



In brief: Ivory Coast back on the brink

Standard Note: SN/IA/5804

Last updated: 4 January 2011

Author: Jon Lunn

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

Not for the first time in recent years, a disputed election has brought an African country to the verge of civil war, with an apparently defeated incumbent refusing to accept the result. After Zimbabwe and Kenya comes Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire). A second round of presidential elections on 28 November 2010 led to both candidates claiming victory and swearing themselves in. The incumbent, Laurent Gbagbo, has used the Constitutional Council, which his supporters control, to annul a large number of votes cast for the challenger, Alassane Ouattara, who had strong support in the north, claiming that they were fraudulent. The UN, which facilitated the elections, has declared Ouattara the rightful victor, as have the AU (African Union) and ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). Ivory Coast's participation in both bodies has been suspended.

The UK, US and – importantly given its close links with the country – France, have also endorsed Ouattara. The EU and US have imposed travel bans on those deemed to be obstructing peace and reconciliation by refusing to accept Ouattara's victory. Those affected include Gbagbo, his wife and 17 of his close aides. Asset freezes are likely to follow if Gbagbo does not back down. He is facing a major squeeze on his access to financial resources, with the West African Central Bank preventing Gbagbo from drawing on Ivory Coast state accounts held by it, and with the World Bank suspending its dealings with him. France has seized his presidential jet. Many of his diplomatic representatives abroad are not being recognised.

Ouattara is currently holed up in an Abidjan hotel, with a thin blue line of 1,000 UN troops providing him with protection. Gbagbo's supporters have threatened to attack the hotel but so far not acted on the threat. Gbagbo has ordered the UN's 10,000 strong peace-keeping mission, known as UNOCI, along with all French troops in the country, to leave. Both are ignoring this call. Youth militias, known as the Young Patriots, are being mobilised, led by Gbagbo's Minister for Youth, Charles Bie Goude, and UN personnel have been subject to some attacks, although so far there have been no fatalities. Ex-rebels, known as the New Forces, in the north remain largely intact and are unlikely to meekly accept any effort to capture Ouattara by pro-Gbagbo forces. The total death toll as a result of clashes between the two sides is now estimated by the UN to be at least 179. There have been reports that pro-Gbagbo radio stations are broadcasting 'hate speech' and that there is a mass grave in a neighbourhood near Abidjan. UNOCI has been asked to investigate these reports by UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon.

ECOWAS has in recent weeks sent two delegations at head of state level to Ivory Coast to urge Gbagbo to stand down and go into exile, or face the use of military force. Promises appear to have been made that, if he complies, he will not face prosecution in connection with alleged human rights abuses committed by forces loyal to him, and his personal assets will not be touched. So far he has not budged.

Despite the growing international pressure, Gbagbo still holds some cards, not least the apparent loyalty of the security forces in the south. France now has fewer troops on the ground than it used to – the ‘Licorne Force’ is currently 900 in number. Neither it, as the former colonial power, nor ECOWAS will be keen to undertake military action. They are acutely aware of the risks of such action exacerbating, rather than solving, the crisis, leading to them becoming embroiled in a quagmire. This would be the first ECOWAS intervention in which it had not been invited in by the incumbent government. The force’s logistical and equipment capabilities would also need to be strengthened significantly by support from other states if it was to have a genuine prospect of success. Furthermore, Nigeria, which would be crucial to such a force, is currently in ‘election season’ and has many domestic problems of its own, all of which may well inhibit President Jonathan’s room for manoeuvre. ECOWAS is also likely to have to seek a mandate for military action from the UN Security Council, which could take time. Finally, although UNOCI had its peace-keeping mandate renewed in December, it was not strengthened to encompass peace-enforcement.

All of this means that Gbagbo may still be hoping that, in the end, the rest of Africa and the world will be unable to avoid negotiating with him, perhaps leading to a new ‘power-sharing’ arrangement. Much may depend on whether he can find sufficient sources of finance with which to keep supporters bound to his cause. He does still retain control over the lucrative oil, gas and cocoa sectors.

