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Côte d'Ivoire: Ensuring a Peaceful Political Transition

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The March 2007 Ouagadougou Political Accord (OPA), signed by Laurent Gbagbo, president of Côte d'Ivoire, and Guillaume Soro, leader of the Forces Nouvelles (FN) rebel movement, holds great promise for ending the current political stalemate and reuniting the country. The political crisis began in September 2002 with an attack by military officers protesting the government's decision to demobilize them; according to some, it was also, an attempted coup d'état. The uprising generated other rebel groups, which took control over the northern part of the country and ignited a civil war. Even after the brunt of the fighting ceased, the country remained divided, with northern Côte d'Ivoire devoid of public services and the state's administration. The OPA is the sixth peace agreement directed at ending the political crisis; the previous five were never fully implemented due to, among other factors, disagreements about the selection of the mediator, the absence of political will among the signatories, and the tense relationship between the government of Côte d'Ivoire and the United Nations. Blaise Compaoré, president of Burkina Faso, mediated the negotiations leading to the signing of the OPA. Burkina Faso remains the facilitator of the agreement's implementation.

Under the OPA, a new government of national unity is in place to undertake the tasks necessary to organize elections and guide the country out of the political crisis. Key tasks that must take place include: providing identification cards to undocumented residents; demobilizing and disarming the FN and the militia groups; updating the voters' registry; and organizing elections. With grievances of citizenship and identity at the heart of the political crisis, the identification process is among the most critical tasks.

USIP and the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding – Côte d'Ivoire (WANEP-CI) organized a workshop in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, from November 6-9, 2007, on strategies to ensure a peaceful political transition and electoral process. The workshop included nearly 50 civil society organizations (CSOs) from all parts of the country, representing the media, human rights and democracy advocates, economic development groups, and religious and traditional leaders. Madame Fatoumata Traore, the vice president of the independent electoral commission, and Moussa Soro of the Ministry for African Integration, jointly opened the workshop. Traore also participated in the panel on democracy on the first day; she returned on the second day with an electronic copy of the voters' list, which provided participants an opportunity to verify their personal details and correct any errors. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the outcome of the workshop and includes additional observations gained from discussions on the ground and other reports.

Summary

The workshop had three inter-related goals: to increase knowledge of electoral violence,

build civil society's capacity to prevent violence and defuse tension, and create an information-sharing network of CSOs. The workshop concluded with recommendations and proposals for the way forward to ensure a peaceful transition.

Primarily, the workshop sought to broaden participants' knowledge of triggers of electoral violence and opportunities for reducing tension during the electoral period through analyses of both peaceful and troubled transitions in Africa. Thus, over the course of three days, participants discussed successful and unsuccessful means by which other elections had taken place – namely those held in Togo, Benin, Ghana, and Zanzibar, Tanzania. This comparative approach was used to draw lessons for Côte d'Ivoire's presidential elections – now scheduled for June 2008 – and outline the potential roles for civil society.

Secondly, through panels on democracy, social reconciliation and peacebuilding, and the role of regional and international organizations, the workshop aimed to strengthen the capacity of civil society to prevent conflict in Côte d'Ivoire's upcoming elections. In addition, the participants took part in a simulation exercise depicting a politically troubled country about to embark on elections. The purpose of the exercise was to enable participants to play different roles – including government representatives, opposition groups, student leaders, electoral commission members, and civil society – and develop strategies for defusing tension during the electoral process.

Finally, USIP and WANEP–CI endeavored to create a network of civil society representatives from across Côte d'Ivoire to share information on early warning of electoral violence and expertise on reducing tension. With many nongovernmental organizations based in Abidjan, it is critical that links are formed between the urban and rural civil society groups.

