

SPECIAL COURT FOR SIERRA LEONE
PRESS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Enclosed are clippings of the latest local and international press on the Special Court and related issues obtained by the Press and Public Affairs Office as of:

Wednesday, November 24, 2004

The press clips are produced Monday to Friday.
If you are aware of omissions or have any comments or suggestions please contact
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THE EXCLUSIVE

Vol. 2 No. 2180

Wednesday November 24, 2004

How Kamajors' Black December Was Planned

By Joseph Turay

A witness code name TF 2-008 yesterday testified at the Special Court that the Minister of Development and Economic Planning, Mr. Mohamed Bashiru Daramy, and Hon. Momoh Pujeh during the interregnum made recommendation for the Kamajors in the Eastern Region to fight under the command of ECOMOG to dis-

lodge the AFRC/RUF junta from areas occupied by its members.

In a cross-examination by the defence counsel, the witness who identified himself as

former Kamajor boss told the court that between 1997 and 1998 the Kamajor War Council

held a meeting in Bo to discuss the recommendation made by Minister Mohamed

B. Daramy and Hon. Momoh Pujeh, who according to the

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How Kamajors' Black December Was Planned

From front page

witness were also members of the Kamajor society. The witness, however, said the CDF National Co-ordinator and first accused in the on-going trial, Chief Samuel Hinga Norman, kicked against the recommendation on grounds that it would divide the civil militiamen, which would not augur well for their course. The recommendation was therefore rejected by the Kamajor War Council, the wit-

ness added.

TF 2-008 further testified that he was initiated into the Kamajor society in 1998 at Makoste in the Southern Region and took part in the planning of "Operation Black December" that was executed in December 1997 to dislodge the AFRC/RUF junta in their strongholds in the South-eastern region.

The witness said before the operation was launched, members of the Kamajor War Council had a meeting with the ECOMOG Task Force Commander, Colonel Maxwell Khobe (was promoted to Brigadier General after the military intervention), who volunteered to provide them with an helicopter, to airlift the militiamen from "Base Zero" to a particular location in the Western Area.

CONCORD TIMES

Excellence and Objectivity

November 24, 2004

Price: Le500

Norman endorses Kamajor war decisions

By Abdul Karim Koroma

Special Court witness, TP2-008 Tuesday revealed that Kamajor National Coordinator, Chief Sam Hinga Norman endorsed all Kamajor war decisions before Kamajor commanders executed them.

The witness, cross examined by defence counsel Yada Williams, says he took part in planning Operation Black December as a member of the Kamajor War Council at the time.

"Operation Black December was a

decision of the Kamajor War Council," the witness said, adding, "the operation was launched to prevent the movements of AFRC members and their RUF allies within the country."

He explained that when the Kamajors planned to attack Freetown with a force of 7000 personnel, they had to seek the

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Norman endorses Kamajor

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permission of General Maxwell Kibbe because ECOMOG was deployed at the Western Area.

He says Norman told them he would get arms

supply from Abdul Mwanan Wan in Liberia.

"I cannot remember exactly when Black December was planned but the operation was executed in December 1997," he said

and confirmed that he was trained to use arms but not as a combatant.

"Norman, MS Dumbuya and Kamajor Director of Training Gboba trained us," he stated.

Tears flow in

By
**Mohamed
Wadi, Our
Kenema
Correspondent**

Kenema for



Hinga Norman

Norman

Tears flowed from the eyes of former Kamajor fighters last Saturday during the visit of Hinga Norman's Lawyer at the Special Court, Dr. Bubuaque Jabbie at the Forest Industry Canteen in Kenema when a traditional song was sang by Topkwoi Bassay and group depicting Hinga Norman's role in restoring democracy and what they referred to as the

ungrateful reward of his indictment by the Special Court. They claimed that the

arrest of Hinga Norman was a ploy to destroy the Mende nation. The ex-fighters vowed to continue to support Chief

Norman till death. A former Kamajor General, Ishmail Koroma whilst addressing former

Kamajor fighters during the meeting said the Special Court should indict former ECOMOG officers since they were

supplying them arms and ammunitions to fight the rebels. He said they as

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From Front Page

Kamajors have documents to substantiate the above claim. He also claimed that Paramount Chiefs are all ex-combatants since

Tears flow in

Kenema for Norman

according to him, the Chiefs were responsible for selecting those initiated in the Kamajor movement

Mr. Koroma claimed that the Special Court does not only target Hinga Norman but the Mende ethnic group since all those indicted by the court are Mendes. "This is an affront", he said.

