

AFRICA AWASH WITH CONFLICTS AND WEAPONS

Ivory Coast conflict isn't over

Half a million people who fled Ivory Coast during the post-election violence are afraid to return to their homes; many are in Liberia where rival Ivorian militia are hiding and arms are plentiful. This could have consequences for the region

BY ANGELA ROBSON

Early in the morning in Solo refugee camp in eastern Liberia, a teenage girl stands against a rubber tree, arms clamped around her protruding belly. Setiche's voice is calm but her eyes are always on the horizon. "We heard people screaming and could smell houses burning," she says, remembering the day rebels appeared in her village of Bilique, in the west of Ivory Coast. "I was in school. The rebels were firing guns. Our teacher told us to run."

Setiche doesn't know anyone in the refugee camp, a sea of white tents just put up for people who have fled Ivory Coast (1). The only clothes she has are those she was wearing when she fled her village. "I ran into the forest and stayed there for four days, hiding. I moved by night so the rebels wouldn't find me." It took her a week to reach the relative safety of Liberia. She is desperate to leave the camp, but has no way of getting home: "I don't know if my family is alive. I need someone to help me find them."

Half a million people displaced by the post-electoral violence in Ivory Coast are still afraid to return to their homes for fear of reprisals, and the country remains fragile and unstable (2). United Nations investigators have found evidence that crimes against humanity – murder, rape, and persecution of individuals and groups on political, ethnic, and national grounds – have been committed by forces loyal to the West African country's ex-president, Laurent Gbagbo, and by forces loyal to his opponent and successor, Alassane Ouattara (3). Both sides also committed war crimes, including intentional attacks against civilians and the murder of people not taking an active part in hostilities (4). At least 3,000 have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced – both within Ivory Coast and in neighbouring countries. More than 170,000 people fled from western Ivory Coast into Liberia.

A 12 October report by Oxfam, Care and the Danish Refugee Council warns that a "humanitarian crisis of significant proportions" is still unfolding in Ivory Coast, threatening efforts to ensure peace, reconciliation and the ability of people to return home and rebuild their lives. Displaced people in Ivory Coast continue to experience reprisals, violence and intimidation. "The situation is still highly precarious and people affected by the conflict, particularly in the west of the country, still have specific assistance and protection needs," says Philippe Conraud, Oxfam's regional humanitarian coordinator for West Africa. "The climate of fear and insecurity is not conducive to sustainable returns. The arrest of Gbagbo on 11 April 2011 marked the end of the post-electoral violence but not of the ethnic divisions and land disputes that have torn communities apart in the west. The installation of the new government in Abidjan has not put an end to the insecurity in the region. Waves of reprisal attacks, arbitrary arrests, killings, sexual violence, verbal harassment and illegal taxation are keeping people in fear in a region awash with weapons."

Land disputes have been exacerbated by the conflict, the resulting displacement, and now the return of displaced people. It is feared that disputes will multiply as more people return to their place of origin (5).

Despite the need for large-scale humanitarian support, the UN's international emergency appeal remains just 29% funded. The shortage of food is the overwhelming priority and lack of shelter a major challenge. "Transitional shelter is urgently needed for the displaced, particularly

for those who want to return to their home villages but can't because their homes were destroyed," says David Coomber, IOM chief of mission in Ivory Coast.

In Zleh, a rural hamlet 30km from Solo camp, which at the peak of the conflict doubled its population of 1,300, Ivorians have started to create normality in their children's lives. Helped by the children's humanitarian agency, Plan Liberia, primary education is being provided, taught by Ivorian teachers who also escaped the fighting. Many of the children are traumatised – they have seen their homes burnt and members of their families raped or killed, before making the journey through the jungle to Liberia.

Oliver, 13, was shot in the foot when rebels stormed into his house, looking for his father: "I don't know why they wanted my father. They didn't ask him anything. They just took out their guns and fired them into his head."

