

THE POLITICAL CRISIS AND CIVIL WAR IN IVORY COAST (2002-2007): ECOWAS FORTH INTERVENTION AT CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN WEST AFRICA

By

Ezeh Chinonso Kennedy

B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D.

From the in-depth analysis of the then ECOWAS Special Envoy to Ivory Coast, Ambassador Ralph Uwechue (2011), the first Ivorian Civil War was a conflict in the Ivory Coast (also known in French language as Cote d'Ivoire) that began on 19th September, 2002 to 4th March, 2007.

He noted that:

Although, most of the fighting ended by late 2004, the country still remained split into two, with a rebel-held north and a government-held south.

Once hailed as a model of stability, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Ivory Coast slipped into the kind of internal strife that has plagued so many African countries.

As of 2006, the region was tense and many said the UN and the French military failed to calm the civil war. Yet notably, ECOWAS

through ECOMOG (ECOMICI in French Language) and the Cote d'Ivoire National Football Team were credited with helping to secure a temporary truce when it qualified for the 2006 World Cup, which brought the parties together, (***US State Department, 2002***).

BACKGROUND TO THE FIRST IVORIAN CIVIL WAR

The civil war revolved around a number of issues, particularly:

For more than three decades after Ivory Coast gained independence from France in 1960, Cote d'Ivoire was a beacon of peace and stability in West Africa. The autocratic but tactful rule of the country's first President, Felix Houphouet Boigny, ensured religious and ethnic harmony as well as economic prosperity until his death in 1993.

As Ambassador Uwechue (2011) further noted; his 33 year rule bound the country's political system tightly to his myth, charisma, political and economic competence. But for the first time, the political history and system of Cote d'Ivoire was forced to deal with open and competitive elections without President Houphouet-Boigny in 1995.

Felix Houphouet Boigny's successor, Henri Konan Bedie sowed seeds of discord when he coined the term "***Ivoirity***" and introduced the concept "***Ivorite***" or "***Ivorian-ness***". This term which meant to denote and represent the common culture and identity of all those born and really living in Cote d'Ivoire, also came to be used by nationalists, xenophobic politicians and a section of the press, to represent solely the population of the south-eastern portion of the country, particularly Abidjan, the

capital city of Ivory Coast. This term was principally used by Henri Konan Bedie to deny Ivorian citizenship to his then main political rival, Alassane Quattara and thereby excluded him from running in the election held in 1995. Henri Bedie insisted that Alassane Quattara, a Muslim from the north of the country, was actually from Burkina Faso **(Stormer, 2006:44)**.

Since that time, there have been an increasing number of attacks on people of foreign descent. About one quarter of Cote d'Ivoire's population of 16 million are immigrants or descendant of immigrants, many from Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Ghana and neighbouring Burkina Faso, a poorer country to the north, many of these had been Ivorian citizens for two generations and some of them, of Mandinka heritage, can be considered native to the northern part of what is today known as Cote d'Ivoire, **(Ghana Workshop Report, 2nd June, 2004)**.

Furthermore, in the words of Ambassador Ralph Uwechue (2011);

Visible discrimination towards people of Burkinabe origin made neighbouring countries particularly Burkina Faso fear a massive migration of refugees. The economic downturn with deterioration of terms of trade between Third World and developed countries worsened conditions, exacerbating the underlying cultural and political issues.

Also, unemployment forced a part of the population to return to fields and farms which they discovered had been taken and exploited by immigrants again.

BEGINING OF THE CIVIL WAR

The catalyst for the Ivorian civil war was the law quickly drafted by the government and approved in a referendum before the elections of 2000 which required both parents of a presidential candidate to be born within Cote d'Ivoire. This automatically excluded the northern presidential candidate, Alassane Quattara from the race and he represented the predominantly Muslim north, particularly the poor immigrant workers from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso working on coffee and cocoa plantations.

The Ivorian protracted political crisis, however took a U-turn for the worse when the military under the leadership of General Robert Guei overthrew the elected government of Henri Konan Bedie in the country's ever coup d'état staged on 1999 Christmas Eve (***CNN Breaking News, 25th December, 1999***).

Although the coup was ostensibly prompted by soldier's unhappiness over their pay and other conditions of service, it soon became apparent that, like Bedie, General Guei was also ready to incite ethnic and religious rivalries in order to neutralise political opposition. Continuing the same trend and theme of "Ivoirite", General Robert Guei introduced even stricter eligibility requirements for presidential elections held in October 2000.