He said former Vice President, Dr. Albert Joe Demby was the National

Chairman of the Kamajors. This, according to Koroma, is a sufficient proof to the whole world that the government had links with the CDF movement. He argued that the Kamajor initiators were all given licenses by the government mandating them to initiate fighters to protect and liberate their land.

The ex-Kamajor General called on his former colleagues to sympathize

with Chief Norman's suffering. He drew attention to a paradox when he mentioned, "the March 19 date on which Kabbah was reinstated to power was the same date Hinga Norman was arrested by the Special Court"

Arthur Koroma, former CDF Administrator, East lamented said, "the fight against Norman is a fight for the Mendes and the SLPP because it was the Kamajors that

fought to bring both Kabbah and his SLPP government to power." He questioned the impartiality of the Special Court noting that the Defense Counsels of Chief Norman are not enjoying similar financial support given to the outreach team who are now all over the country. Mr. Koroma warned Dr. Jabbie not to be influenced by money to prolong the

proceedings. Dr. Jabbie expressed thanks and appreciation to the fighters for the first time of meeting them. He said his duty is to defend Chief Norman and assured them to do his best in this aspect. His purpose for the visit he said, was to brief the ex-fighters about the Norman trial and other developments since they will be needed to serve as witnesses for his defense. Dr. Jabbie

further briefed them on the international rules of Norman's indictment citing section 40 of the conventional law which states that what ever agreement signed by a government at

international law must first go through Parliament. He said the International Customary Law would not have an effective hold on Norman when the time comes. Present at the occasion were representatives of Paramount Chiefs, former Commanders, ex-fighters, traditional rulers and Dr. Emmanuel Momoh a Member of Parliament for Kenema District

SALONE TIMES

The Newspaper You Can Trust

Wednesday November 24th, 2004

FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

Le500

'Kamajors Indisciplined And Uncontrollable'



Hinga Norman

By Mohamed Mansaray

When the 27th Special Court Prosecution witness in the trial of CDF indictees, TF2-008 resumed his testimony in court yesterday after he recovered from a chest illness, he told the court that Kamajors who captured Bo from AFRC/RUF forces sometime in 1998 became indisciplined and uncontrollable.

The witness made this statement whilst he was under cross-examination by Arrow Bockarie who is de-

fending the second accused Moinina Fofana at Court Room No. 1, New England in Freetown.

"I arrived in Bo from Base Zero five days after Kamajors captured the town from AFRC/RUF

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Kamajor Witness On Discipline

forces," he told the court.

According to the witness, the Kamajors who attacked Bo were commanded by the Regional Director of Operations in the Southern Region Albert J. Nallo. He told the court that even though the regional Director of Operations in the Southern region and other battalion commanders were in Bo with the Kamajors, yet there were still problems with discipline.

The witness quoted Mr. Norman as telling Kamajors in Bo during that period about plans by two members of Parliament to create factions within the CDF. "Hon. Mohamed Daranyi (now Minister) and Hon. Momoh Pujeh were the MPs who told Kamajors to go under ECOMOG command," the witness further quoted the accused as telling them in Bo and added that Mr. Norman kicked against the idea fearing that there would be division within the CDF.

In his examination-in-chief earlier, the witness described himself as a man who was attached to the administrative wing of the CDF and a member of the CDF War Council. He informed the court about a "Concerned Group" that was constituted in Bo during that period, of which he (witness) was a member and was charged with the responsibility of putting in place strategies to reverse the 1997 military takeover.

Born in Mano, Jaiama Bongor chiefdom in the Bo district, the witness was led in evidence earlier by a prosecution lawyer, Joseph Kamara. He gave his testimony in English from the witness protection box.

The trials continue.

STANDARD TIMES

Wednesday November 24, 2004

Le500

Over Chief Norman's arrest...

Kamajors hold high level meeting

BY
THEOPHILUS
S.GBENDA

After months in the cold watching how events surrounding the arrest and detention by the Special Court for Sierra Leone of the

three top ex-Kamajor officials Chief Sam Hinga Norman, Moinina Fofanah and Allieu Kondewa, former Kamajor commanders within the eastern and

southern provinces last weekend for the first time held high level meetings in Bo and Kenema.

Facilitated by the defence teams of the three accused persons, the meeting amongst other things was aimed at sensitizing the former fighters of what the Special Court trials are all about and to give them an up date account of the current fate of the trio.

