

Côte d'Ivoire: Lethal Crime Wave, Security Vacuum Human Rights Watch March 5, 2012

The Ivorian government should urgently address the rising violent crime in and around the central town of Bouaké, the country's second largest city, Human Rights Watch said today. The government should take urgent steps to disarm the former combatants widely believed to be implicated in the attacks and adequately equip the police and gendarmes to protect the population and investigate violent crimes, Human Rights Watch said.

Since early December 2011, at least 22 people have been murdered in central Côte d'Ivoire during attacks on passengers travelling on motorbikes or in commercial vehicles. Victims and witnesses from Bouaké interviewed by Human Rights Watch described 15 such attacks during which at least 13 men were shot and killed and five women raped. Bouaké residents said the road banditry occurs daily and is part of a striking rise in violent crime that has crippled daily life. Residents said police and gendarmes have neither protected them from, nor properly investigated, the violent attacks. (...)

(...) Bouaké is the former capital of the Forces Nouvelles (New Forces) armed group that effectively controlled the northern half of the country beginning in September 2002 and constituted the bulk of the Republican Forces during the post-election period. (...)

(...) The Ivorian government has commendably acknowledged the problem of road banditry and violent crime, and publicly made a commitment to address the issue, Human Rights Watch said. Representatives from Ivorian civil society and the United Nations Operations in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) likewise told Human Rights Watch that since the December 2011 killing of five people by Republican Forces soldiers in the town of Vavoua, the government has taken a few meaningful steps to address problems of indiscipline within the Republican Forces. These include creating a military police unit, which has arrested some soldiers engaged in crime, and improvements in unifying the formerly belligerent armed forces into a military with some chain of command. (...) (...) The right to security is protected under article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and article 6 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, both ratified by Côte d'Ivoire. These provisions require authorities to take reasonable steps to protect everyone in Côte d'Ivoire from violence by anyone else, when the authorities are aware that certain individuals or groups are at specific risk. (...)

(...) Human Rights Watch called on the government to quickly provide sufficient material support for the police and gendarmes to undertake basic security functions. The government should also ensure that the military defers to and respects the primacy of the police and gendarmes who are responsible for protecting the population and bringing those responsible to book, Human Rights Watch said.

In addition to empowering the security forces, a successful disarmament, demobilization, and reinsertion program (known as DDR) for the tens of thousands of men who took up arms during the post-election crisis is essential to tackle the worrying rise in violent criminality, Human Rights Watch said. Some important progress has been made in disarming men who took up arms during the post-election crisis, Human Rights Watch said. And UN officials said that the Ouattara government's current efforts were a significant improvement from three failed

disarmament programs during Gbagbo's presidency. The disarmament of certain high-risk armed groups in Abidjan and the western part of the country – the majority formerly associated with Gbagbo's side – has indeed begun, with close involvement from the UN. (...)

(...) UN officials told Human Rights Watch that UN-monitored disarmament of these former combatants has yet to start, as the government says it is yet to arrive at decisions regarding military reform and has not finished registering and profiling all of these former combatants. As one UN official said, the UN could not assist disarmament of the Republican Forces “until the government tells us who to disarm.”

UN officials blamed part of the problem on the proliferation of state institutions implicated in DDR – 17 involved currently in some capacity – and called for a centralized, national program with the authority to organize and move the process forward. (...)

(...) Human Rights Watch called on the Ivorian government to ensure that the UN operations in the country and other international actors can monitor the DDR process from the identification and registration of former combatants through disarmament and reinsertion programs. (...)

(...) Ineffective Police, Gendarme Response

After beginning their rebellion in late 2002, the then-rebel New Forces quickly controlled the northern half of the country. Through the 2010 presidential election, there was little to no state authority, including the police and judiciary, in northern Côte d'Ivoire, and these state functions were effectively taken over by the New Forces.

Nine months after the end of the post-election conflict, the Republican Forces continue to assume the primary crime-fighting role in many parts of the country – despite the government's repeated promises to return the military to their barracks and allow the police and gendarmes to resume their functions. Tensions over the continued pre-eminence of the military have on occasion turned deadly. Reuters reported that on February 13, three people were killed and 20 more injured during clashes in eastern Côte d'Ivoire set off by local protests over the ongoing use of the Republican Forces, rather than gendarmes, in basic security roles.

In addition, the Republican Forces' predominance has left the police and gendarmes almost wholly ineffective in protecting the population and investigating crimes, particularly in northern Côte d'Ivoire. (...)

(...) For years, Forces Nouvelles soldiers have been very credibly implicated in widespread extortion and racketeering, including when carrying out police and judicial functions. The UN Group of Experts released a report in April 2011 describing the financial windfall for Forces Nouvelles commanders of millions of US dollars from extortion. A December 2011 report from the International Crisis Group described ongoing extortion and racketeering under certain Republican Forces commanders who were previously with the Forces Nouvelles.

Ouattara has commendably established a military police force to address inadequate discipline within the army, and there have been arrests. However, several victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that at least some members of the regular army are benefitting financially from the lack of security in Bouaké.

To read the full report, see [here](#) .