



## Keeping the Peace in Côte d'Ivoire: UN Operation a Critical Step in Stabilizing West African Subregion

By *Blake Rice*

On November 29, 2003, elements of the Ivorian army loyal to President Laurent Gbagbo mounted an assault on the northern town of Bouaké, aimed at liberating the city from its rebel occupiers. Spearheading the attack were members of pro-Gbagbo militant groups, many of them based in from Abidjan. This motley assortment of civilians and soldiers departed from southeast of Bouaké in a column that included Ivorian army vehicles. To reach the rebel stronghold, they first had to cross the “zone of confidence,” an area off-limits to both armed rebels and government forces since the January 2003 Marcoussis accords split the country in half. But the attempt to reach Bouaké failed, as heavily armed French forces repelled the government loyalists, averting a possible return to war.

Last November’s clash between Gbagbo loyalists and French peacekeepers illustrates how perilously close Côte d’Ivoire has come to the brink of civil war in the past year. It also demonstrates—as detailed in United Nations assistant secretary general Hedi Annabi’s report on Côte d’Ivoire—the vital role played by the roughly 4,000 French troops of *Opération Licorne* and their 1,478 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) counterparts. These peacekeepers have helped enforce a precarious cease-fire, despite the best efforts of hard-liners who would rather see their respective agendas imposed through force of arms. Yet even if the French and West African interventions have kept hope for reconciliation alive in Côte d’Ivoire, they appear unsustainable both politically and logistically, especially if the peacekeeping force is to move beyond simple maintenance of the line of

partition to complete implementation of the Marcoussis Accords—that is, to securing Côte d’Ivoire’s porous western border, maintaining elementary security to allow restoration of social services, overseeing disarmament and demobilization, and preparing for elections in 2005. Only an international peacekeeping operation led by the UN can fulfill these critical functions and bring durable peace to the country.

Meeting on February 4, 2004, the UN Security Council voted to extend its authorization of the French and ECOWAS peacekeeping missions to February 27. Under U.S. pressure, the Security Council chose to postpone the decision on whether to create a UN peacekeeping mission to supersede the French and ECOWAS missions. The U.S. administration, initially hesitant to endorse this option, has since dropped its objections. U.S. ambassador to the UN John Negroponte has reportedly recommended to Congress that it support UN secretary general Kofi Annan’s request for a contingent of 6,240 troops.

U.S. policymakers had good reason to examine carefully Annan’s request for a contingent of troops for Côte d’Ivoire. Their main concerns were the cost of the operation and perhaps more importantly the availability of competent troops and achievability of the mission. Demands for such UN peacekeeping operations—particularly in Africa—have risen dramatically in recent years. From 1994 to 1999, following the Somali and Rwandan crises, there was a sharp drop-off in UN peacekeeping in Africa. Today, authorized UN peacekeeping operations on the continent total approximately 40,000 troops (11,000 in Sierra Leone, over 10,000 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 4,000 in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and 15,000 authorized for Liberia.) Côte d’Ivoire, Burundi, and Sudan now stand in the wings and, if all are authorized, could increase that number by another 20,000.

Nonetheless, the United States should not miss this opportunity to work multilaterally with its African, European, and UN partners to bring stability and normalcy

to the troubled West African region through an expanded UN operation that would supersede the French and ECOWAS interventions.

The United States has a special and rising interest in securing the stability of West Africa—an interest repeatedly articulated by both the U.S. administration (beginning with the September 2002 National Security Strategy) and subsequently by the top leadership of the U.S. European Command, charged with operationalizing a West African counterterrorism strategy. There is increasing recognition both of rising U.S. energy stakes in the region and the risk that instability and economic collapse in West Africa could provide an enabling environment for militant anti-Americanism, terrorist networks, and criminal syndicates. Significant U.S. investments in Sierra Leone and Liberia (the United States recently pledged \$200 million to reconstruction and \$245 million for peacekeeping operations in Liberia) attest to the new U.S. security calculations, but these investments will come to naught if instability and bloodshed persist in Côte d'Ivoire.

Guinea, already deeply implicated in the subregional conflict, confronts severe internal strains of its own and risks being drawn further into the violent West African vortex if prolonged fighting re-erupts. Resolving the Ivorian conflict is a matter of increasing urgency to West African leaders. West Africa's most successful states—Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Benin—have felt the negative impacts of the Ivorian conflict, in terms of economic fallout and massive refugee and returnee flows. An impressive delegation of foreign ministers from Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, Senegal, and Benin (which just began a two-year term on the UN Security Council) came to Washington, D.C., in early February, together with ECOWAS executive secretary Mohamed Ibn Chambas, to urge the U.S. administration, the Congress, and the Security Council to approve the upgraded peacekeeping deployment. The states of the region have taken a proactive role, not only in supplying personnel for the ECOWAS force, but also in political mediation and interventions among the key Ivorian stakeholders. Their initiative should be recognized and rewarded.