Current Political Climate and Status of the OPA

The OPA called for the creation of a new transitional government to guide the country through implementation and, eventually, presidential elections. To this end, Soro was designated prime minister in March 2007, and he named a new 33-member cabinet that included representatives of a cross section of political parties and civil society. The new government includes nine members from the ruling Front Populaire Ivoirien; seven members from the FN; five representatives each from the Rassemblement des Républicaines and Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire; and seven members representing civil society and smaller political parties.¹

At its signing, the OPA was expected to be implemented over the course of ten months, culminating in the organization of presidential elections. Tasks for its successful implementation include: creation of both an integrated command center and committee to oversee the implementation process; establishment of a transitional government; replacement of UN military officers with police and military units from both the FN and the government in the Zone of Confidence – a buffer zone between the north and south; demobilization, disarmament, and cantonments of militia units and fighting forces; the extension of the state's administration throughout the country; the re-launching of mobile courts to provide undocumented residents with identification cards indicating their citizenship or legal status; voter registration and the subsequent issuance of identity and voters' cards; and the unification of the FN and the national army into a new army and the integration of some ex-combatants into a new civic service program.²

In the nine months since the signing of the OPA, it has fulfilled only a few required tasks. Specifically, the transitional government has established the integrated command center and the implementation monitoring committee, deployed mixed units in the Zone of Confidence, held a

ceremony to mark the start of disarmament and demobilization, started the redeployment of state employees to all parts of the country, and re-launched the mobile courts. However, even some of these tasks remain incomplete; others have not been started at all. The implementation of the OPA has been particularly problematic in the process of demobilization, disarmament, and cantonment; the extension of the state's administration; and the re-launching of the mobile courts.³

Demobilization and disarmament began in May 2007 with the collection of 555 weapons brought forth by four western militia groups of militias. It was followed up with a ceremonial burning of weapons in the rebel-stronghold of Bouaké in July, which the government termed "La Flamme de la Paix." However, since then disarmament has not proceeded. Moreover, the FN and the Ivorian national army have been unable to agree on how many members of the FN should be integrated into a new army and how military ranks used by the FN should be transferred to the new army.⁴

The extension of the state's administration has not occurred. While many civil servants have been re-deployed to posts in the north of the country, a region that had remained out of government control since the start of the crisis, many have returned back to Abidjan, citing poor working conditions and infrastructure.⁵ Many areas of the country also remain without functioning public services.

As stated above, issues of identity and citizenship are at the core of the Ivorian crisis. In the 1995 and 2000 elections a new citizenship law resulted in many northerners claiming disenfranchisement and discrimination. Alassane Ouattara, a northerner, was disqualified from running in both presidential elections, when doubts about his citizenship arose. Indeed, a central grievance raised by the rebels is the high number of Ivorians (as many as 3 million) who do not have identity cards; as a result many suffer from discrimination and disenfranchisement, as they are perceived to be foreigners. Thus, the success of the mobile courts, which began operations in 25 locations at the end of September, is critical. So far, they have yielded approximately 80,200 identification documents out of about 84,800 requests, but the courts have been criticized for their slow pace. The state's poor organization, lack of information to citizens, and paucity of resources for the program's full implementation have been cited for the slow start of the identification process.⁶ The timely completion of the identification process is not just important to demonstrate the government's commitment to the peace agreement, but also because the electoral commission is unable to begin updating the electoral registry until the identification process is complete.

Recently, the Ivorian government took steps to move critical aspects of the implementation process forward. Additional funding for the mobile courts has resulted in greater efforts to increase the visibility of and information about the identification program and the deployment of 30 more mobile courts.⁷ On November 28, 2007, Gbagbo and Soro signed the second and third complementary agreements to the OPA. The second complementary agreement specified that the French firm, SAGEM, would produce the identity and voter cards. Key components of the third complementary agreement, include a revision of the deadlines for demobilization of militia units and recruitment into the civic service program (December 22, 2007); the extension of the state's administration (December 30, 2007); and the re-establishment of services throughout the country (January 30, 2008). It sets the election date for the end of June 2008. In addition, the third complementary agreement specifies that the Burkinabè facilitator will decide how many members of the FN will be integrated into the new army and how the military ranks of FN officers would be treated in the new integrated army.

Many participants questioned the depth, substance, and direction of the peace process underway. In particular, some wondered if the country placed too much emphasis on the symbolic aspects of the implementation process – such as "La Flamme de la Paix" – instead of more substantial programs that ensured that demobilization and disarmament proceeded apace. Noting that peace could not be possible without reconciliation, many were also divided on the structure of

reconciliation efforts. Others felt that it was too soon to call for national reconciliation, emphasizing instead the opportunities for dialogue to air grievances. However, participants agreed that reconciliation must take place before elections and must occur at the grass roots level.