General Robert Guei was however forced to flee by the popular uprising after he fraudulently claimed that he won the election that was conducted to usher in a democratic government, which left Laurent Gbagbo as the winning candidate. The elections were marred by violence against civilians by all sides including Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (IPF), Alassane Quattara's Rally of the Republicans (QRR), foreigners and Muslims but had the

colouration of a state sponsored human rights violations, with a clear ethnic and religious focus, **(US Country Report, 2001)**.

On 19th September 2002, a group of about 800 combatants, many of whom originated from the northern Ivory Coast, called the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast (MPCI) or (Mouvement Patriotique Cote d'Ivoire) attempted a coup against President Laurent Gbagbo but the French and West African troops jointly stopped the rebel army from seizing the country's commercial capital, Abidjan. Their principal claim relates to the definition of who is a citizen of Ivory Coast and who can stand election as President, **(Ambassador Uwechue, 2011)**.

On the first night of the uprising, former President, General Robert Guei was killed and Alassane Quattara took refuge in the French Embassy but his house was burnt down.

The rebel soldiers launched attacks almost simultaneously in most major cities, the government forces maintained control of Abidjan and the south but the new rebel forces had taken the north and based themselves in the city of Bouake, about 100 Km north of the political capital, Yamoussoukro. They also captured other cities in the northern and central regions of Ivory Coast; **(BBC News Africa, 23rd September, 2002)**.

A ceasefire agreement was signed between MPCI and the government on 17th October, 2002. However, by November 2002, two other rebel groups, the Movement of the Ivory Coast of the Great West (MPIGO) or (Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Quest) and the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) or (Mouvement pout la Justice et la Paix) emerged and seized cities

in the western region and took absolute control of Man and Danane towns, **(CNN News, 25th November, 2002).**

Eventually on the 13th January, 2003 MJP and MPIGO concluded a ceasefire agreement with the Ivorian government in Lome, Togo. Thereafter, from 15th to 26th January 2003, the various parties met at Linas-Marcoussis in France where they negotiated a return to peace and signed a compromise deal on 26th January 2003, to create a new government of reconciliation under President Laurent Gbagbo that incorporated representatives of all these rebel movements, now unified under the umbrella named New Forces or (Forces Nouvelles), **(Linas-Marcoussis Agreement, 2003).**

The government of reconciliation was supposed to implement several programmes including preparing transparent national elections, investigating human rights violations, organising the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of ex-rebel forces, as well as restructuring the Ivorian National Armed Forces (FANCI) or (Forces Armiees nationales de Cote d'Ivoire).

On 4th April 2004, the UN Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI) was established with a mandate to monitor the ceasefire and to assist the government of national reconciliation in the DDR process. The 1,300-strong ECOWAS force was "rehatted" to help establish UNOCI while the mandate strength was 6,240. Around 4,000 French troops based in Ivory Coast were to remain outside the UN mission but will provide support to UNOCI as a rapid intervention force, **(BBC News, 10th April, 2004).**

It is noteworthy that the ECOWAS peacekeepers in Ivory Coast were called ECOMICI instead of ECOMOG. However, they mean the same thing and will be used interchangeably in the discourse.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN IVORY COAST

The reaction of ECOWAS to the events in Cote d'Ivoire was informed by the fact that the attempt to violently overthrow the legitimate government of President Laurent Gbagbo was in violation of the basic principles of the African Union, including the Algiers Declaration of July 1999, which had established a framework for reaction to unconstitutional change of government. The coup attempt also contravened the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance which prohibits the recognition of any government that comes to power by the overthrow of a democratically elected government through unconstitutional means, **(ECOWAS Protocol on DGG, 2001)**.

ECOWAS member states were also mindful of the spill-over of the violence and its effects across the borders.

Thus, soon after the crisis broke out, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo sent a delegation to Ivory Coast to express solidarity and support for President Laurent Gbagbo and reassured him that ECOWAS would do whatever it could to ensure that democratic and constitutional order prevailed in his country. According to Ambassador Uwechue (2011), President Gbagbo was also urged to do everything possible to ensure peace, stability and reconciliation in the country.

