



## Côte d'Ivoire: AU Should Press Gbagbo to Halt Abuses <sup>[1]</sup>

### Strong African Union Action Needed to Prevent Escalation Into Large-Scale Conflict

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(Dakar) - The African Union delegation tasked with resolving the political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire should work to end gross violations of human rights by forces under the control of Laurent Gbagbo, Human Rights Watch said today. The delegation left the country on February 23, 2011, with plans to issue their recommendations in the coming days.

Gbagbo has refused to cede power to Alassane Ouattara, whom international observers have certified as credibly having won the November 2010 presidential election. Gbagbo's forces have targeted real and perceived supporters of Ouattara, using excessive and often lethal force against largely peaceful demonstrators since early December, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch has documented the killing by Gbagbo's security forces of at least 11 people since February 19, including demonstrators and passers-by, as well as the abduction and killing of wounded people taken from an Abidjan hospital, and intimidation, harassment, and abuse by armed militiamen. Killings of Gbagbo's forces in pro-Ouattara neighborhoods also have been reported in recent days. Human Rights Watch expressed grave concern that the conflict could escalate if a quick solution is not found.

"As the African Union panel met in Abidjan, the bloodshed continued," said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "These leaders need to step in to find a just and accountable way out of this stand-off before the violence gets any worse."

The African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council asked five African presidents to work to break the deadlock. The presidents of South Africa, Chad, Mauritania and Tanzania arrived in Abidjan on February 21, while the fifth, from Burkina Faso, was prevented from participating in the talks because of threats from Gbagbo supporters. Victor Gbeho, the president of the Commission of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), expressed concern on February 23 that the AU panel went ahead with its Abidjan visit without the entire delegation. Political and youth leaders in Ouattara's coalition have made clear that demonstrations will continue if the AU panel decision does not result in Gbagbo stepping down.

In late January, an in-depth investigation by Human Rights Watch into violations in the commercial capital, Abidjan, revealed an often-organized campaign of violence by Gbagbo's security forces targeting members of Ouattara's political coalition, ethnic groups from northern Côte d'Ivoire, Muslims, and immigrants from neighboring West African countries.

Human Rights Watch research shows new violations in recent weeks, with reports of the security forces firing lethal weapons - including live ammunition, fragmentation grenades, and rocket-propelled grenades - into crowds of people who continue to call on Gbagbo to concede his loss to Ouattara.

In a particularly egregious case, security forces abducted perceived and actual Ouattara supporters from a hospital, where they were receiving treatment for bullet wounds. Family members later found the bodies of several of them in local morgues, witnesses told

Human Rights Watch. At least one immigrant from Burkina Faso was slashed with a machete at a makeshift militia checkpoint in the Port Bouët neighborhood.

Human Rights Watch is also concerned about the apparent killing of at least three members of pro-Gbagbo security forces. On February 8, three bodies with their throats slit were found in the streets of Abobo PK-18, an Abidjan neighborhood that is an Ouattara stronghold. Another body of a person dressed in military uniform who apparently had been killed in a similar fashion was found during the night of February 13. A local journalist, speaking to Human Rights Watch on the condition of anonymity, confirmed reports of the three Abobo killings and identified one of the deceased as Chief Dago Séri, who serves with Gbagbo's Republican Guard.

Other sources alleged that the attackers of the pro-Gbagbo officers were youth members of Ouattara's political coalition, the Rally of Houphouetists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP), and armed combatants from the *Forces Nouvelles* ("New Forces," or FN), the longtime rebel army previously under the control of the recently named prime minister for Ouattara, Guillaume Soro. *Forces Nouvelles* has controlled the northern half of the country since the 2002-2003 civil war.

General Staff Colonel Hilaire Babri Gohourou, spokesperson for the Security and Defense Forces (FDS) loyal to Gbagbo, acknowledged on the national television channel the death of three military personnel since February 7, two in Abobo and one in Duékoué in western Côte d'Ivoire.

Numerous Ivorians and Liberians, including former combatants, told Human Rights Watch that groups on both sides of the current divide have been recruiting young men and remobilizing others for use in a much-feared resumption of hostilities. Credible evidence indicates that Abidjan alone is teeming with hundreds of new recruits, including pro-Gbagbo militiamen being trained in the Yopougon, Abobo, and Port Bouët neighborhoods. The *Forces Nouvelles* are also recruiting in Abidjan.

The conflict could easily spread to the surrounding region, as Human Rights Watch has documented continued recruitment in Liberia, including former fighters from the bloody Liberian civil war, by security forces loyal to Gbagbo.

Human Rights Watch has called on Gbagbo to make clear immediately that the continued use of violence by his forces against Ouattara supporters and others will not be tolerated. Gbagbo's incumbent government also needs to recognize people's rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, Human Rights Watch said. And both sides should direct their armed forces to exercise maximum restraint. Human Rights Watch reminded armed groups that they could be held responsible for war crimes and any other grave violations of human rights if hostilities resume.

"To prevent a return to a civil war, cooler heads need to prevail on both sides of the divide," Bekele said. "At the very least, the visiting African Union delegation needs to call for an end to the current abuses and the incitement to violence by all sides."