Civil Society's Participation in the Transition

Presently, civil society in Côte d'Ivoire operates at the margins of the peace process. In large part, many suggested that the lack of funds for CSOs prevented them from playing a larger role. To this end, many called on the international community for assistance. However, others stressed that Ivorian civil society must develop its own solutions for emerging from the political crisis, rather than relying on the international community. Moreover, some noted that because many Ivorian CSOs divide along political lines, their credibility as advocates for their causes is often questioned and diminishes their effectiveness. Traore in particular stressed the need for the electoral commission to partner with CSOs to ensure that the voter registration process and elections take place peacefully, but noted that the politicized nature of civil society is problematic. Furthermore, she stressed that CSOs have to be more proactive in engaging with the electoral process, urging them to identify themselves to government officials and indicate their interest in participating in the electoral process.

Participants identified the Ivorian media as an especially important source for both defusing and exacerbating tension. Many media outlets are operated by political parties or are considered politically biased, jeopardizing their ability to properly inform the public. In addition, some noted that the news received in the north (from northern-based media outlets) sometimes differed from that in the south, leading to incomplete or inaccurate information; some cited this as a potential source of tension. Some suggested that CSOs in general could play an active role to counter and dampen the biased nature of the Ivorian media through more clearly defining the role of the press. Others added that the media should be more conscientious about checking facts and monitoring itself.

Peacebuilding and Economic Reconstruction Efforts

The international community has an important role to play in Côte d'Ivoire's peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. At a special donor's conference in July 2007, \$388 million was pledged to assist the country in its recovery efforts. The International Monetary Fund dispersed \$60 million on an emergency basis in August 2007 to fund economic recovery efforts and the United Nations approved \$700,000 to support the Burkinabè government in its capacity to facilitate the implementation of the OPA.⁸

The United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), which was represented at the workshop, operates with a mandate to support the full implementation of the OPA by providing guidance, advice, and technical and logistical services to the government and certifying the stages of the electoral process. To this end, there are approximately 9,100 military and civilian police in the country. UNOCI provides security and support to the integrated command center; retains a quick reaction force in the Zone of Confidence, in case of sudden instability; has constructed cantonment sites for demobilization; and provides logistical and technical support for the identification and voter registration processes.⁹

CARE International, a participant in the workshop, has developed a set of programs to foster social reconciliation through economic integration. It focuses on northern and western Côte d'Ivoire, where violence has been triggered by poor land use policies, perceived failure of 'strangers' to adequately invest in land, and perceived exploitation of land and forests in the region. According to CARE, poverty is thus the common trigger of violence in each of these cases. As such, this organization aims to resolve conflict and promote social reconciliation through development; in its project sites in northern and western Côte d'Ivoire, it has introduced

micro-credit programs. However, these projects do not stand alone; they are coupled with efforts to reduce tension through the establishment of mediation committees and reconciliation ceremonies.

In July 2007, the World Bank, which was also represented at the workshop, pledged \$120 million toward reintegration of former combatants, the national identification process, and strengthening social capital. The World Bank also pledged \$275 million toward more long-term assistance for economic recovery, contingent upon the adoption of a macro-economic plan that includes structural reforms in the energy, public finance, and coffee and cocoa sectors. Through an emergency fund program, the World Bank reported that it would release about \$2 million in emergency funds through the following projects to foster social cohesion: (Search for Common Ground, \$270,000); social reintegration (CARE USA, \$737,500); reintegration of children associated with fighting forces (UNICEF, \$298,000); and a \$160,00 project to evaluate social conditions.

Triggers of Violence, Recommendations, and the Way Forward

As the country moves steadily toward elections, many worry about the potential for instability, given the violence that accompanied the previous two polls. To this end, participants identified: five potential triggers of violence; recommendations for civil society generally, and the media, specifically, in promoting peace and social reconciliation; and specific tasks and responsibilities for the way forward.