The meeting also was aimed at making it clear to the former fighters that the three were arrested because the Kamajor as an entity has been accused of committing war crimes during the course



Former Kamajors at the meeting

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Kamajors hold meeting

FROM PAGE 1

of the war, and hence encourage them to come forward and give testimony in defence of the three.

This is against the backdrop of the fact that the defence has been finding it extremely difficult to get the co-operation of former fighters, who otherwise would have been used as defence witnesses to counter some of the things the prosecution witnesses were testifying to.

After the arrests, Kamajors had generally taken cover in fear of further arrests, a situation that according to one of the facilitators, Mr. Augustine S. Sannoh, has been giving the defence a lot of problems.

This was why, according to Mr. Sannoh, that it was deemed necessary to call the

meetings, which were attended by 13 paramount chiefs, four (4) CDF administrators from Kenema, Kono, Kailahun and Tongo as well as Mr. Arthur Koroma and all district commanders including the former general battalion commander, Mr. Ishmail Koroma.

Addressing the well-attended meetings, the court appointed Counsel for Chief Sam Hinga Norman, Dr. Bu-Buake Jabbie, explained the content of the indictment and the reason why the three have opted to boycott the trials.

According to Dr. Jabbie, the three opted out of the proceedings in protest at the non-service of the Joinder Indictment, the non-arrangement to take a plea, and the witness protection

measures.

Reacting, the Kamajors expressed their delight to be opportuned to attend such a meeting, which had been badly longed for.

According to the Kamajors, they were shocked and annoyed when they first heard of the arrests, but decided to keep their cool and watch how the situation unfolds.

They blame the government for what they say is a blatant show of ungratefulness, stressing that the Kamajor movement was formed with the sole aim of re-instating the exiled SLPP regime, and laid special emphasis on the fate of Chief Sam Hinga Norman, who they said sacrificed his life, comfort and personal resources to see that the government was re-instated and lasting peace achieved in the country.

They also blame the SLPP as a whole for not doing anything to reverse the plight of Chief Norman, who they say was a constituency chairman and government minister by the time of his arrest.

They accused the Outreach Team of the Special Court for instilling fear in them and misinforming them about what was actually obtaining at the court.

They also condemned the court's decision to impose counsels on the indictees which they say is an indication of the support for the court rather than the welfare of the indictees.

They therefore seek clarification on the terms of the court appointed counsels and stand by counsels.

Accordingly, they ended up coming out with a resolution, pledging to wholeheartedly support the defence team, and to do everything within the law, to ensure that the three are acquitted and discharged.

This according to them is crucial, because if they sit by without rendering their support, and at the end of the day the three are found guilty and sentenced, the Kamajor society will automatically be seen as a wicked organization and that the negative stigma on them will remain forever.

NEW VISION

Motto: A Better Vision Is A Better Future

Wednesday November 24, 2004

Independent

Le 500

Former CDF fighters question Special Court

By Sheku Tamba

Thousands of former fighters including the general populace have vowed to back CDF indictees Chief Sam Hinga Norman (former Coordinator of CDF), Moinina Fofana (former Director of war) and Alieu Konduwa (the initiator).

This happened on the Defence team for Saturday 20th Chief Sam Hinga November 2004 when Norman and his

investigators visited Kenema to sound the opinion and views of the people particularly the CFD for whom Chief Norman now stands trial at the Special Court. And to also try to identify witnesses for the CDF indictees who can also give evidence to counter some of those

Continued page 2



Chief Sam Hinga Norman

Former CDF fighters question Special Court

those given against Chief Sam Hinga Norman which many described to be fabricated and devoid of truth.

Some of the issues discussed were the factors that led to the formation of the Civil Defence Forces from the time of the late Alpha Lavalie and on to 1997 when the democratically elected government was toppled.

Questions and reactions were encouraged amongst which were the joint indictment charges of the three CDF accused before their individual charges.

Other questions included, why the Kamajors who fought to save Sierra Leone are at this time the first to appear before the Special Court and why only the Kamajors in the Civil Defence Forces are indicted when in fact there were 'Donsos', 'Captals' and the 'Tanaboros'?

At the end of the meeting a resolution was passed by former fighters of the Civil Defence Forces giving their strong and relentless support to the Defence team of the CDF indictees in a non-violent way but constitutionally to ensure that justice prevails.