Consequently, at very short notice Ghana hosted an extraordinary summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and

Government in Accra on 29th September 2002. The summit decided to create a High Level Contact Group (HLCG) of seven Heads of State and Government namely Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Togo, **(ECOWAS Communiqué in Accra, 29th September, 2002).**

The group was mandated to establish contact with the insurgents, prevail upon them to immediately cease all hostilities, restore normalcy to the occupied towns and negotiate a general framework for the resolution of the crisis, **(The Newswatch Magazine, 1st October, 2002).**

The Contact Group began its formal work at ministerial level in Abidjan on 2nd October 2002. It held discussions with President Gbagbo and obtained his consent for its members to meet with the insurgents in order to engage them in a dialogue towards resolving the crisis. The Group also met with the Ambassador of France to Cote d'Ivoire and obtained French commitment to provide logistical support and security escort for the visit to the insurgents in Bouake. Thus, the Contact Group travelled to Bouake under French escort on 3rd October 2003, held discussions with the representatives of the rebel groups and succeeded in obtaining a commitment, in principle to a ceasefire **(Ambassador Uwechue, 2011).**

Following the Ivorian government's subsequent indication that it was willing to sign a ceasefire agreement, the Contact Group travelled to Yamoussoukro enroute to Tiebiso for the signing ceremony. From the eyewitness account of Ambassador Uwechue (2011) at Yamoussoukro, it was learnt that the officer who had been designated to sign the agreement on behalf of the Ivorian

government had not received the necessary written authorisation. The written mandate was never given and the Contact Group was compelled to abandon its mission and return to Abidjan.

Subsequent consultations between the Contact Group, the then Chairman of ECOWAS, President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal and President Gbagbo, along with the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Senegal to Cote d'Ivoire, resulted in a proposal for an agreement for cessation of hostilities. The agreement was signed by the insurgents on 17th October 2002. It provided for the insurgents and the government to remain in the areas they were controlling and allow for the return of normal administrative life and supplies to the occupied towns, (*Tribune Newspaper, 18th October, 2002*).

Ambassador Ralph Uwechue (2011) also stated that; President Gbagbo made a nationwide broadcast accepting the cessation of hostilities and declaring the readiness of government to dialogue with the rebels. ECOWAS designated the then Togolese President, Gnassingbe Eyadema, (now late) as its principal coordinator to facilitate the day to day management of the mediation effort.

ECOMOG OPERATION IN IVORY COAST

The deployment of ECOMOG force towards resolving the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire was in accordance with the roles assigned to it under the 1999 ECOWAS Mechanism. As soon as the conflict erupted, the Defence and Security Commission, the Mediation and Security Council and the Authority of Heads of State and Government, all played their roles as required by the 1999 ECOWAS Mechanism, Ambassador Uwechue, (2011) narrated.

On 26th October 2002, the ECOWAS Defence and Security Commission submitted a proposal to deploy ECOMOG (under a new name ECOMICI, meaning ECOWAS Mission in Cote d'Ivoire) to the Mediation and Security Council. The council approved the following mandate for the force:

- a.** To monitor the cessation of hostilities;
- b.** To monitor and supervise the return of normal public administration services and free movement of goods and services;
- c.** To contribute to the implementation of the ceasefire agreement between warring parties; and
- d.** To guarantee the safety of the rebels, observers and humanitarian staff, **(The Punch Newspaper, 27th October, 2002).**

The authorised strength of the ECOMICI force that was to implement this mandate was 2,386. The provisional breakdown of ECOMICI force contributions were as follows: Benin 300; The Gambia 135; Ghana 265; Guinea Bissau 386; Mali 250; Niger 250; Nigeria 250; Senegal 250 and Togo 300.

Ambassador Ralph Uwechue of Nigeria was unanimously appointed Special Representative of the ECOWAS Executive Secretary to direct the peacekeeping operations of the mission while Brigadier General Papa Khalil Fall of Senegal was appointed ECOMICI Force Commander; **(Julie Sander: NWC Report, 19th February 2003).**

The Force Commander's concept of operations envisaged four phases as follows:

- a. Phase 1; involves the monitoring of the ceasefire line and the provision of VIP protection. The objective was to create a zone of confidence, stretching from west to east and to the north and south of the ceasefire line;
- b. Phase 2; would see to the disappearance of the ceasefire line and the extension of operations into the wider territory of Cote d'Ivoire, for the purpose of opening up economic and humanitarian corridors.
- c. Phase 3; encompassed the support of the DDR process.
- d. Phase 4; should be the drawdown and withdrawal of ECOMICI forces, **(US Country Report, 2003)**.

However, following the UN Security Council's authorisation for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force known as United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI), ECOMICI personnel were eventually re-hatted as part of this expanded operation.

ECOMOG's CONTRIBUTION TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Following ECOWAS achievements of a diplomatic success with the signing of the first ceasefire agreement on 17th October 2002, the deployment of French troops on a separation line between the warring parties and suspension of military hostilities between them, ECOMOG contributed significantly to the progress of that peace process.