Potential Triggers of Violence

- *Demobilization and Disarmament:* Failing to properly demobilize and disarm combatants and provide a viable alternative to armed conflict would facilitate a return to violence.
- *The Mobile Courts:* The failure of the mobile courts to carry out the identification process could trigger violence. While most participants were not ready to declare the identification process a failure, some were concerned that in several parts of the country, the population had not had the opportunity to receive identification papers, a central grievance of the political crisis.
- *Social grievances:* A recurrence of grievances over social conditions could facilitate a resurgence of violence.
- *The Electoral List:* Should Ivorians doubt the integrity of the electoral list, many feared that violence would erupt.
- *Forces Nouvelles and the National Army:* Participants warned that if clashes were to erupt between the FN and the national army, it could reignite the conflict.

Recommendations for Civil Society

- Ivorian civil society must take charge of the peace process in Côte d'Ivoire by demonstrating more initiative in controlling and monitoring the implementation of the OPA. It must not wait for the international community to act.
- Civil society must be neutral, independent and united. Currently perceived as politically biased, it is compromised in its ability to advocate effectively.
- Civil society must work to establish a new social contract in Côte d'Ivoire.
- Civil society must establish guidelines to assist the media in its work.

Recommendations for the Media

- Media organizations must verify the information that they print. Not doing so can result in fuelling rumors or publishing incorrect information, which can exacerbate tension.
- The media must be trained in conflict management strategies. Moreover, any media training must integrate CSOs.
- New technologies must be used in a bid to diffuse information more widely.

The Way Forward

Five immediate steps were identified to ensure that the political transition underway proceeded peacefully:

1. *Identify, locate, and register the former combatants:* Tracking combatants helps to direct them to social assistance programs and reduces the chances of a resurgence in violence.

Responsibility for this task:

- The parties in conflict
- Civil society
- National Reintegration and Community Rehabilitation Program (PNRRC)
- National Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Program (PNDDR)

2. *Re-socialization of ex-combatants:* Many combatants are used to obtaining economic and social benefits through armed force. This pattern must be broken through demonstrating that there are alternatives to armed conflict.

Responsibility for this task:

- Civil society
- PNRRC / PNDDR

3. *Diffuse information:* A significant factor that slowed the start of the identification program was the paucity of information on the operations of the mobile courts. Many did not seek identification papers because they did not know where to go or what to do. To ensure their success, information must be more effectively disseminated.

Responsibility for this task:

- Civil society
- Political parties
- Minister of Justice
- Minister of the Interior
- Independent Electoral Commission

4. *A new social contract:* Civil society should partner with the national government to organize a forum aimed at achieving national consensus on the relationship between the state and the population.

Responsibility for this task:

- Employers
- Trade organizations
- Nongovernmental organizations
- Religious and traditional leaders

5. *Improved civil-military relations:* Train and sensitize the armed forces on human rights and international humanitarian law.

Responsibility for this task:

- Armed forces training schools
- Civil society
- International organizations

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¹ Moussa Dosso and Youssouf Soumahoro, "Transition, Acte III: Tout sur le nouveau gouvernement," *Soir Info*, April 10, 2007 (<http://www.soirinfo.com>).

² Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, *Accord Politique de Ouagadougou, March 4, 2007, Annex* (<http://www.onuci.org/archives/communiqués/DossierOuaga.html>)

³ United Nations, "Fourteenth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire," (S/2007/593). October 1, 2007, paragraphs 16-23.

⁴ United Nations, "Fourteenth Progress Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire," (S/2007/593). October 1, 2007, paragraphs 20-22.

⁵ *Ibid*, paragraphs 23-26.

⁶ Michel Koffi, "Audiences foraines/ Méité Sindou: 'Tout est prêt, sauf les moyens,'" *Fraternité Matin*, November 13, 2007 (<http://www.fratmat.info>); and Paulin N. Zobo, "Sécurisation des audiences foraines par les partis : L'État réaffirme son rôle régalien," *Fraternité Matin*, December 11, 2007 (<http://www.fratmat.info>).

⁷ Zobo, (2007).

⁸ United Nations, paragraphs 32, 51.

⁹ United Nations.