U.S. endorsement could also be an opportunity to work in concert with British and French allies, who have invested considerable resources in helping ensure regional stability. U.S. approval of UN intervention in Côte d'Ivoire—a matter of great importance to Paris—would help mend a transatlantic relationship that has been damaged by the global debate over the U.S. military intervention in Iraq.

Answering the secretary general's call for blue helmets in Côte d'Ivoire may also prove very helpful to the United States in its quest to gain UN support in Iraq on the issues of elections and transition of power.

Finally, this is an opportunity for the United Nations and its member states to experiment with an integrated, regional approach to UN peacekeeping, building on economies of scale and interoperability. There are signs that this is beginning to happen. The UN force commanders in Liberia and Sierra Leone met in Senegal with the UN chief military liaison in Côte d'Ivoire in early February to discuss ways to strengthen cross-border security and coordination among their missions. To date, coordination has centered primarily on information sharing and communication. Given the interlinkages between the Ivorian, Sierra Leonean, and Liberian conflicts and the considerable costs associated with each peacekeeping mission, there is a strong argument for pooling and sharing common assets and facilities, such as aircraft, trucks or emergency air support, and for creating joint patrols or allowing UN personnel to cross national borders to stem the movement of combatants, arms, and illegal resources. Given the heavy demands for peacekeepers and the strong likelihood of future regionalized conflicts in Africa (the Great Lakes conflict is another case in point), there is a strong incentive to develop integrated approaches that capitalize on economies of scale and strengthen African capacities to respond to future crises.

Momentum is building in Washington, D.C., for a positive vote on Côte d'Ivoire. The following analysis, based in part on consultations held with ECOWAS, French, UN, and U.S. representatives at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, offers a brief background of the conflict and the current peacekeeping operations, emphasizing the importance to the region of Côte d'Ivoire and the necessity of a UN peacekeeping mission.

### **Côte d'Ivoire's Impact on West Africa**

Within the West African subregion, Côte d'Ivoire's economic importance cannot be overstated. Prior to September 2002, Côte d'Ivoire generated nearly 40 percent of the eight-member West African Economic and Monetary Union's (WAEMU) GDP and approximately 15 percent of all ECOWAS wealth. By virtue of its geographic location between the Atlantic and landlocked neighbors to the north, Côte d'Ivoire serves as a key transit country for regional

commerce. Port-Abidjan, the largest and best-equipped seaport between Casablanca and Cape Town, handles nearly 70 percent of Mali's import-export activity; Burkina Faso also relies heavily on Ivorian port facilities for access to world markets.

The instability and de facto partitioning of the country brought about by the September 2002 army mutiny have already had serious effects on the region's economic health. In the early stages of the conflict, Côte d'Ivoire's northern borders were closed, causing severe bottlenecks at the port of Abidjan as cargo bound for Burkina Faso and Mali was left to accumulate on the docks. The vital Abidjan-Ougadougou rail link was severed, forcing Burkina Faso to reroute its outgoing trade, while Niger and Guinea were also hard-hit. Although borders have since reopened, the general climate of instability reigning along much of the central Ivorian trade corridor—with its gauntlet of checkpoints, often manned by undisciplined fighters—is not conducive to the free flow of goods.

Ongoing conflict could also threaten Côte d'Ivoire's crucial agricultural sector—one-third of GDP—and have negative repercussions throughout the subregion. As the winter harvest season comes to a close, unsettling reports have emerged from the southwestern cocoa belt, an area divided between rebel groups and government forces in which the world's foremost exporter of cocoa grows most of its beans. Opportunistic buyers have taken advantage of the conflict to secure cocoa at reduced prices for smuggling, while immigrant farmers from neighboring countries have been chased off land they had tilled for years. There are signs that Côte d'Ivoire's agricultural heartland is becoming a no-man's land.

The regional security implications of the Ivorian conflict are equally troubling. All told, nearly one-third of Côte d'Ivoire's 16 million people are originally from neighboring West African states, with the unresolved issue of citizenship at the center of the Ivorian conflict. Given these significant expatriate communities, protracted conflict in Côte d'Ivoire could have political consequences in the many countries of origin where the specter of returnees looms large. President Gbagbo's most loyal supporters make no secret of their suspicion that Burkina Faso aided the rebellion in its early days, and though the true nature of Ouagadougou's involvement remains unclear, President Blaise Compaoré is said to have great influence over the rebel leadership. This connection is all the more relevant considering the large number of Burkinabé immigrants living in Côte d'Ivoire: some 3 million, many of whom

came years ago in response to the demand for cheap labor generated by the plantation economy. The same applies to a significant Malian community, estimated at 2 million; Bouaké, located in central Côte d'Ivoire, is often described as Mali's second city after Bamako.