Present were the Chief lawyer of Chief Sam Hinga Norman, Dr. Bubuaka Jabbie, Abu Turay and Augustine Saunoh who are all investigators for Chief Norman.

Others present were SLFP Secretary General Arthur Koroma, Dr. Francis Momoh, Members of Parliament, Chief Albert Gotor, Chief Sheku Mansaray and representatives of Paramount Chiefs.

THE HERALD GUARDIAN

Vol. 3 No.39 MOTTO: TRUTH AND COMMITMENT Friday 26 November 2004

PLOT TO KILL KABBAH

By Our Defence Editor

THE HERALD GUARDIAN has reliably learnt that there is a plot by unknown persons to assassinate President Kabbah and topple his Government.

According to intelligence reports gathered by this Press, five mercenaries are presently in the country; three of them in Freetown and two in the provinces.

“Those in Freetown are here to monitor the movements and activities of the Head of State, Cabinet Ministers and other dignitaries and those in the provinces are there to recruit men and set up a back up base”, a defence source

EXPOSED

explained
RED ALERT

A senior State Security official told THE HERALD GUARDIAN that they were in readiness for any eventuality and that they were not minimizing any information.

“We call on the populace to be vigilant and report all suspect persons to the nearest police station... Meanwhile let everybody go about their business as usual”, an aide to the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Oliver Somassa, told THE HERALD GUARDIAN.



President Kabbah

“PA” NEWS

Mon 22 Nov 2004

print  close **12:01pm (UK)****Fco Minister for Africa to Visit Sierra Leone and Liberia***FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE News Release issued by the Government News Network on 22 November 2004*

Chris Mullin, the Minister for Africa, will visit Sierra Leone and Liberia from 22-29 November. Ahead of his visit, Mr Mullin said:

“Britain has made an enormous investment to help Sierra Leone to put its terrible decade of conflict behind it, to establish security, and to develop stability. We are providing training for the police and army and supporting reform in every sector of government. I look forward to seeing what progress has been made, and to discussing with the Government of Sierra Leone how they are tackling the challenges they now face.

“Liberia has come a long way since a peace deal was signed in August last year. The disarmament process was completed last month, and preparations for next year’s elections are underway. I hope to see how the UN are also helping Liberians to rebuild their lives, and to hear of how the Transitional National Government intends to tackle Liberia’s reconstruction.

“This is a crucial time for Liberia and the region. The prize of lasting peace in West Africa drew closer with the ending of Liberia’s 14 year war. Recent trouble in the Cote D’Ivoire is of real concern. A long-term solution to this conflict is vital to the region’s stability.”

Press Officer: Kristian Sharpless: 020 7008 3909

Editors’ Notes

* Dates of the wars

* Sierra Leone: civil war 1991 – 2002

* Liberia: Back to back civil wars between 1989 and 2003

Details of HMG contributions to SL and Liberia

DFID provided £104.5m in aid to Sierra Leone in the three years from 00/01 to 02/03 (£35m, £37.1m, £32.4m). DFID has undertaken to provide £120m in aid over three years (03/04 to 05/06), as well as a ‘substantial direct development programme’ over the next ten years. DFID also has major projects to reform and equip the Sierra Leonean Police, to house the Sierra Leonean army and to reform the Sierra Leonean intelligence service. These have totalled approximately £30m over the last 3 years. The UK-led International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT) is developing the Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) As part of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), the UK has provided 22 personnel in the capital Freetown, and 15 United Nations Military Observers deployed throughout the country.

The UK donated £7.6m to Liberia in 2003/4; this was mainly directed towards improving the humanitarian situation. We have committed a further £3m for humanitarian aid and a £6m for the DDR process over the next two years, as well as £150,000 towards setting up an independent radio station

Link to Sierra Leone info at <http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1017756002632>

Link to Liberia country brief: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394365&a=KCountryProfile&aid=1019744966050>

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EDITORIAL**Gambian legal pace setters**

By DO

Nov 23, 2004, 18:00

Gambians are now the most influential persons in the world's quest for international justice and respect for human rights. Justice Hassan Jallow is making tremendous progress at the UN Special Tribunal for Rwanda at Arusha, Tanzania, which he heads since last year. Prior to his appointment, he was a special judge at the Sierra Leone Tribunal trying people most responsible for the atrocities committed during the civil war in that country.

