," said Rona Peligal, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "No Ivorian families should have to suffer this grave mistreatment."

On December 23, the United Nations deputy high commissioner for human rights, Kyung-Wha Kang, said that UN human rights monitors had reported 173 killings, 90 cases of torture or abusive treatment, 24 forced disappearances, and hundreds of arrests between December 16 and December 21. At least 20 people were killed and scores seriously injured when Gbagbo's security forces opened fire on demonstrators during a December 16 march by Ouattara supporters. The UN Human Rights Council in Geneva unanimously adopted a resolution on December 23 condemning abductions, executions, and enforced disappearances in Côte d'Ivoire, and pledged to take further action if the situation deteriorates.

The second round of Côte d'Ivoire's presidential election, on November 28, was supposed to reunify a country divided since a 2002-2003 conflict, but instead it has plunged the West African nation into an explosive political conflict. Both Ouattara and Gbagbo declared themselves president and appointed separate governments. The international community, including the African Union, the regional body ECOWAS, and the UN Security Council, has unanimously endorsed Ouattara as the victor and called on Gbagbo to step down.

"Both forces loyal to Gbagbo and those to Ouattara should be on notice that they could be held to account for past and current crimes," said Peligal. The ICC prosecutor, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, has said that he would pursue those responsible if deadly violence breaks out in Côte d'Ivoire. Although Côte d'Ivoire is not a party to the ICC, in 2003 the government made a declaration accepting the ICC's jurisdiction "for the purposes of identifying, investigating and trying the perpetrators and accomplices of acts committed on Ivorian territory since the events of 19 September 2002."

Such crimes include war crimes, crimes against humanity, or acts of genocide. This declaration remains in force. Under the Rome Statute, which established the court, acts such as murder, the enforced disappearance of persons, and urging persecution of a national, ethnic, or political group could qualify as crimes against humanity under ICC jurisdiction when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilians.

### **Incitement to Violence Against Peacekeepers, Intimidation of Human Rights Workers**

Over the last week, pro-Gbagbo forces have also used language against both UN and French forces that has the potential to incite violence, Human Rights Watch said. At a December 18 rally, Charles Blé Goudé called on his *Jeunes Patriotes* (Young Patriots), a group with a history of violent behavior against the opposition and peacekeepers, to "liberate" the country of foreign peacekeepers.

On the night of December 18, armed men fired on a vehicle registered with the United Nations mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), which has been in the country since 2004. UN officials also reported that since this rally, armed members of the security forces have entered the houses of some UNOCI staff in what appeared to be a clear attempt to intimidate UN personnel.

The ICC statute prohibits attacks against international peacekeeping missions as long as they are operating as peacekeepers. On December 8, the ICC began a hearing about the alleged involvement of two Darfur rebel leaders in an attack that killed 12 African Union peacekeepers in Darfur. "Attacks against peacekeepers are serious crimes that interfere with the protection of civilians," Peligal said. "The Darfur case sends a clear message to warring parties that such attacks will not be tolerated."

Those attempting to report on abuses have likewise come under increasing threat. In the early evening on December 18, two men from the Ivorian nongovernmental organization *Alliance pour le Changement*

were abducted in public by armed men in a 4x4 vehicle. One witness interviewed by Human Rights Watch said the attackers were from the Republican Guard, Gbagbo's personal unit. Friends, family, and others have tried to find out where the abducted men are, but they are still unaccounted for. Another local organization told Human Rights Watch that it received threatening phone calls after issuing a statement about the violence last week.

Kang, the UN deputy human rights commissioner, said that Gbagbo's security forces have also blocked the UN mission's human rights staff from investigating an allegation that there is a mass grave in an Abidjan neighborhood. She said that as part of this effort, the security forces blocked the special representative of the secretary-general for Côte d'Ivoire, Y.J. Choi, at gunpoint. (...)

### Recruitment of Foreign Mercenaries

Human Rights Watch has also documented the recruitment of Liberian mercenaries by pro-Gbagbo government forces, beginning at least in early December, when some who had been combatants in previous regional civil wars were offered money for their services. Multiple witnesses during the December 16 demonstrations in Abidjan noted the presence of Liberians, identifiable by their use of English and irregular uniforms.

While evidence collected so far is about recruitment by those supporting Gbagbo, the history of recruitment by *Forces Nouvelles*, who actively back Ouattara, raises concerns that mercenaries may be crossing into the northern half of Côte d'Ivoire and fomenting instability there as well, Human Rights Watch said. There are worrying reports from some of the thousands of people who have fled to Liberia in recent days that

*Forces Nouvelles* soldiers have targeted pro-Gbagbo individuals and villages for abuse. This region, with its long

history of grave human rights abuses by

*Forces Nouvelles*

soldiers, has been largely unreported on since the presidential run-off and demands greater attention from the UN and human rights groups, Human Rights Watch said.

Given the history of war crimes and serious human rights abuses committed by combatants in both the Liberian and Ivorian conflicts, Human Rights Watch expressed deep concern about this cross-border recruitment. UN and Liberian authorities should monitor borders to prevent conscription of children, in particular, Human Rights Watch said.

### **Background**

On December 2, the president of Côte d'Ivoire's electoral commission declared Ouattara the victor of the November 28 presidential election, with over 54 percent of the vote. However, Paul Yao N'Dre, the president of the Constitutional Council and a close ally of Gbagbo, contended the decision was invalid because the commission had not met a three-day deadline for announcing the results. Less than 24 hours later, the Constitutional Council overturned the commission's results and proclaimed Gbagbo the victor. The following day, Gbagbo was sworn in as president, with Ouattara soon following with his own inauguration. Both appointed prime ministers and cabinets in the subsequent days. A stand-off began, with Gbagbo operating from government buildings and Ouattara and his government functioning from the Golf Hotel in Abidjan.

International bodies called on Gbagbo to step down immediately, but Gbagbo's spokesman and officials have repeatedly denounced what they perceive as meddling. The Gbagbo government also closed off international broadcasts in the country and has used the national television station, *Radiodiffusion Télévision Ivoirienne* (RTI), as a 24-hour mouthpiece for Gbagbo's assertions of legitimacy.

Frustation over the power and control of RTI led Guillaume Soro, Ouattara's prime minister and the longtime leader of

*Forces Nouvelles*

, to call on his supporters to take over the station's building during a December 16 march. The protesters were quickly dispersed, however, as security forces first fired tear gas and then opened fire with live rounds, killing at least 20 and wounding scores more.

Fighting broke out the same day between *Forces Nouvelles* soldiers supporting Ouattara and Gbagbo's security forces in the area of the Golf Hotel, as well as in the western and central parts of the country - raising fears that the country was headed back into civil war. Some 10,000 Ivorians in the far west have fled across the border to Liberia since the beginning of December, with particularly large numbers crossing in the week after the brief fighting on December 16.

The African Union has sent two delegations to try to break the impasse, but tensions have only escalated since the December 16 march. The European Union and United States have both instituted sanctions against Gbagbo and many of his closest allies in the past three days. Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and others have previously documented serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions, torture, incitement to violence against the UN, and the recruitment of child soldiers, committed by *Forces Nouvelles* soldiers commanded by Soro, as well as by security forces loyal to Gbagbo, including Blé Goudé's Young Patriots.

To date, there has been almost no accountability for serious crimes allegedly committed by any party during the 2002-2003 civil war and its aftermath.

[See full news report here](#)