Meanwhile, in an area now euphemistically referred to as Côte d'Ivoire's "Wild West," the free movement of foreign fighters has contributed to great instability along the Liberian border. Foreign fighters fought on both sides of the Ivorian conflict; many of those recruited to aid Gbagbo subsequently filled the ranks of the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL). Now that Liberia is finally emerging from civil war, these fighters are finding their way back to the Wild West, clearly demonstrating that instability in West Africa cannot be isolated by country. Lasting subregional peace will remain elusive unless fighters are denied the ability to drift from conflict to conflict when faced with demobilization at home.

### Lead-up to the Conflict

For most of its existence as an independent state, Côte d'Ivoire was considered a model of stability in an otherwise volatile region. In the decades following independence, the country built a dynamic economy based on the export of primary agricultural goods, becoming the world's foremost cocoa producer. Avoiding heavy reliance on primary exports through diversification and in-country processing, the Ivorian economy experienced sustained growth, which in turn allowed significant public reinvestment and development of an impressive infrastructure. State resources permitted President Félix Houphouët-Boigny—who led his country through three decades of relative political stability under semi-autocratic, single-party rule—to perpetuate what has been described as a "quasi-corporatist arrangement," which held together Côte d'Ivoire's diverse ethnic and religious groups but failed to build democratic institutions that would sustain the country through leaner years.

Côte d'Ivoire began to show signs of fracture with Henri Konan Bédié's succession to the presidency after Houphouët's death in 1993. Without the resources to pursue his predecessor's policy of co-optation—already somewhat undermined by economic slowdown in the late 1980s and austerity measures in the early 1990s—President Bédié turned to a strategy of divide and conquer the opposition, and Houphouët's complex system collapsed. The glue holding together Côte d'Ivoire's divergent groups

slowly began to dissolve.

The 1995 general elections saw the introduction of *Ivoirité*, a divisive concept in no small part responsible for the current crisis. Hoping to exclude former prime minister and opposition leader Alassane Dramane Ouattara from the race, Bédié and the *Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI) pushed through laws prohibiting foreigners from running for office. Ouattara, believed to have been born of a Burkinabé father, was absent from the first post-Houphouët elections. This concept of *Ivoirité* created tensions between Côte d'Ivoire's large immigrant communities and the rest of the population by drawing attention to previously ignored differences; *Ivoirité* also fueled divisions between Ivorian ethnic groups.

These divisions took on new dimensions at decade's end. The 2000 elections, which came after a military coup led by General Robert Gueï, exacerbated ethno-religious tensions and violence. Once again, Ouattara was barred from the race, while Laurent Gbagbo, leader of the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI), played the *Ivoirité* card to consolidate his power and rise to the presidency amid reports of repression based on ethnicity and religion.

On September 19, 2002, the spark of military mutiny finally ignited Côte d'Ivoire's volatile internal environment, as dissidents within the army gained control of key cities in the north, including Korhogo and Bouaké. Later identified as the *Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI), the main rebel group took control of northern Côte d'Ivoire; two additional groups, the *Mouvement pour la paix et la justice* (MPJ) and the *Mouvement populaire ivoirien du Grand Ouest* (MPIGO) subsequently surfaced in the west. All three regrouped under the banner of *Forces Nouvelles* or "New Forces."

The country remains divided between the north, held by the *Forces Nouvelles*, and the government-controlled south, although the worst of the fighting ended with a peace agreement signed in Linas-Marcoussis, France, in January 2003. This agreement called on the government, the rebels, and the political opposition to share power in a transitional government until elections in 2005.

### Current Peacekeeping Efforts

Despite the regional importance of Côte d'Ivoire, the conflict there has not yet received the international commitment it merits, even if the French and ECOWAS

efforts have been commendable. Shortly after the September 2002 uprising, France put an end to its policy of nonintervention in Africa. What began as the reinforcement of the permanent French military presence to protect foreign nationals has since become the peacekeeping *Opération Licorne*, endorsed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1464. During previous bouts of instability in its former colony, Paris had avoided direct intervention, even when Ivorian leaders invoked the many defense accords linking the two countries, as Bédié did in his 1999 effort to counter Gueï's military coup. Côte d'Ivoire's troubles were related to internal political considerations and not external threats, or so the reasoning went, and therefore did not warrant activation of the defense accords.

