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Côte d'Ivoire: More IDPs return as the peace process moves forward

Following the March 2007 Ouagadougou Peace Accord, some of Côte d'Ivoire's internally displaced people (IDPs) have started to return home, either spontaneously or in a few cases assisted by the government and humanitarian agencies. Some tens of thousands of IDPs are believed to have returned, from over 700,000 counted in just five government controlled regions in 2005.

While the political atmosphere remains generally positive and all the parties involved continue to support the implementation of the Ouagadougou agreement, the new unity government has struggled to abide by the road map for peace and meet the deadlines set out in the Accord and its supplementary agreements. Delays in the implementation of the plan were due to the lack of funding, the limited capacity of national institutions and the need to balance political and military aspirations over the sensitive issue of dismantling both pro- and anti-government militias and integrating them into the regular army. The June 2007 attack against the Prime Minister, Guillaume Soro, ex-rebel leader of the Forces Nouvelles underlined the continuing fragility of the peace process. While this current peace agreement has enabled some displaced people to return or resettle, the overall situation needs to improve further, especially in the west of the country, before IDPs can voluntarily return to their areas of origin or resettle in another area of the country in safety and with dignity.

In a context characterised by a transition towards early recovery, access to services remains precarious, especially in the north, while humanitarian needs are still extensive in the western regions. Here, ethnic tensions and inter-community clashes still cause low-level displacement and encourage discrimination which makes it more difficult for returning IDPs to reach durable solutions. Problems in accessing land and property, compounded by people's difficulties in establishing their legal identity, are an integral part of the displacement situation and need to be confronted. Indeed, the country's displaced people will only be able to voluntarily return or resettle if all parties demonstrate a serious commitment to implementing the peace process and addressing the root causes of Côte d'Ivoire's conflict.



More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

Background and causes of displacement

For more than three decades after independence from France in 1960, Côte d'Ivoire was a beacon of stability in West Africa. The country's stability from 1960 to 1980 was due not only to the political pragmatism of President Félix Houphouët-Boigny's autocratic government but also to a very favourable economic environment. A key to the economic development of the country was the availability of foreign labour, which was further encouraged by liberal laws on land ownership, under which the land belonged to those cultivating it. However, Houphouët-Boigny's pragmatism and political opportunism failed to tackle existing tensions in any sustainable way (UN Commission on Human Rights, 22 December 2004). Following a sharp decline in the commodity prices of coffee and cocoa, Côte d'Ivoire's main exports, a recession at the end of the 1980s not only had an impact on general standards of living but also exacerbated tensions between locals, workers from other West African countries and internal economic migrants (CRISE, March 2007).

As discontent spread, Houphouët-Boigny's successor Henri Konan Bédié started politicising ethnicity in a bid to hang on to power. In 1995, he introduced the concept of "*Ivoirité*", which served to deny Ivorian citizenship to his main political rival, Alassane Ouattara, in order to exclude him from running in elections held that year. According to this new concept of national identity, a citizen of Côte d'Ivoire had to be born of Ivorian parents belonging to one of the country's "autochthonous" ethnic groups, had to belong to one of the country's ethno-

linguistic and cultural groups and had to share the same socio-cultural experience as the Ivorian people. The concept was used by its creators both to exclude political opponents and to mobilise political support against people of foreign origin among an increasingly impoverished population. As the country's economy declined, people became receptive to the political hate propaganda (Human Rights Watch, August 2001), and the policy undermined the residence rights of millions of people who had migrated to Côte d'Ivoire from the neighbouring countries throughout the economically prosperous 1960s and 1970s and even during colonial times. Around one quarter of the population of 17 million, especially in the north and west of the country, was increasingly disenfranchised.

A protracted political crisis erupted when the army, under the leadership of General Robert Guéï, overthrew the elected government of Konan Bédié in the country's first ever coup on Christmas Eve 1999. Building on the theme of "*Ivoirité*", Guéï introduced even stricter eligibility requirements for the presidential election of October 2000, which was eventually won by Laurent Gbagbo. Gbagbo, like his predecessors, made the issue of nationality central to his political agenda and failed to resolve the growing ethnic and religious divisions across the country (HRW, August 2001). In September 2002, a failed coup by disaffected soldiers set off civil war. Intense fighting left the rebels of the *Mouvement Patriotique pour la Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI) in control of much of the centre and the predominantly Muslim north of the country, with government forces holding the largely Christian south. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced.