In the view of General Fall, who was the former ECOMOG Force Commander in Ivory Coast, the multinational force between its first operational duty on 29th March 2003 and its merger into the United Nations operation on 4th April 2004 recorded significant achievements, which included the following:

- i.** A shift from the monitoring of the ceasefire line to the control of the zone of confidence, casting further away the spectre of direct confrontation.
- ii.** The restoration of the broken dialogue between belligerent parties which resulted in the release of War Prisoners, the development of a joint DDR implementation plan and the stoppage of the use of heavy weaponry.
- iii.** The opening of trade and humanitarian corridors.
- iv.** Expansion of the operations of the impartial forces throughout the territory in the meantime, thereby restoring confidence and assisting the regrouping of combatants.
- v.** The development of an important civil-military activities including provision of food and free medical assistance to the populace,
- vi.** The securing of close protection of the members of government, **(Fawole, 2005:37)**.

In Ambassador Ralph Uwechue's (2011) assessment, such outstanding field outputs were largely as a result of the decisions made at the early stage of the crisis coupled with the political and diplomatic efforts with early deployment of a military force.

Azikiwe (2004:41) also observed that a rundown of the various operational and civil-military activities of ECOMICI showed that the force was able in conjunction with the French LICORNE to create and maintain along the ceasefire line a "Zone of Confidence" between the government forces and the forces of the Ex-Rebels. Thus on 15th and 29th March, 2003, ECOMICI forces were deployed to the western region of Ivory Coast to liberate the

area west of River Sassandra from the menace of mercenaries that were operating from and across the Liberian border.

Also as a result of the activities of ECOMICI, the build up of confidence among the soldiers on both sides of the conflict progressed steadily to the extent that in July 2003, the warring factions: the Ivorian National Armed Forces (FANCI) and the Rebel Armed Forces (FAFN) declared an end of the war, during an official ceremony at the presidential palace.

Ambassador Ralph Uwechue (2011) summed up that; in the fifteen months of ECOMOG operation, ECOMICI contributed significantly towards getting the warring parties to make the concessions and compromise necessary for conflict resolution. Apart from sustaining the ceasefire agreement recorded at the early stages of the conflict, ECOMICI initiated regular quadripartite mediation meetings involving the French LICORNE, the government forces FANCI and the rebel army FAFN which led to the resolution of over 36 cases as confidence building measures. Moreover, its involvement in the peace process enabled ECOMICI to contribute positively to the planning of the process of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR).

On the civil-military side, the ECOMOG force provided security to Ministers and other VIP's in the Government of National Reconciliation and it also provided security cover for schools, markets, factories, banks, public transportation and other high-risk areas.

ECOMICI or ECOMOG also rendered sustained humanitarian assistance and provided medical services to thousands of

wounded Ivorian civilians. Most often, ECOMICI mediated in communal clashes and disputes within the areas of their deployment as well as negotiated the release of military detainees and persons indiscriminately arrested or detained.

ENDING OF THE IVORIAN WAR 2005-2007

With active support from ECOWAS as a regional body, demonstrated through their regular reports to the United Nations (UN), there came the UN Security Council Resolution 1572 on 15th November 2004, which issued arms embargo on all warring parties in Ivory Coast. This was followed by the meeting of the Ivorian Political Leaders which was held in Pretoria, South Africa from 3rd to 6th April 2005 which was moderated by the then South African President Thabo Mbeki. This Pretoria Agreement (6th April, 2005), reiterated and reinforced Linas-Marcoussis Agreement and declared the immediate and final cessation of all hostilities and the end of the war throughout Ivory Coast. The rebel forces started to withdraw heavy weapons from the front line on 21st April 2005, **(BBC News, 8th September, 2005).**

It was also envisaged that presidential election were due to be held on 30th October, 2005 but in September, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Anan announced that the planned elections could not be held in time.

The Cote d'Ivoire national football team helped to secure a truce in 2006 when it qualified for the World Cup and convinced President Gbagbo to keep the channel of peace talks open. The team also reduced tensions between government and the rebel forces in 2007 by playing a match in the rebel capital Bouake, an

occasion that brought both sides peacefully together for the first time, **(Associated Press, 10th April, 2007)**.

In late 2006, the elections were again delayed, this time till October 2007. However, on 4th March 2007, another peace agreement was signed between the government and the New Forces in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso and their new leader, Guillaume Soro was subsequently appointed Prime Minister and he took office in early April, 2007.

In the presence of Gbabgo and Soro on 16th April 2007, the UN buffer zone between the two sides began to be dismantled, the Government and the New Forces soldiers paraded together for the first time. President Laurent Gbabgo declared that the war was over, **(Reuters, 17th April, 2007)**.