Since September 2002, both sides have accused France of aiding and protecting the other. When the rebel insurgency threatened to claim the economic capital Abidjan at the outbreak of hostilities, interceding French troops were seen as overtly protective of the Gbagbo regime; at the same time, government loyalists claimed the French were not doing enough to help quell the insurgency. In recent months, with the balance of power now favoring government forces, the French presence has been portrayed as an obstacle to peace by hard-liners in Gbagbo's camp who believe they could easily reclaim the north through force of arms.

The troops of *Opération Licorne* have undoubtedly played a key role in keeping Côte d'Ivoire from total disintegration, but they lack the impartiality normally associated with peacekeeping missions. Any action Paris takes in Côte d'Ivoire must be carefully weighed against nightmare scenarios involving the remaining 15,000 resident French nationals, not to mention the considerable economic interests developed over decades of close partnership. In much of the government-controlled media, France is lambasted as a neocolonial power bent on usurping the country's national wealth, while the pro-Gbagbo youth group *Jeunes Patriotes* stirs fervent anti-French sentiment on the streets. The October 21, 2003, murder of journalist Jean Hélène—killed by a bullet to the head—stands out as the most dramatic example of this sentiment; hard-liners subsequently took up the presumed killer's cause to portray him as a courageous hero who stood up to the white oppressor.

Also endorsed by Resolution 1464, the ECOWAS Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ECOMICI) has shared responsibility with *Opération Licorne* for enforcing the cease-fire and

patrolling the zone of confidence. But this West African force faced deficiencies even before it deployed in January of last year; at its conception, the ECOMICI was unable to fill even half the 3,200 billets deemed necessary for a successful mission. In the field, ECOWAS peacekeepers must cope with a lack of resources that shortens their already limited reach.

## No Peace without the UN

The Marcoussis accords, which call for key electoral and constitutional reforms to address the problem of *Ivoirité*, are unworkable without UN intervention. Gbagbo, humiliated at Marcoussis, has been reluctant to delegate authority to the rebel leadership, while the rebel camp, wracked by internal divisions, has cited security concerns in its bid to forgo disarmament. As a result, the government of reconciliation has made little progress in preparing Côte d'Ivoire for elections in 2005.

The current proposal under discussion at the UN envisions a force of 6,240 peacekeepers. These blue helmets would oversee the disarmament of rebels and Gbagbo militias and provide neutral election oversight, two critical tasks the current peacekeeping missions are unable to complete, for both political and logistical reasons. The ECOWAS presence, which could be increased to 2,500 in the event of a UN operation, would be assimilated by the blue-helmet mission, bringing valuable local knowledge and experience. The troops of Opération Licorne, like British troops in Sierra Leone, would operate in close coordination with the UN operation and could provide rapid-reaction capabilities when needed.

Recruiting the number of troops required for the UN operation will require a special diplomatic effort. Most will likely come from South Asia and West Africa, and the United States should strongly consider substantially expanding training programs for West African peacekeepers. The UN mission will almost certainly be violently tested, and the Security Council should ensure that it is adequately equipped and mandated to respond effectively and enforce the peace. The presence of French troops, who will play a critical backup and rapid-response role, will significantly strengthen the UN mission's enforcement capacity. Finally, the UN should take concrete steps to coordinate and integrate its West African peacekeeping missions—measures that will both conserve costs and effectively address the regionalized aspects of the conflict.

Disarmament of rebels and militias is a critical first step for a longer-term solution in Côte d'Ivoire, in that it will allow a modicum of political dialogue and offer an opportunity for external parties—African, European, and American—to put pressure on Ivorian stakeholders to resolve differences and tolerate compromise. Nonetheless, in a region that is both saturated with small arms and home to large populations of young men lacking employment or economic prospects, a UN peacekeeping operation—no matter how effective, well integrated with other regional commands, or rapidly deployed—will not be a panacea for Côte d'Ivoire's political instability. ECOWAS and its member states have played a remarkably active role in trying to mediate and promote compromise. This is a promising trend, which the United States should recognize and encourage. But in the near-term at least, ECOWAS will require the support and political weight that Western powers and the UN can provide.

The United States should approve the deployment of the UN peacekeeping operation, as requested by Secretary General Annan. But it should build on this first step by strengthening high-level and sustained engagement with France, Great Britain, and the United Nations in a longer-term, region-wide approach that addresses the more fundamental roots of West African conflict. The price tag and uncertainty of yet another peacekeeping operation in Africa understandably gives U.S. policymakers pause. But if the United States and international community fail to make this investment now and follow up with continued engagement, demands for peacekeepers are unlikely to abate in the foreseeable future.

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