At least 200,000 people fled the rebel-held northern town of Bouaké and many sought refuge in Abidjan. Further displacements occurred later that year when two new rebel factions emerged in western Côte d'Ivoire. In Abidjan, several thousands were made homeless by a government demolition policy (UN OCHA, 15 October 2002; UNHCR, 8 October 2002). The main targets of the demolition were immigrants whom the authorities accused of supporting the rebellion. Many Ivorians were displaced, as well as refugees from wars in neighbouring countries, causing population movements that threatened the stability of the entire region. International efforts to end the civil war had limited success. Three peace agreements brokered between 2003 and 2005 failed and violence persisted in the country.

Following a wave of anti-UN violence in January 2006, which resulted in the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from the west of the country and the evacuation of humanitarian agencies (IRIN, 18 January 2006), the main political rivals bowed to international pressure to iron out their differences in early 2006. After a year of deadlock over the main issues standing in the way of elections, principally voter registration and disarmament, new hopes emerged with the signing of the Ouagadougou Peace Accord, which addressed these outstanding points of concern.

Progress in the implementation of the Ouagadougou Accord

In March 2007, the government of Côte d'Ivoire and the *Forces Nouvelles* – as the rebel groups had become collectively known – signed a peace agreement reaffirming the need to bring peace and sta-

bility to the country. Under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, the signatories recognised *inter alia* the need for the identification of the population and the registration of voters. Even though the agreement has been praised as a concrete attempt at reviving a stalled peace process (Government of Burkina Faso, 14 January 2008; AU, 19 December 2007), concerns remain over the ability of both parties to adhere to the timeline set forth in the Accord and in the subsequent supplementary agreements (Oxford Analytica, 15 November 2007; Reuters, 29 November 2007).

After several delays, the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme targeting *Forces Nouvelles* elements and government-aligned militias was launched in December 2007 (Reuters, 29 November 2007; UNOCI, 24 December 2007). Some progress has also been made in the redeployment of the state administration, with 70 per cent of around 24,000 displaced civil servants resuming their positions between 2005 and 2007, and up to 19,000 having returned to their posts in the north, the centre and the west by the end of March 2008 (UNOCI, 23 January 2008, and by email, 31 March 2008). Equally, the process for registering legal identity, started with the deployment of mobile courts in September 2007, has managed to progress without any major security incidents.

Serious constraints, however, remain. Lack of funding and unclear reintegration arrangements afflict the DDR programme. A difficult transfer of administrative and financial authority forced the

redeployed administrators into a de facto power-sharing arrangement with the intact *Forces Nouvelles'* command structures. Due to a failure to prepare the ground properly and financial, logistical and political constraints, the mobile courts have encountered a low response and have covered a restricted geographical area.

Scope of displacement

Given the patterns of displacement, with people being hosted by friends and family, and the near-total lack of information from the former *Forces Nouvelles*-controlled area in the north, reliable statistics about the number of internally displaced people in the whole country are difficult to obtain. A UNFPA-funded survey, carried out by the national statistics agency ENSEA in late 2005 and published in March 2006, put the total number of IDPs in five government-held regions at 709,377. In early 2008, humanitarian agencies continued to use for planning purposes the same estimate of 709,000 internally displaced people for the five regions surveyed by ENSEA (UNHCR-Geneva by email, 23 January 2008). According to the Ministry of Solidarity and War Victims, around 553,000 IDPs were identified during a 2007 census exercise for war victims. The exercise did not have the same geographical coverage as the UNFPA/ENSEA survey, and did not include the area in the west from Guiglo to Odiénne, or the city of Abidjan (NRC by email, 7 December 2007). As of April 2008, both the government and humanitarian agencies are trying to quantify the ongoing small-scale returns, to provide a better picture of the current scope of displacement. Meanwhile, low-level displacement continues, mainly due

to land disputes and inter-community tensions (UNOCI, 29 January 2008; UN OCHA, 20 December 2007).