Mohamed Bah, country director of Plan Liberia, believes that there are many challenges for children who have fled, but particularly those who have witnessed violence first-hand. The children who have arrived unaccompanied are especially vulnerable, and some could be exploited, sexually, or by being dragged into further conflict as child soldiers. "Many of these children are deeply troubled by what



The village of Janzon has 10,400 refugees, far outnumbering the 1,800 local Liberians who are providing food and shelter, despite their own limited means. Conditions for both refugees and villagers are bad, and only set to worsen as more displaced people arrive every day



Ivorian refugee children have begun attending school in Nimba County: a regular routine offers a semblance of normal life, helping to reduce the trauma of their displacement

There are many challenges for children who have fled, but particularly those who have witnessed violence first-hand. Some could be exploited, sexually or by being dragged into further conflict as child soldiers. Many of these children are deeply troubled by what they have gone through," he says. "Some have nightmares, others show signs of agitation or extreme emotion."

Child psychologist Paul Doykevee, who works in the camps along the border, believes there are many challenges for children who've experienced war trauma. "They are sometimes unable to concentrate. It is difficult for them. Some express themselves through violent gestures, or by becoming very frustrated. Others – who may have lost contact with family

and friends – may simply become withdrawn and silent. It all depends on the individual child. We try and offer support in different ways – by keeping children busy at school and also setting up recreational activities for children outside of school hours to keep them as occupied as possible. Since some of the children have no way of describing what they have gone through, we have been getting them to draw their experiences, using art therapy. Counselling is also helping them to come to terms with events they have gone through."

Ivory Coast's recent descent into violence could have huge repercussions for a region where roving militia are abundant. The situation is worrying on the border with Liberia, where there are hidden caches of arms and members of the former pro-Gbagbo militia in hiding, together with Liberian mercenaries. "Not enough is being done to protect the very many vulnerable children in the border regions," says Mohamed Bah from Plan. "Though primary school education has started there is no funding as yet for secondary schools. This leaves teenagers with little to do and vulnerable to being sucked back into fighting. Some of these young people are desperate, without food or livelihoods. They are bored and restless. If they are offered \$50 to take up arms, it can be very tempting."

While some Ivorians have started returning home from Liberia, hundreds, according to Medica Mondiale Liberia, which supports women and girls in crisis zones, are still arriving in Liberia each week.

In the small village of Pouh Town, in eastern Liberia, Josephine, 70, points to the forest surrounding her small, borrowed hut and says the dense jungle saved her life when she fled her village of Toulepleu in western Ivory Coast. Josephine arrived in Pouh Town in July after almost three months hiding in the jungle. From April to July, the population of Pouh Town, around 15km from the border with Ivory Coast, doubled from 1,500 people to 3,000 with the huge exodus of refugees.

"It was the first time I'd heard gunshots," says Josephine. "The village was overrun with rebels. They were wearing military uniforms. When they started to fire, I started to run. They were burning down houses, locking people inside first. The rebels grabbed one man and shot him in the head. Then they cut out his intestines."

Josephine believes her village was attacked because people in the area have traditionally supported ex-president Gbagbo. She said the majority of the people attacking Toulepleu were *dozos*, traditional hunters who have given their backing to Alassane Ouattara. "When I reached the border with Liberia, rebels loyal to Ouattara met us, saying it was safe to return home. So we went back. There were only two places to go – the school and the hospital. When we got closer, we realised it was a trick. We heard gunshots and cries."

Josephine's sister, her brother in law and her nephew were rounded up and killed. She believes scores of people from her village were killed that day. "Ivory Coast is not secure. There has been all this talk of disarmament but the rebels are still holding the arms. There has been no reconciliation. Our homes have been burnt, our crops have gone. We are too afraid to go back."

Anu Pillay, head of Medica Mondiale, says that in Liberia an estimated two out of three women were raped during the civil war from 1989 to 2003 – around a million women. Despite severe legislation against sexualised violence, rape is still among the most frequent crimes and the majority of offenders are unpunished.

