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Côte d'Ivoire: Threats hang heavy over the future

As the official expiry Laurent Gbagbo's mandate as President approaches in the coming days, Amnesty International fears that, if a political agreement on a new power structure is not very quickly reached, the tensions which already exist will spill over into renewed hostilities, leading in turn to a humanitarian crisis and serious human rights abuses.

"Not since the country gained independence have so many uncertainties hung over the future of Côte d'Ivoire. There is a shared responsibility to prevent the country from descending into chaos which could lead to long-term destabilization of the entire sub-region," Amnesty International said today.

In a report published today – *Côte d'Ivoire: Threats hang heavy over the future* – the organization identifies some of the main factors that could lead to a rapid deterioration in the situation: complete deadlock in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process; violations of the ceasefire; inter-ethnic conflict in the west of the country; encouragement of xenophobia by some political figures and news media supporting President Gbagbo; the use of child soldiers; and attacks on freedom of expression.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about reports of small arms proliferation and possible arms transfers to both sides despite the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations (UN) in November 2004.

"Confronted with the barely concealed desire by both sides to fight it out militarily sooner or later, the resources available to the UN to effectively monitor the arms embargo appear inadequate," Amnesty International noted today.

In addition, the DDR process, although agreed by both sides, remains at a standstill. "The main factor blocking progress appears to be a complete lack of mutual confidence, without which such a programme has no chance of ever getting off the ground," the organization noted.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the risk of worsening inter-ethnic conflict in the west of the country, which has been fuelled in particular by encouragement of xenophobia by some political figures and news media supporting President Gbagbo. The report published today highlights the fact that the theory known as "*ivoirité*" ("Ivorianness"), developed a decade ago by some intellectuals closely associated with former Ivorian President Henri Konan Bédié, has been consistently exploited for political ends to convey particularly dangerous xenophobic sentiments.

"In the current climate of political uncertainty, any advocacy of hatred against foreign nationals, especially those from the sub-region (Burkinabè, Malians or Guineans), could degenerate at any time into

massacres all the more bloody because they often occur in remote areas, far from the gaze of both political authorities and UN peacekeeping forces,” Amnesty International said today.

If these disturbing facts are taken together with the activities of the pro-government militias who violated the ceasefire in February 2005, and the calls for dissent and insurgency against President Gbagbo by two senior Ivorian army officials in August 2005, the scene seems set for a continuing and pervasive climate of suspicion which could at any time result in serious human rights abuses.

Amnesty International is therefore today appealing to President Gbagbo and the Forces nouvelles (New Forces) – who since September 2002 have controlled the northern half of the country – to do everything possible to prevent further serious human rights abuses in Côte d’Ivoire.

The organization is also appealing to the international community which has already made significant efforts to resolve the conflict and has deployed a 10,000-strong peacekeeping force in Côte d’Ivoire.

“Confronted by the grave crisis facing Côte d’Ivoire, the international community must assume its responsibilities and do everything possible to enforce and ensure implementation of UN Security Council resolutions so as to prevent a resumption of the conflict which would inevitably result in serious human rights abuses.”