Some attempts at providing a clearer picture of the displacement situation were recorded in 2007. The ENSEA study had highlighted that the commercial capital Abidjan hosted almost 70 per cent of the IDPs included in the survey in 2005, for the most part northern Ivorians or people from neighbouring countries, who had been in Côte d'Ivoire for decades and who may be entitled to Ivorian nationality. In order to gain a better understanding of the humanitarian and protection needs of the IDP population in Abidjan, attempts were made during 2007 to survey their numbers, their living conditions and access to services. A study commissioned by UNHCR identified identification, documentation and general vulnerability as major protection issues but the methodology used did not allow extrapolation from the number of IDPs in Abidjan and Grand Bassam (UNHCR, July 2007). A parallel study conducted by the IDMC and Tufts University concludes that the number of internally displaced people in Abidjan could range between 299,000 and 440,000, depending on the variables used (IDMC/Tufts University, forthcoming). An additional survey is planned for 2008 to further establish the scale of displacement in the areas formerly held by the *Forces Nouvelles*. UNFPA is sponsoring this new study which will be carried out by ENSEA, using a methodology similar to the previous one.

Return movements

The signing of the Ouagadougou agreement and the consequent dismantling of

the “zone of confidence” between government and rebel-held areas had initially led to the expectation that huge numbers of IDPs would go back to their areas of origin (ICRC, 31 May 2007). However, only small-scale return movements were recorded through 2007. Generally, however, these movements have been only partially documented and there is no reliable data on the number of returns. The lack of data is largely due to the complexity of the displacement patterns themselves, as well as a lack of resources. Humanitarian agencies had recorded some 50,000 returnees in the west of the country by the end of 2007 (USNC, 2 January 2008; UN OCHA, 20 December 2007). The improvement in security with the deployment of mixed government/*Forces Nouvelles* brigades reportedly contributed to the increase in returning IDPs. In the north, the Ministry of Solidarity and War Victims registered some 15,000 returnees in and around Bouaké in its identification exercise between April and September (UN OCHA, 30 September 2007). The new UNFPA-sponsored survey should also provide a more comprehensive picture of the scope of returns.

As the peace process has moved forward, attempts have multiplied to facilitate the return or resettlement of the hundreds of thousands displaced by the conflict (IOM, 7 August 2007, 25 September, 16 October 2007; Fondation Akwaba, November 2007). However, obstacles to return remain. Although the level of security has somewhat improved in the course of 2007, criminal attacks and incidents of extortion still occurred especially in the west because of the widespread presence of arms, the limited deployment of the mixed brigades (UN

SC, 2 January 2008; UNOCI, 7 December 2007, 5 December 2007; IRIN, 14 November 2007) and the continuing existence of checkpoints (IRIN, 21 March 2008; UNOCI, 26 December 2007, 26 September 2007). In the absence of effective deployment of the administration, returnees cannot count on a regular provision of services, while law and order are only loosely guaranteed, especially in the north. In some cases, returnees have included male heads of households, who have decided to leave their families behind until they can ensure appropriate housing conditions in the areas of return, or because of the lack of services, such as education and health, in return areas (IDMC Interviews, Bouaké, 23 September 2007; UN OCHA, 7 October 2007).

As of March 2008, intermittent conflict between returning groups seeking access to their agricultural land and communities of origin blocking their return (UNHCR, 26 March 2008; IOM, 16 March 2008) was still causing secondary displacements. With the rainy season approaching, preventing access to land to some of the returnees could have the same effect and also endanger the food security situation in some areas. However, though some IDPs may have found themselves forced to return to or to resettle in areas where the conditions necessary for their safety and dignity are not yet in place, the humanitarian community has identified areas where conditions for safe and dignified return or resettlement are met, in the Moyen Cavally and 18 Montagnes regions (UN OCHA, 20 December 2007).

The application of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement is being advocated with particular regard to the volun-

tary aspect of the process (UN, 10 December 2007). There is however less focus on the right of IDPs to opt for local integration in areas of displacement. In Abidjan, a significant percentage of IDPs have expressed their intention to remain (IDMC/Tufts University, forthcoming) and will be considered “resettled” when they are able to address their specific needs, especially with regard to restitution of or compensation for lost property.

Protection concerns and humanitarian conditions

Property restitution and access to land still constitute sources of inter-communal conflict, and remain politically charged issues, particularly in western Côte d'Ivoire (UNHCR, 26 March 2008; UNOCI, 23 October 2007). In a situation of chain displacement, returnees may be refused access to land by the communities in return areas, by other IDPs currently occupying the land (UNSC, 2 January 2008; IASC, 15 August 2007) or by newly arrived migrant workers.

