

# Ivory Coast Riots Stem from IMF Policies

by Christine Bierre

On Oct. 26 and 27, the fight in Ivory Coast between the forces of Laurent Gbagbo, the newly elected President, and those of Alassane Ouattara, president of the Assembly of Democratic Forces, exploded into ethnic-religious riots, leaving at least 150 dead and many hundreds wounded. On Ouattara's side are the Muslim populations of the northern part of the country, where it borders Burkina Faso; Gbagbo's partisans are the Christian populations of the central and western parts of the country.

In those two days, the hideous specter of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda stalked Ivory Coast, provoking horror even among those who had contributed to unleashing it. Churches and mosques were burned down, machetes were wielded by one ethnic group against another; gangs of soldiers belonging to one ethnic group attacked those of the opposite group, Muslims were arrested or killed simply because they were Muslims, and a mass grave with 57 persons, each shot in the head, was found in the suburbs of the country's major city, Abidjan.

How could Ivory Coast, this haven of stability in the midst of oft-tormented post-colonial Africa, reach such a point of disintegration? All commentators are taking the easy way out, blaming the wild period opened by General Gueï's coup against former President Henri Konan Bédié, on Dec. 24, 1999.

## The Crisis Unfolds

On that day, using Konan Bédié's corruption as a pretext, General Gueï, former Army Chief of Staff under President Félix Houphouët-Boigny (the man who led Ivory Coast for more than 30 years after the country's independence), took power, claiming that he would only stay as long as necessary to organize free elections. At that time, the partisans of Laurent Gbagbo in the Ivoirian Patriotic Front (FPI), as well as those of Alassane Ouattara, approved of the coup and participated in what was supposed to be only a "transitional government." The entente between Gueï and Ouattara was such at that point, that, before things turned sour between the two men, many suspected the latter of having encouraged the coup.

Rapidly, however, Gueï's own ambitions began to show. The ten months of transition were only aimed at giving him

the time to legalize the coup, through some form of rigged electoral process to take place on Oct. 22, 2000. On July 23-24, a referendum was held, to adopt the new constitution of the Second Republic, worked out by the transitional government. Article 35 of this new constitution, stipulating that the President of the Republic must be born of Ivoirian parents, gave the constitutional court the pretext to eliminate 14 of the 19 Presidential candidates. Ouattara, who is from Burkina Faso, and Bédié, the ousted President, were among those removed from the electoral process by this article and other pretexts. Having thus eliminated his main opponents, General Gueï thought that his election on Oct. 22 was guaranteed.

Wrong! On Oct. 24, two days after the elections, when the National Election Commission (CNE) tally was giving Gbagbo a majority of approximately 59%, Gueï dissolved the CNE and, in a delirious speech, proclaimed himself President, claiming 52.75% of the vote, and dedicating his victory to the people of Ivory Coast!

On Oct. 24 and 25, as Gbagbo also proclaimed his own victory, hundreds of thousands of his supporters took to the streets, leading to the collapse of the military junta whose members had already, one by one, started to abandon the sinking ship. The military police was the first security force to join Gbagbo's camp.

At this point, the crisis nearly went from horror to hell. Following Gbagbo's decision to proclaim himself President, Ouattara's followers decided to contest the results of the Presidential election from which they had been barred. Their intervention degenerated, sparking ethnic-religious riots for the very first time, in this country where more than 60 different ethnic groups reside.

Peering into the abyss into which the country could swiftly plunge, both Ouattara and Gbagbo decided to intervene to calm down and retake control of the situation. The new President, Gbagbo, announced the creation of a national unity government, in which Ouattara's collaborators could participate, and the holding of early legislative elections in December. While Ouattara did not agree to participate in the new government, he has done everything in his power to calm his supporters, and his party will be participating in the upcoming elections.

## The Real Culprits

It was Henri Konan Bédié who started stirring up xenophobic arguments against the northern Islamic populations, partly in order to keep Ouattara out of office. After taking power, Gueï and Gbagbo continued using the same tactics, leading to the situation which exploded on Oct. 26 and 27.

But the principal actors in the crisis are not Ivory Coast's political figures, but, first of all, the raw material cartels, which brought about the collapse of cocoa and coffee prices, the country's main export crops. The world's leading cocoa producer, exports of this product make up 40% of

Ivory Coast's total exports. Yet, there seems to be no bottom to the collapse of the prices. Since the early 1990s, prices to the grower have been halved twice. Between the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 growing seasons, the revenues of Ivoirian cocoa producers have plummeted by 210 billion CFA francs, the currency of many French-speaking African countries.

