

Côte d'Ivoire's Great West: Key to Reconciliation International Crisis Group

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Western Côte d'Ivoire

's land, security and identity problems make this vast border territory the country's most unstable area. Reconciliation has yet to begin there and communal tensions remain acute. Two administrative regions are especially problematic: Cavally and Guémon. Outside Abidjan, these are the two regions where the post-electoral crisis claimed the most victims and which saw the gravest violence. The Ivorian government's preference for a security clamp-down there, rather than measures to address political and economic problems has done little to address instability, which could provide the spark that reignites the crisis. Since December, the government has taken some steps nationally to lower political tension and promote national reconciliation: these should be immediately extended to these two regions, which remain strongholds of former President Laurent Gbagbo.

Since independence, the central government has ignored Cavally and Guémon when distributing the nation's wealth. These two outlying regions produce a significant proportion of the cocoa that makes Côte d'Ivoire the world's biggest producer, as well as large quantities of other plant-derived raw materials. Yet they missed the "Ivorian miracle" and have remained undeveloped. Their exceptionally fertile land is both a source of wealth and their main problem. Poorly regulated and subject to fierce competition, land ownership is a recurring cause of conflict. Land is a magnet for migrants, both from other parts of the country and from abroad, who often outnumber those "native" to the area and leave them with a strong sense of dispossession.

For a long time, conflicts have been resolved peacefully through local and customary dispute resolution systems. However, the economic crisis, demographic pressures and the spread of a xenophobic political discourse in the 1990s have exhausted these systems. Land conflicts, exploited by the three major political parties that disputed the succession to President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, have increasingly provoked violence between "native" landowners and migrants.

The government of then-President Henri Konan Bédié tried in 1998 to resolve the situation by introducing a land code that was never enforced. The war in September 2002 and its aftermath then considerably worsened the conflicts. During this period, the violence that affected the west was worse than anywhere else in Côte d'Ivoire, bar the capital Abidjan, with large-scale criminality claiming dozens, even hundreds, of victims.

This was partly due to Cavally's and Guémon's strategic location, not only because they produce cocoa but also because they are at the centre of the transport network that takes the raw material to the coast for export. Whoever controls these two regions also controls the country's main source of foreign currency. Liberia's proximity is another aggravating factor. Mercenaries from that country have exported the brutal behaviour that characterised the Mano River wars and make regular, deadly incursions into Ivorian territory, taking advantage of the weakness of Liberian and Ivorian armed forces.

During the 2011 post-electoral crisis, further massacres took place in Cavally and Guémon. The gravest, with a death toll of hundreds in just a few days, took place in the town of Duékoué. Then, in July 2012, more than one year after the end of the crisis, other violent crimes were committed at the Nahibly camp for the internally displaced, just outside Duékoué. In 2013, several incursions into Côte d'Ivoire by Liberian and Ivorian militia from Liberia claimed further victims and displaced thousands. These recent events proved just how volatile these two regions are, and showed they are likely to be the first to boil over if political tensions increase.

At the moment, serious crimes against members of ethnic groups considered to be supporters of former President Gbagbo remain unpunished, which lends credibility to allegations of a two-tiered justice system. The government in Abidjan must shed light on these crimes and take other significant measures to stabilise Cavally and Guémon.

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