### **Excessive Use of Force, Illegal Detention**

On February 21 in the Koumassi neighborhood, three witnesses told Human Rights Watch that security forces fired at least two rocket-propelled grenades directly into a crowd of over 100 demonstrators, killing at least four and wounding several others. Several witnesses said that pro-Gbagbo security forces, including the Command Center for Operations and Security (CECOS), an elite gendarme unit, fired live rounds and tossed fragmentation grenades into the crowd.

One demonstrator said, "First they shot at us, and then they fired rockets directly into the crowd. I saw several dead, including one Malian man whose arm was completely severed. His intestines were completely outside his body."

In Treichville, around 9 a.m. the same day, troops from the Republican Guard, an elite unit closely linked to Gbagbo, arrived in a convoy

of cargo trucks and opened fire on demonstrators congregated at the intersections of Avenue 16 and Rues 17 and 21. One witness told Human Rights Watch, "They came and opened fire with live ammunition immediately. A youth not far from me took a gunshot straight to his head; it was as if part of his face was blown off. He was one of at least two killed that I saw with my own eyes."

Human Rights Watch has also confirmed previous reports of at least 5 people killed when security forces opened fire in the neighborhood of Abobo on February 19 and 20.

Human Rights Watch called on security forces to comply with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms, which state that, in dispersing assemblies, "law enforcement officials shall avoid the use of force or, where that is not practicable, shall restrict such force to the minimum extent necessary."

Firing live ammunition, fragmentation grenades, and rocket-propelled grenades into crowds and fleeing protestors clearly violates these requirements, and security forces that continue to engage in such behavior should be brought to account, Human Rights Watch said. Commanding officers, including the heads of the Republican Guard and CECOS - elite units that have been continuously implicated in grave human rights abuses during the post-election period - should likewise be put on notice for failing to take all measures in their power to prevent, suppress, or report such abuses, Human Rights Watch said.

More than 20 demonstrators were also arrested and detained on February 21. Human Rights Watch called on the security forces to release them immediately or bring charges against them.

### **Hospital Abductions**

Around 10 a.m. on February 8, armed soldiers in green camouflage arrived in a convoy of military trucks and entered Houphouët-Boigny hospital in Abobo neighborhood. At least 17 wounded people had been taken there after security forces opened fire on protesters the day before, killing several. Most of the 17 had gunshot wounds and were largely unable to move, witnesses told Human Rights Watch.

One witness present at the hospital heard the military forces say, "You are all rebels - let's go, get in," as they forced an unknown number of the wounded into the trucks.

Family members immediately learned of the situation and visited military and police sites throughout the city trying to discover the whereabouts of their loved ones. One family member interviewed by Human Rights Watch found the body of her son at the Anyama morgue on February 11.

According to credible reports, two other family members found deceased victims at the Abidjan military hospital. The exact total of those abducted and the number of dead remain unknown.

Some protesters did appear to have engaged in aggressive behavior at the local police station on February 7, but the threats in no way justified extrajudicial killings, the excessive use of force, or arbitrary arrests, Human Rights Watch said.

"To abduct wounded persons during the light of day from a hospital, a place which should always be a refuge, demonstrates the brazenness and complete impunity with which Gbagbo's security forces are operating," Bekele said. "The wounded will now be terrified to seek treatment, further endangering lives during these difficult times."

### **Growing Recruitment, Concerns of Armed Conflict**

Numerous Ivorian residents and Liberian former combatants interviewed by Human Rights Watch described recent waves of

recruitment of youths to be deployed in the event hostilities resume between forces loyal to Gbagbo and those allied with the *Forces Nouvelles*. Ivorians from the Abidjan neighborhoods of Yopougon, Abobo, and Port Bouët, as well as those who had visited the political capital, Youmoussoukro, and the far western town of Duékoué, where some of the fiercest fighting took place during the civil war, described seeing hundreds of young men in military training in schools, university housing units, and military camps. The training was usually being conducted by members of the Ivorian security forces.

Several residents from the Port Bouët neighborhood described being regularly intimidated and harassed by a group of about 150 youths who form part of an armed militia based in a university dormitory there. They described how the youths, many armed with pistols, automatic weapons, and machetes, regularly harass, threaten, and at times attack members of the West African diaspora who live there.

One witness told Human Rights Watch, "I see them running through every morning and afternoon, guarded by a few with guns in front and behind." He had provided first aid to a neighbor from Burkina Faso who had been attacked and slashed with machetes by the group on February 19. The witness said the militiamen often threaten to attack and kill the residents there if Gbagbo is ever forced from office. Others said they complained to the police twice about the intimidation but were told, "This is a political matter; there is nothing we can do."

Several Liberians who had fought in Liberia's armed conflict, which ended in 2003, told Human Rights Watch they had been approached and asked if they wanted to fight alongside troops loyal to Gbagbo. The recruitment documented by Human Rights Watch took place in the Liberian cities of Monrovia, Zwedru, and Buchanan.

On the other side, pro-Ouattara militants are increasingly arming themselves and fighting back against security forces, particularly in Abobo. Credible reports also indicate that the *Forces Nouvelles* have re-integrated almost all soldiers that were previously demobilized. Research by Human Rights Watch has also shown that some *Forces Nouvelles* soldiers have engaged in intimidation and violence against Gbagbo supporters in the north, though not on the scale of the violence committed pro-Gbagbo forces in Abidjan.

Commanding officers on both sides of the military divide need to ensure that they have effective command and control over their subordinates and should train them to adhere to the laws of war and international human rights standards, Human Rights Watch said.

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