In April 2011, as Ivorian refugees started pouring over the border, Medica Mondiale became aware that many women and girls had been raped or sexually assaulted. "In one case, a woman was raped by rebels, who then decapitated her husband," says Anu Pillay. "She was then forced, at gunpoint, to carry his head on her head until she reached the border with Liberia. We are also receiving reports of torture and rape of women and girls, including the gang rape of a two year old girl."

Medica Mondiale believes that far more women and girls have been raped in Ivory Coast than has been reported. "This sexual violence is going under the radar because women fear being stigmatised and rejected by communities and family members, and so rarely report what has happened to them. Many of those targeted have been done so because of their political or ethnic affiliation. This kind of discrimination must end, as well as impunity for such crimes."

The International Crisis Group believes that the government seems to be focusing more on punishing the defeated rather than on bringing charges against supporters of the new president who also committed serious crimes. Distrust and fear have led to "multiple rumours and violence, which in turn leads to further displacement and hinders freedom of movement". It warns that, without efforts at reconciliation in Ivory Coast, resentment could once again lead to inter-ethnic violence. "The next months are crucial. The new government must avoid the narcotic of power that has caused so many disastrous decisions over recent decades... Reconciliation and justice are imperative."

LMD ENGLISH EDITION EXCLUSIVE

(1) For a good analysis, see Vladimir Cagnolari, "Ivory Coast's struggle for succession", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, February 2011.

(2) "A Critical Period for Ensuring Stability in Côte d'Ivoire", International Crisis Group, 1 August 2011; "They killed them like it was nothing: the need for justice for Côte d'Ivoire's post-election crimes", *Human Rights Watch*, 5 October 2011.

(3) "Towards durable solutions for displaced Ivorians", Care, Danish Refugee Council and Oxfam, 12 October 2011.

(4) "Côte d'Ivoire: rebranding the army", Integrated Regional Information Networks, 5 October 2011.

(5) International Crisis Group, op.cit.

Somalia's uneasy peace



A Transitional Federal Government army recruit drills with a wooden stick in place of a rifle at the African Union's al-Jazira training camp

Abdullahi walked slowly past makeshift stalls in a crowded Mogadishu market, dragging his right leg. He's in his fifties and unemployed, and relies on overseas remittances sent by his daughter to survive. In 2007 he was shot by Somalia's increasingly powerful Islamist militia, al-Shabab (Youth). The bullet blew a hole through his right leg, just below his groin.

Like many Somalis, Abdullahi is a casualty of the conflict between Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and al-Shabab. He says he supports the TFG but doesn't know whether it can succeed. "But it has to," he said. "Look at the roads, look at the rubbish: this is what 20 years of no government does. We cannot have another 20 years of war."

With renewed violence in October, the uneasy peace that has hung over Mogadishu since al-Shabab withdrew in early August may be over. Most analysts explain the withdrawal from the capital city by pointing to rifts that emerged within the organisation when it attempted to define who it should be fighting. Should it fight the 'near enemy' or the 'far enemy'? Should it be national in its focus, or international? Part of the global jihad or not? Pressure from other militia – notably the Sufi-oriented Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa – compounded the organisation's problems; so did the drying up of remittances from the Somali diaspora.

According to William Reno, of Northwestern University in the US, al-Shabab placed emphasis on ideology at the expense of political pragmatism, and fought on too many fronts at once. "They've overlapped their ideological hand and annoyed enough people so that, in the end, the communities they control are turning against them and starting to look to other people," Reno, who has extensive experience throughout Africa, thinks that in some ways al-Shabab has pursued the sensible alternative when trying to figure out how to unite communities – to use religion. "But," he added, "in trying to articulate a religious idea they are too ideological. So they are insensitive to the political calculations and compromises they have to make." (Al-Shabab's ideological persuasion is Takfiri, an ultra-conservative interpretation in which the killing of apostates forms the core conceptual basis. Un-Islamic cultural practice is banned and a strict version of sharia enforced.)

In 2008, for example, a 13-year-old girl, Asho Duhulow, was raped by three militiamen.

