

## Côte d'Ivoire

### As turmoil continues, children remain out of school in Côte d'Ivoire



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Pafait in front of his padlocked sixth-grade classroom in the village of Beoua, western Côte d'Ivoire. Armed forces occupied his school during the political crisis and have yet to leave.

#### By Cifora Monier

BEOUA, Côte d'Ivoire, 24 June 2011 – “We arrived at school at 7:30 a.m. as we always do on a school day. At exactly 8:30 we could hear shooting coming from the direction of a neighbouring village,” recalls Pafait Guei, a 14-year-old boy in sixth grade, who usually attends Beoua village primary school in western Côte d'Ivoire.

#### Out of school

“The shooting continued for another thirty minutes or so. Our teacher told us to go back home as nobody knew what was happening,” he says. “I was very scared. I was also very scared for my grandparents with whom I live. They are very old people.”

Pafait and his friends have not been in school since that day, on 17 March.

Côte d'Ivoire has been through political crisis and violence following disputed presidential elections last year. Although the political deadlock has been resolved with the new President, Alassane Ouattara, sworn in, there is still a tremendous push required to restore the volatile situation in the country.

UNICEF, with the support of the Government of Côte d'Ivoire and its partners, has been targeting one million children for the national ‘Back to School’ campaign in the 10 most vulnerable regions in the western and southern parts of the country.



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Pafait Guei (in orange) with his friends at Beoua Primary School in western Côte d'Ivoire. They have been unable to attend school since March due to the country's political crisis.

Pafait has been living with his maternal grandparents since the death of his parents due to illness six years ago. It takes him an hour to walk to school from his home every morning and another hour to return home. Beoua is 110 km from regional capital Man and 700 km from the economic capital, Abidjan.

“I don't know when school will start. I know that it's not good for me to be sitting at home, but none of the teachers have returned to Beoua as their homes are still occupied by the military,” says Pafait.

#### Soldiers using school buildings

Several schools in western Côte d'Ivoire remain closed, due to the occupying of teachers homes and, in some cases, school buildings by the armed forces. UNICEF is currently actively engaged in negotiations with the Government of Côte d'Ivoire to get the occupied homes and buildings vacated immediately.

In addition, UNICEF is focusing on encouraging social and community mobilization, improving educational environments, providing school supplies and training teachers in psycho-social and institutional support.

Unable to attend school, Pafait and his friends are helping their families on their farms as it's the planting season. But they still linger around the school when they can.

“When we finish our chores, we like to come back to the school yard and talk with each other,” he says. “The military don't say anything to us when we come to the school yard, even though we are all very scared of them.”



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To the right of this Beoua Primary School building, a teacher's home has been occupied by armed forces. Children in the village in western Côte d'Ivoire are still unable to attend school as a result.

Learning in a safe and protective environment is crucial for a child. One of UNICEF's main challenges here remains access to education for the most vulnerable children in the conflict-affected areas because of insecurity.

### Acute humanitarian needs

"Our role is to strengthen and pursue our efforts, together with our partners, to advocate for schools to be freed from the occupation of these establishments by armed groups. Children need to go back to safe schools and realize their right to education," says UNICEF Education Specialist Helena Murseli, currently on mission to Côte d'Ivoire from UNICEF's regional office in Senegal.

Pafait is still waiting to resume his right to learn. "It was supposed to be my last year in primary school. I don't think that I will be able to go to junior high school until the next school year. We have missed so much school work and I will probably have to repeat my year," he says solemnly.

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