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Côte d'Ivoire : Open letter from Amnesty International's General Secretary on the occasion of the opening of negotiations in Paris on the Côte d'Ivoire crisis

Today, 15 January 2003, negotiations between the main Côte d'Ivoire political groups and the different parties to the conflict, notably the three armed opposition groups that have conducted an uprising against the government since September 2002, begin in Paris under the auspices of the French government. A summit meeting of the African Heads of State concerned by this crisis is due to take place towards the end of the month in the French capital, where Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations is also expected to arrive by the end of the month. Such diplomatic mobilization indicates the level of international concern at the Côte d'Ivoire crisis, which has already resulted in the death of hundreds of civilians, provoked an exodus of hundreds of thousand of refugees and displaced persons from the zones of conflict and plunged the country into economic paralysis and political chaos, the impact of which continues to increase in the other countries of the sub-region.

On the occasion of these diplomatic meetings, I would like to make an appeal, in the name of my organization, to all the participants in these talks, and to those who join them later, including the African Heads of State and the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Amnesty International has been ringing the alarm bells and increasing its appeals to the parties to the conflict and to the international community to ask them to take measures to avoid an increase in atrocities against the civilian population. After the massacre by men in military fatigues, of dozens of civilian foreign nationals and people with Muslim names at Daloa, in October 2002, when the town was recaptured by government forces, the organization highlighted the risk of an increase in massacres occurring each time a locality is captured or recaptured by parties to the conflict. Unfortunately, our worst fears were confirmed by later massacres committed by government forces at Monoko-Zohi and in the region of Man by two opposition groups that appeared in the west of the country at the end of November 2002, and by government forces when they launched an offensive against the town.

Since the crisis began, Amnesty International has sent two research missions to the country, to Abidjan and to the northern part of the country held by the *Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI) Côte d'Ivoire Patriotic Movement. These missions were able to gather corroborating evidence of atrocities committed by both sides as well as information on the serious humanitarian situation in which the country finds itself and that can only deteriorate if the situation persists.

Amnesty International therefore appeals to the participants in the talks beginning in Paris today to make the human rights situation and respect for human rights an essential element in all the discussions on the agenda, and to consider the following recommendations:

It is essential that any peace-keeping force, already deployed in the field, or to be deployed in the future, must be given an international mandate allowing it to ensure respect for human rights and especially to do everything in its power to prevent new atrocities.

All negotiations must take into account the need to obtain the most rapid possible protection for all people detained by the parties to the conflict. Prisoners detained in the course of military operations must have proper access to medical care, to their families and to international organizations that are trying to make sure they are treated humanely.

Prisoners of conscience must be released.

All parties to the conflict must immediately end all extra-judicial or summary executions of civilians or of personnel who are no longer in a position to fight; they must also put an end to the enlistment of minors.

In order to end the impunity that has fed the continuous cycle of violence during the last four months, exhaustive and independent international inquiries must be opened as quickly as possible into the series of atrocities committed by all parties to the conflict. Amnesty International especially requests that the High Commissioner of Human Rights' report on the Côte d'Ivoire be made public.

Given that the various parties to the conflict have not respected the many cease-fires that have been called so far and that atrocities by both sides continue, Amnesty International considers it essential that the measures set out above be implemented. Otherwise, the country and the whole sub-region risks plunging into chaos of incalculable consequences for a very long time.

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