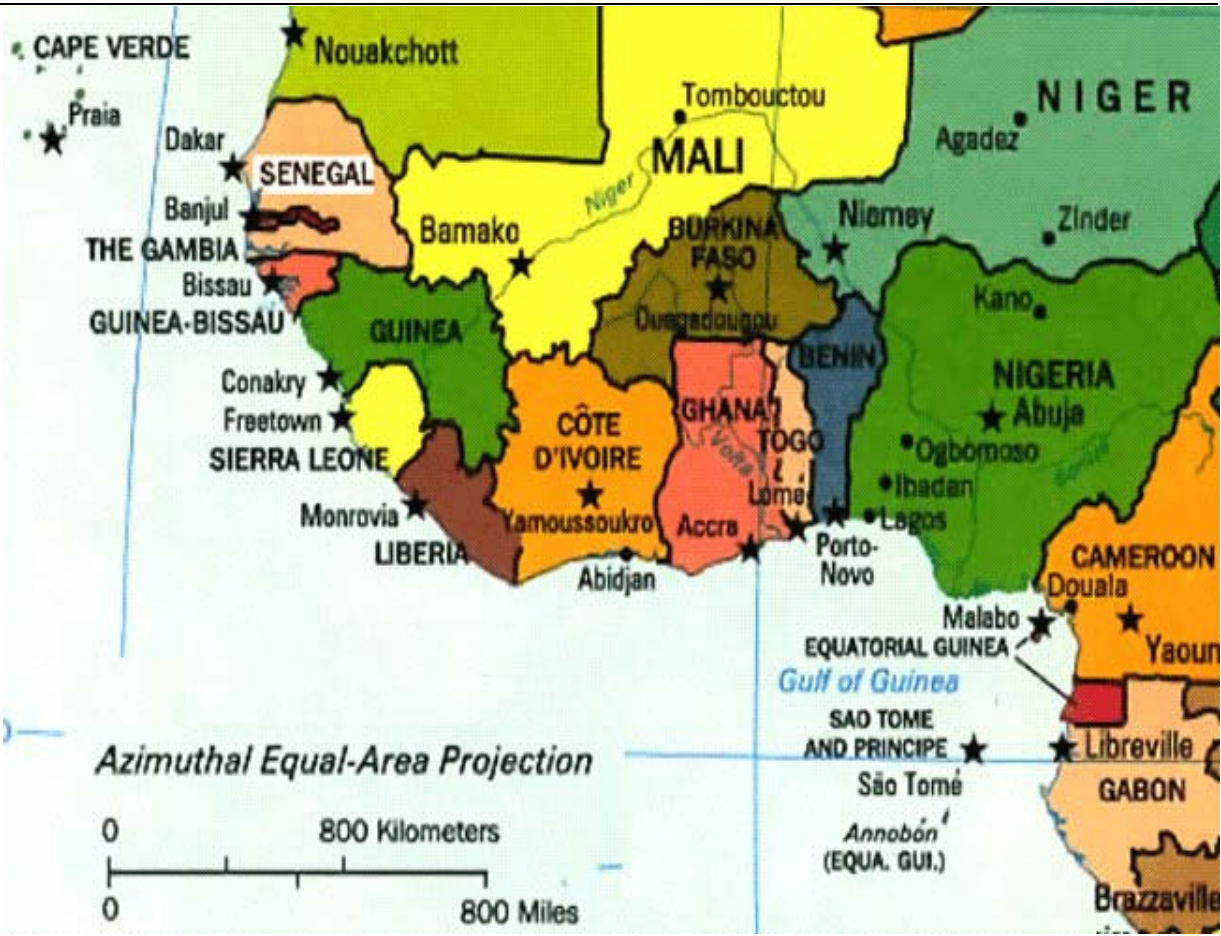
If a full-scale civil war does break out, it will constitute a resumption, rather than an entirely new development, for Ivory Coast. Civil war first broke out in 2002, when northern soldiers mutinied and came close to taking control of the entire country. French military intervention stopped this from happening but the country ended up semi-partitioned, with the north effectively autonomous from the south. A 2004 peace agreement eventually set in motion a process that was meant to culminate with successful elections and the stitching back together of Ivory Coast. These hopes are now in peril. The north-south split is rooted in a political conflict over citizenship that is driven by an exclusionary ideology of ‘Ivoirité’, with populist southern politicians arguing that many northerners are not really Ivoirien, having migrated in past decades from neighbouring countries to work in what has been one of West African’s most successful economies. Ouattara was banned from standing in previous elections because his parents were from Burkina Faso. Division and mistrust was also fuelled by the fact that Islam is the dominant religion in the north, Christianity in the south.

Unlike in France, Ivory Coast does not feature particularly strongly on the radar screen of British public opinion. Ivory Coast receives very little bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) from the UK, although the UK makes a significant contribution to humanitarian assistance through multilateral agencies. Sierra Leone and Liberia are much bigger UK ODA beneficiaries. Similarly, as might be expected, there are many less Britons living in Ivory Coast than there are French nationals. The FCO has advised all Britons to leave the country. However, British companies are involved in the oil and gas sectors and exports to Ivory Coast are considerably higher than those to Sierra Leone or Liberia.

The UK has been involved in efforts to give international support to the peace process in Ivory Coast, but its engagement has been more intensive with regard to Sierra Leone and Liberia. The UK foreign secretary, William Hague, has said that the UK Government supports ECOWAS military action in principle, but there appears little or no prospect of British troops taking a direct part in such action. However, the UK Government will be aware that the crisis in Ivory Coast has considerable potential to destabilise countries nearby in which it has invested much. These regional interconnections have operated to destructive effect in the

not-so-distant past. Ivory Coast destabilised Liberia from 1989. Liberia subsequently exported conflict to Sierra Leone. Guinea and Ivory Coast later supported efforts to overthrow Charles Taylor in Liberia. All four countries are part of a hitherto ineffective sub-regional body called the Mano River Union.

In recent weeks, an estimated 19,000 Ivoiriens are reported to have fled to Liberia, which is set for presidential elections of its own in 2011. Ghana will also be a host for Ivoirien refugees. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, reacting to reports that ‘mercenaries’ are already operating on Gbagbo’s behalf, has warned former Liberian rebel fighters not to get involved in the crisis across the border. Guinea, which has successfully, if precariously, negotiated its own elections over recent months, can expect to see an influx of refugees if the crisis is not successfully resolved. This would complicate the life of its new president, Alpha Condé. In sum, while events in Ivory Coast are perhaps above all a test case for the AU and ECOWAS, there is plenty potentially at stake for the rest of the world, including the UK.



This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required. This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.