

Who will pay for violence in Ivory Coast

Human Rights Watch, published in CNN.com 05 January 2011 Matt Wells *Matt Wells is a researcher in the Africa division of Human Rights Watch.*

Does this sound familiar? An election in Ivory Coast meant to unite a divided country instead ignites pre-existing tensions, leading to rampant human rights abuses. (...)

But Ivorians are likely to remain trapped in the current conflicts so long as the country's leaders and security forces operate with impunity, and the international community does not insist on justice for major human rights crimes.

After the 2000 elections, investigations by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and others found a post-election death toll of 200, with hundreds more seriously wounded, and scores tortured - the vast majority actual or perceived supporters of Ouattara. A mass grave on the outskirts of the financial capital, Abidjan, contained 57 bodies - most massacred while in detention.

Despite extensive evidence of these abuses, no one was brought to justice for the crimes. The captain at the detention camp where the executions occurred was even promoted.

Initial international demands for prosecutions diminished and ongoing abuses were met with ever-softer calls for justice. The U.N. Security Council, for example, has still not made public the findings of a 2004 U.N. Commission of Inquiry that investigated serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law and prepared a list of actors deemed most responsible for crimes committed during the civil war and its aftermath.

Security Council resolutions have long called for sanctions against those who threatened peace and security in Ivory Coast, but only three individuals were subject to them, largely for inciting attacks on U.N. personnel and foreigners. (...)

The November presidential election has brought new violence to Ivory Coast as Gbagbo has refused to accept the results of a vote in which, nearly the entire international community agrees, Ouattara was elected president. Over the past several weeks, pro-Gbagbo forces have abducted perceived political opponents from their homes in Abidjan; many remain missing, and the U.N. has put the death toll at almost 200.

Human Rights Watch has also documented abuses in the northern half of the country against

Gbagbo supporters who, because of intimidation and some violence by forces supporting Ouattara, have fled to neighboring Liberia. (...)

While the determination to end the stalemate is to be applauded, Ivory Coast's history shows that this approach must not be taken at the expense of accountability.

In recent weeks, Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, have affirmed that human rights violations committed in the post-election period must be punished, calls echoed by the Security Council and major governments.

Perhaps most importantly, the ECOWAS Commission, a regional body of African states, has warned "all those responsible that they will face international trial for human rights violations at the earliest opportunity."

These words must be followed by determined action this time around. Security forces and others who commit human rights abuses must know that they can and will be held to account for heinous acts. Political leaders must understand that violence is no way to cling to power. The Ivory Coast will only emerge from its recent bloody history if these lessons are learned.

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