The second culprit is the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has imposed its structural adjustment policies (SAP) throughout Africa since the early 1980s. If numerous African countries have ceased to exist as nations, entering a kind of gray zone of war, criminality, and disease, the IMF policies imposed on them are to blame to a great extent. By demanding the payment of foreign debt as a priority, the IMF enforced draconian austerity on all those countries, forcing them to privatize their public sector, fire hundreds of thousands of civil servants, eliminate all subsidies to local producers, and successively devalue their currencies, time and again.

The true culprits are also those international powers, notably Britain and its allies in the United States, who conceived and imposed those criminal looting policies; and also France, which, after having barred IMF policies from French-speaking Africa for many years, finally capitulated, after the government of Prime Minister Edouard Balladur.

The international powers are also guilty of not intervening to create a new, just world economic order for the benefit of those countries—and of intervening unjustly in the internal affairs of Africa's sovereign nations.

Alassane Ouattara is a pure product of those policies and oligarchical networks. In 1990, at the end of his life, Houphouët-Boigny, under dual pressure from the IMF, and the massive drop in raw materials prices, called on Ouattara to become the Prime Minister who would impose the IMF policies. Houphouët-Boigny chose him, thinking that his foreign origins would better allow him to do this dirty work. Educated in the United States, it is there that Ouattara has all his support today. After the death of Houphouët-Boigny, Ouattara went to the United States, where he became director general of the IMF, and got to know both Democratic and Republican policymakers.

The United States organized an international support campaign for Ouattara when the Ivory Coast crisis started. When Gbagbo proclaimed himself President, the Americans, the UN, and the Organization of African Unity all supported Ouattara's call for a new Presidential election.

France has no coherent long-term policy for Africa, and while claiming not to intervene into the internal affairs of these countries, it nevertheless does so—with often disastrous results.

Thus, the French media revealed that at the beginning of the coup, General Gueï found a friendly ear at the Prime Minister's office in Paris. At the other end of the political spectrum, General Gueï, who studied at the Paris war college,

apparently had strong support among some high-level French military officers. The name of Gen. Raymond Germanos is among those mentioned. This may explain the sudden appearance of Gen. Jeannou Lacaze (ret.), former Chief of Staff of the French Army, now 75, on the side of General Gueï. According to certain sources, on the eve of the elections, General Lacaze was working to reinforce Gueï's security apparatus, by deploying six former members of military intelligence, as well as some well-known hands from the wars in Bosnia and Congo Brazzaville.

Concerning Gbagbo and his FPI, which is a member of the Socialist International, his main support in France comes from Gérard Collomb, a Socialist Deputy from the Lyon region. Guy Labertit, "Mr. Africa" of the Socialist Party, was recently in Ivory Coast, to support his friend Gbagbo.

### Prospects for the Future

Facing the possibility of Ivory Coast's total destruction, Paris, unlike Washington, decided to give support to Gbagbo, while securing from him the promise that legislative elections would be held in December. This decision on Paris' part, will only play a crucial role in easing the crisis in Ivory Coast, if the Paris elites radically change their economic policies toward Africa.

Only a long-term development policy, supported by the international community, will allow Ivory Coast to reconstruct itself and free itself from the demons of ethnicity. The current chaos has led to a total slump in the economy: Port activity is down to 10% of normal, direct investment is nearly zero, the Paris industrialist association MEDEF warned its members not to invest in Ivory Coast, the private and public debt owed to the London and Paris Clubs has piled up, and the budget deficit has gone beyond the figures which the IMF permits.

Gbagbo's economic advisers are calling on the international community to bring the country into the debt reduction program designed for poor and highly indebted countries. This would allow it to reduce its foreign debt—presently at \$19 billion, for which it pays 500,000 CFA francs annually—by 80%.

Ivory Coast, just like every other country in Africa, needs a policy that creates the conditions for durable growth. This implies revaluing its raw materials on the international markets, and making available Marshall Plan-type credits, connected to infrastructure projects. It is intolerable, in this 21st Century, that countries are still dependent on their raw materials exports. We must create the conditions for a rapid industrialization of Africa. The precondition for that, is to dump the IMF policies and return to the dirigistic policies of productive investment which were so effective in the postwar reconstruction of Europe.

It is in that domain that France, the United States, and other advanced sector countries, are welcome to intervene—and in no other.