

January 31, 2007

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Cote d'Ivoire: Continuing IDP Crisis Complicated by Nationality and Voting Issues

Cote d'Ivoire was once considered the showplace of West Africa. Since 2002, however, the country has been wracked by internal conflict over national identity, voting rights, and land tenure, which has divided the land of nearly 18 million people in two.

The government of President Gbagbo controls the prosperous south and west while the opposing Force Nouvelle controls the physically larger but poorer north. It is widely believed that the United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), largely funded by the European Union to date, have prevented humanitarian emergencies in the north and south. Displacement, continued violation of human rights, and an undetermined level of humanitarian need plague the nation.

The civil war produced large scale displacement: the exodus of some 400,000 migrants to their neighboring homelands; the flight of some 15,000 Ivorian refugees to neighboring states; the movement of an estimated 500,000 to the south. A still unknown number has been displaced in the north. The flight of civil servants from the north left that 60 percent of the country without administrators, police, teachers, water and sanitation services, health care workers and road maintenance. Diseases that were under control are flourishing again. The World Health Organization is concerned that a recent outbreak of yellow fever, an increase in water borne diseases due to deteriorating water systems and sanitation, as well as the impact of recurrent malaria and increasing HIV/AIDs, could further threaten public health.

Fundamental rights are violated on a daily basis. One NGO worker told Refugees International, "There are still killings, disappearances, and death threats." Numerous security and identity checkpoints subject the population not only to physical risks but also to lost income and work opportunities. Detained individuals experience endless delays, constant harassment, and extortion from armed elements on both sides, who frequently confiscate or destroy papers, seize goods, arrest travelers, or physically abuse and even rape vulnerable travelers. A person might be pressed to give between \$1-10 (of

a \$30 monthly income) to regain freedom of movement. Human rights workers told RI, "Checkpoints are places where women are set aside and sexually assaulted. The bus leaves and they are alone. This is a hidden problem, but is increasing."

The majority of the internally displaced moved in with relatives or friends, following West African traditions. Some 24,000 displaced government employees from the north continued to receive their salaries in the south, but others soon depleted their own resources and those of their families. In 2005 the UN Development Program estimated that 44 percent of the country had fallen below the poverty line.

Concern about the lack of knowledge regarding displacement led the UN Population Fund in 2005 to sponsor the first statistical study in the government-controlled south. The study, released in 2006, estimated that 750,000 internally displaced people (though the methodology has since been questioned by some) from the rebel controlled north lived primarily with host families in the south, many in deplorable conditions in shanty towns. For their part, government officials gave an estimate to RI of two million IDPs, heavily concentrated in Abidjan, the economic capital, and Yamoussoukro, the political capital, with many needing aid. No data existed on IDP numbers in the north. Last year the government, prompted by the UN, encouraged the return of more civil servants to the north and held school exams for the first time in several years. According to RI's interlocutors, in the northern area of Bouake school exams as expected had prompted the return of many families and some civil servants.

With individual resources rapidly being depleted, aid is required, but the level is not clear. One humanitarian noted, "People being displaced are not in real need," but an official

noted, "There is real humanitarian need here. People don't think there is an emergency because there aren't camps." The representative of an inter-governmental agency added, "About 30,000 of the most vulnerable are in shanty towns in Abidjan."

Despite large scale displacement, there is only one official IDP camp, the Center for Assistance to Temporarily Displaced (CATV) located in the west, which houses over 7,000 mostly ethnic Burkinabe (also spelled Burkina-be and Burkina be, identifying people once from Burkina Faso) in Guiglo. The camp, located in close proximity to a UN peacekeeping encampment, is operated by the International Organization for Migration but is transitioning to management by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which in 2006 accepted responsibility for IDP protection under the UN cluster approach and undertook an IDP assessment in November.

IDP camp residents expressed their gratitude to IOM, UNHCR and UN peacekeepers for protection, aware that local insecurity had led to attacks on and the burning of UN offices. After four years in the small camp, some complained about overcrowding, poor shelter, insufficient sanitation, a lack of mosquito nets and mats. Universally, the residents decried the lack of education for children and skills training or income generation activities for youth and adults. One resourceful woman started a tailoring apprentice program aiding 20 young women, but the camp leaders worried that most youth and adult had nothing to do and little hope for the future. "We have no hope here," said the youth spokesman, "please resettle us somewhere."

An elderly man apologized for the complaints, "We are sorry we have to ask for things now, we left our plantations, our villages in a hurry and could not take anything. Now we are getting food, shelter and even the clothes I am wearing. But if I had land, I would not beg. I could produce enough for food, clothing. Get us back to the land."

Another man said his family was attacked on his plantation in January 2002 and forced to live in the bush until they reached the camp in October 2003. His parents later returned to Burkina Faso, but he wanted to remain, hoping for reconciliation. NGOs and the international community are working with communities to encourage reconciliation through ceremonies and agreements that would make it possible for these skilled IDP farmers and businessmen to go back.

Large-scale returns of IDPs have been prevented by insecurity, impunity, and violent outbreaks particularly in the west, despite the existence of a UN peacekeeping mission (UN Operations in Cote d'Ivoire –UNOCI) since 2004 and the presence of French forces and joint patrols. Attacks and general lawlessness in the Zone of Confidence, which separate the two

sides and is patrolled by UN and French forces, cause additional displacement, whose ripple effects in turn displace other minorities in the west. The Economic Community of West Africa and the African Union have mediated and negotiated peace accords with the two parties but none has been fully implemented.

The continuing crisis now requires government action, with the support of the international community, to focus on medium and long-term development initiatives that will make possible local integration in safety and dignity for the displaced.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The UN Security Council remain fully engaged with finding a solution to the conflict that would ensure a ceasefire, the demobilization and disarmament of rebel forces and militias, the issuance of new identity cards in a manner that does not adversely effect internally displaced persons, the preparation of voter registration roles, the protection of the property rights of residents through the holding of free and fair elections and the ability of the displaced to return to their homes.
- ❑ The United States increase its diplomatic attention to the situation in Cote d'Ivoire and use its influence with the government and countries of the region to bring an end the conflict.
- ❑ UNHCR move quickly to determine accurately the numbers and assistance needs of IDPs in the north and south while working with the parties to the conflict and the UN country team to prevent further displacement, obtain identity documents for the displaced and provide for the monitored return in safety and dignity for those wishing to return to their homes and communities.
- ❑ The U.S. provide a generous portion of the additional \$6 million that UNHCR requested to improve the protection and condition of IDPs and find solutions for those forcibly displaced.
- ❑ The U.S. be prepared to assist the international community in providing humanitarian and other assistance needed to prevent further deterioration of the health and wellbeing of residents of Cote d'Ivoire, particularly those at risk due to displacement.

Senior Advocate Maureen Lynch and consultant Dawn Calabria completed an assessment mission to Cote d'Ivoire in October 2006