Glen Johnson is a New Zealand journalist

BY GLEN JOHNSON

She took her case to a Kismayo court administered by al-Shabab and identified her assailants. The men were released, but Asho was charged with adultery (1). She was taken to a local sports ground, buried up to her neck and stoned to death. According to reports, al-Shabab militiamen opened fire on people who attempted to intervene, killing one.

Yet, Somalia does not have a history dominated by Islamic extremism and most analysts note that al-Shabab's ideology is an odd fit for Somalis. Political Islam emerged in the 1960s as Muslim Brotherhood ideology spread through the Horn of Africa and Egypt's al-Azhar University funded religious schools in Mogadishu.

In the mid-1970s "former president Siad Barre introduced a new family law, ostensibly promoting gender equality as part of his agenda of "Scientific Socialism"; this granted women equal rights in the area of inheritance. Abdurrahman M Abdullahi wrote in an essay entitled *Women, Islamists and the Military Regime in Somalia*, that the law enraged Somalia's religious leaders who saw it as a secular assault on Islam at the level of the family. An Islamist movement began to crystallise.

Saudi Arabian Wahabbism was imported into Somalia in the 1980s, via Saudi charities. By 1984 al-Itihad al-Islamiya had emerged as a composite of two other radical groups. It morphed into a militant group in 1991, but suffered a series of stinging defeats in the mid-1990s.

The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) was formed in the early 2000s; its basis is an ad hoc collection of Islamic courts that had administered justice in Somalia following the collapse of Siad Barre's regime. By 2006 the UIC was seriously challenging Mogadishu's warlords and took control of the capital in June, bringing stability but enforcing a strict form of sharia. The UIC was unacceptable to both Ethiopia and the United States, for geopolitical reasons. In December 2006 Ethiopia, acting as a crude proxy for the US, formally launched strikes against the movement and quickly overwhelmed it. Al-Shabab, the UIC's youth wing, emerged. Led by Sheikh Aden Hashi Ayro, who is said to have received training in insurgency tactics and explosives in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the organisation began waging war against the TFG and soon controlled much of south and central Somalia (2).

Some of the people perched behind temporary stalls were from Bakara market, which was closed by the TFG as it sought to secure Mogadishu after al-Shabab's withdrawal. One storekeeper said he felt as if he was on holiday, but did not think the peace would last long. "Shabab was making problems for the people. It was better they leave us. [But] these people are from Bakara. By day they come here and sell, at night they fight with the government."

Others claim al-Shabab cannot regroup, but express concerns about whether the TFG will act responsibly: the TFG is known to be corrupt and there are doubts over whether a western-style centralised system of governance is relevant or can be effective in a clan-based Somalia. But everyone agrees that further US involvement in the country would shatter the temporary peace. As Abdullahi put it: "We need help now, but then they [the international community] should leave."

But recent reports that the US is expanding its capabilities throughout the Horn of Africa, while unsurprising, do not bode well, and could threaten Mogadishu's shaky peace, while strengthening al-Shabab's international factions.

It is clear the US is at war in both Yemen and Somalia. How it manages those wars will determine the damage to the region. Washington's Somalia and Yemen strategy seems similar to its Pakistan strategy: by targeting leadership figures – normally with drone strikes – operational inefficiencies emerge over time and hinder the ability of jihad networks to carry out attacks. The networks then fragment as disagreements over how to counter US tactics emerge, amid an overall environment of rotating leadership, probably characterised by competition between potential leadership figures. Efficacy is lowered and the threat becomes localised, rather than global.

But this strategy lacks an end game. As the civilian casualties mount, the likelihood of ordinary people aligning themselves with the US's targets increase. And so the US gets stuck in a pointless rut. Expanded US engagement in Somalia gives al-Shabab's international factions a propaganda boost and could swing the balance in its favour while healing basic rifts within the group.

LMD ENGLISH EDITION EXCLUSIVE

(1) Amnesty International, "Somalia: Amputations and Public Killings Must Stop", 15 May 2009.

(2) Medhane Tadesse, "Sharia Courts and Military Politics in Stateless Somalia" *Hotspot Horn of Africa Revisited: Approaches to Make Sense of Conflict*, LIT, Berlin, 2008.