According to the 1998 Rural Land Act, which is yet to be implemented, only Ivorian citizens have the right to own land while non-Ivorians can only hope to obtain long-lease agreements. The law aims to acknowledge and translate customary rights into statutory ownership titles. Customary transfers of rights between “autochthonous” groups and “foreigners” are characteristic of the agrarian system, especially in the forest belt in western Côte d'Ivoire, where “foreigners” make up the majority of farmers. According to custom, the transfer of rights takes place under the “*tutorat*” relationship which also regulates the social integration of the “foreigners” into the

host community. In the context of return, whereby codes of social integration have been signed in some areas reinforcing this customary practice, warnings have been issued by some protection actors as to avoid the implementation of practices leading to discrimination between indigenous communities, national migrants and foreign workers (UN OCHA/EU-Côte d'Ivoire, September 2007; UNHCR, 17 May 2007).

Meanwhile, in the north, *Forces Nouvelles* members still occupy houses owned by IDPs. Identified by many as a pre-condition for return, repossession of occupied property is still a delicate matter (IDMC Interviews, Abidjan, 17 September 2007; IASC, 15 August 2007), which is further aggravated by internal differences within the *Forces Nouvelles* and the lack of an operational judicial system.

In general, access to justice remains difficult, especially for the most vulnerable groups including internally displaced people, as access to courts is limited by distance, cost and widespread ignorance of the necessary administrative procedures (UNOCI, June 2007). The mobile courts (*audiences foraines*) can be seen as a first step towards moving the administration of justice closer to the people, but as a dedicated documentation measure they do not support the redeployment of national court structures. The Ouagadougou Peace Accord provides for the organisation of nationwide public mobile courts to issue auxiliary judgements (*jugements supplétifs*), which will certify the nationality of the applicant's parents and therefore the nationality of the applicant in the absence of a birth certificate. Mobile courts and tribunals, however, can only issue documents

to people born within their jurisdiction, and for others judgements can be provided only on the basis of birth registration. Concerns therefore remain for those IDPs whose birth was never registered. Moreover, as around 35 per cent of civil registries in eight regions were lost or destroyed following the 2002 events (CNSI/ONI/EU, 2005), it will require time to guarantee everybody's right to "recognition everywhere before the law". In a profiling study conducted in Abidjan in 2007, it appeared that IDPs were less likely to hold birth certificates than non-IDPs while no particular differences were found with regard to certificates of nationality (IDMC/Tufts University, forthcoming).

Donors and humanitarian agencies have gradually started to view Côte d'Ivoire (except for its western regions) as a challenge of early recovery and long-term development rather than a humanitarian emergency (IASC, 15 August 2007). Basic social services are however inadequate or non-existent in both the north and the west of the country. The main issues of concern include the limited access to health services, education and state structures including the judiciary, the lack of clean drinking water and the absence of food security. Severe and moderate malnutrition have long affected children under five in north-western Côte d'Ivoire (IRIN, 9 July 2007). Aid agencies found, however, that chronic malnutrition rates were particularly high in landlocked areas in the west and where conflict-induced displacement had impacted on the already weakened crop production systems (UN OCHA/EU-Côte d'Ivoire, September 2007; WFP, 2 January 2007). Humanitarian organisations have ensured the distribution of food and

seeds in the few cases of assisted returns, but they have been unable to guarantee assistance to all those who returned spontaneously. Geographical discrepancies are also recorded in the west, with the department of Toulepleu having been particularly targeted with food assistance (UN OCHA/EU-Côte d'Ivoire, September 2007).

Access to health services is also restricted, with infrastructure in need of rebuilding and qualified health workers scarce (UN, 10 December 2007). With humanitarian agencies such as Médecins Sans Frontières leaving the country and state care workers going on strike over pay negotiations (IRIN, 7 September 2007), discussions are under way on the sustainability of a health system based on cost recovery. The need to pay for health care would especially impact highly vulnerable groups including internally displaced people and returnees (IRIN, 24 August 2007; MSF, July 2007). An inter-agency study showed that IDPs presenting risk factors for HIV/AIDS had greater difficulties in accessing treatment because of the deterioration of health infrastructure, their increasing impoverishment and their very displacement (UNHCR/GoCdi/UNAIDS, 28 March 2007; UNHCR, 25 April 2007).

The education system was particularly affected by the division of the country, with rebel-held areas facing a shortage of teachers and the deterioration of school infrastructure (UNICEF, 29 January 2007). The signing of the Ouagadougou Accord and the gradual redeployment of public servants laid the foundations for gradual improvement in areas of return, and as a mark of positive development, on 17 September 2007, the school year started on the same day nationwide for

the first time since the civil war erupted. However, in his August 2007 report to the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General affirmed that around 700,000 children had no access to education in the country (UN SC, 30 August 2007), mainly due to a continuing lack of qualified teachers and the poor state of the education infrastructure (UN, 10 December 2007).

The August 2007 UN Secretary-General's report noted that there was no evidence of recruitment of children by the armed forces, but raised serious concerns with regard to instances of grave sexual violence throughout the country (UN SC, 30 August 2007). A report published by Human Rights Watch found that internally displaced people "appeared to be particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse", and noted that displacement and conflict-related poverty were causing women and girls to resort to prostitution (HRW, 2 August 2007) as a means of sustaining themselves and their families.

National and international response

Since the start of Côte d'Ivoire's civil conflict in September 2002, the government's policy and operational response to the internal displacement in the country has been hampered by its lack of experience in tackling humanitarian crises. While several government ministries – including the Ministry of Solidarity and War Victims, the Ministry of National Reconciliation and Institutional Relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Reconstruction and Reintegration – have worked to varying degrees on issues related to displaced

people, the lack of a government focal point greatly constrained efforts led by the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) to put in place a coordinated IDP response structure. However, in mid-2006, the Ministry of Solidarity and War Victims officially took the lead role on IDP issues. The government has also set up a number of bodies, including an inter-ministerial committee, in charge of coordinating the protection of and assistance to the country's internally displaced people (IDMC, 8 February 2007; GoCdI, 20 March 2007), but the broad lack of high-level political representation has limited their effectiveness.

The proclaimed overarching goal of the government's IDP plan is the return of all displaced people to their original homes. The Ouagadougou Accord focuses on the drafting of a national strategy document to facilitate the return of IDPs, and remains silent on the right to voluntary resettlement in another part of the country, as prescribed in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. The government formulated in August 2006 a programme of assistance for the voluntary return of people displaced by the conflict (GoCdI, August 2006), in collaboration with a number of UN agencies and international NGOs; the programme aimed to provide psychological, medical and administrative assistance to returning IDPs while guaranteeing their reintegration in areas of origin. Initially to be developed in two phases, with a pilot phase benefiting 5,000 IDPs, the programme could not be launched in November 2006 as planned due to a lack of funding. Elements of a national legal framework upholding the rights of IDPs, including draft bills for the protection of internally displaced

people and the compensation of war victims including IDPs, were being prepared as of March 2008. Finally, training sessions on the rights of IDPs and on the responsibilities of government towards them were organised throughout 2007, for both government officials and members of the *Forces Nouvelles* (UN OCHA, 7 October 2007; 6 September 2007; 30 July 2007).

Funding constraints have generally affected both the national and the international response to the internal displacement situation in Côte d'Ivoire. After his visit in June 2007, the Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Walter Kälin, noted that overall the humanitarian response had improved since his last visit in 2006, even though the lack of resources visibly hampered implementation efforts at all levels (IASC, 15 August 2007; UNOCI, 2 July 2007). A number of missions to the west, where the humanitarian needs are most pressing, were organised with donor and aid representatives in an effort to increase the support for protection and monitoring activities (UN SC, 2 January 2008; IRIN, 24 July 2007). By 2008, various protection forums existed within the Protection Cluster under UNHCR's leadership, which intends to bring greater accountability and predictability to the protection of civilians, including IDPs. Regional clusters in Tabou, Guiglo and Bouaké were also operational. While the efforts of these forums have been praised, concerns have been voiced over their effectiveness in moving from the analytical to the operational and implementation stages.

The UN response to the humanitarian crisis in Côte d'Ivoire is headed by the Humanitarian Coordinator, Georg Charpentier, who is also the Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, supported by UN OCHA in Abidjan and other strategic locations. He leads the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Coordination Committee (IAHCC), which includes UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, the International Organisation for Migration and international NGOs. With the situation in Côte d'Ivoire being characterised more and more by early recovery and long-term development challenges, it is likely, however, that several UN humanitarian agencies will start scaling down during 2008 and 2009. In line with this trend, organisations like UNDP, the European Union and the World Bank are conversely scaling up their interventions to bridge the gap between the humanitarian and the early recovery phases with varied success. The level of humanitarian intervention provided will depend to some extent on the continuation of the Humanitarian Coordinator role through this period. In this context, a CAP exercise for 2009 looks unlikely.

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Côte d'Ivoire. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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