This week Fatou Bensouda starts her work as deputy prosecutor at the International Criminal Court at the Hague, which was set up to bring to justice perpetrators of war crimes, (massacres) and crimes against humanity (rape and genocide) during wars and emergencies. Her task is indeed tremendously challenging as it is important; she will singlehandedly prosecute war crimes suspects from anywhere in the world and make sure that impunity is no longer the reward to beat in the international arena.

As her investigators are already probing atrocities in the DRC and in Northern Uganda, and will most likely also be in Ivory Coast soon, the international community will soon have to depend on the legal sagacity of Ms. Bensouda to bring about prosecutions.

Mr. Jallow is already a success story at Arusha; in the 12 months since he assumed office work at the Tribunal has gone twice faster with the conviction of at least six persons in the past few months. The staff of the Tribunal have become less restive than during the tenure of his predecessor, the feisty Italian Carla del Ponte.


These appointments however, offers challenges to our government and the Gambian judiciary. The government will now be the under much stricter scrutiny from the international community as regards human rights and the respect for the rule of law. And fair enough, for any country which produces two of the most high profile prosecutors in the leading international courts, must be seen to be a model of good governance and respect for peoples' rights.

The Gambian judiciary too has to keep proving its self as being one of the finest institutions in Africa which has produced these leading legal luminaries.

Both Bensouda and Jallow deserve the continuous support of all Gambians as they are our pride.

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Some nations still not cooperating with UN war crimes tribunals, Security Council told

23 November 2004 – Leading prosecutors and judges of the two United Nations war crime tribunals warned the Security Council today that continued lack of cooperation by certain governments could derail their efforts to complete their work on time.

Briefing the Council on the "completion strategy" of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), the prosecutors said they were close to meeting their targets, but pleaded that some states were unwilling or unable to assist them in arresting and transferring the suspects.

"There are still 20 fugitives at large," ICTY Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte told the Council. "Delays in the arrest and transfer of these fugitives make the planning of the trial more complicated and undermine judicial efficiency."

Ms. Del Ponte said the Serbian Government had "deliberately chosen" to ignore its legal obligations and continued to adopt a defiant attitude towards the Tribunal, adding that Belgrade remained "the single-most obstacle in the implementation of the completion strategy."

ICTY President Judge Theodor Meron agreed with Ms. Del Ponte. "At the moment, there is a wide variation in the several states' willingness to cooperate with the Tribunal," he said. "There has been no serious effort by the Republika Srpska authorities to locate and arrest fugitives."

Both Judge Meron and Ms. Del Ponte also voiced grave concern about the Tribunal's ability to carry out its task with the existing resources at hand.

"It is absolutely essential that the Tribunal have adequate personnel to stay abreast of its steadily increasing workload," said Judge Meron. "It is becoming increasingly difficult to continue to promote internally to senior levels without compromising professional standards," added Ms. Del Ponte.

In their briefings, both the Prosecutor and the President of the Rwanda Tribunal said they were making progress on schedule, but expressed their worries about the possible adverse impact of the shortage of resources on the success of the completion strategy.

"While 2004 has seen some progress registered in the preparation and trial of the cases," said Prosecutor Hassan Jallow, "it will be a great challenge to sustain this progress and deal with the anticipated increased load whilst we continue to suffer the recruitment freeze."

For his part, ICTR President Judge Erik Møse told the Council: "We have been able to keep the trials going. But the situation is critical."

Judge Møse said more than 80 staff had left the Tribunal since the freeze was imposed on hiring.

Noting that arrests and transfer of indicted fugitives continued to be "fraught with difficulties," the Tribunal officials urged Member States to live up to their legal obligations.

They said the Tribunal tried several times to approach the Democratic Republic of the Congo for dialogue on the issue of arrests of fugitives, but got no response. It is believed that many suspects of Rwanda war crimes are hiding in neighbouring country.

11/23/2004 08:17:28

19,000 Ivorians reported to have fled to Liberia: UNHCR

GENEVA, Nov 23 (AFP) - The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said Tuesday it has reports that some 19,000 refugees have poured into **Liberia** from Ivory Coast, where violence surged early this month, but noted that the refugee flow was slowing.

About 10,000 Ivorians have registered in two districts, Butuo and Gborplay, but more Ivorians had crossed the border in other locations, according to the UNHCR.

"Refugees fleeing tensions in Ivory Coast are still crossing the border into north-eastern **Liberia** although the number of new arrivals is decreasing by the day," UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond said.

Other UN agencies confirmed that the flow of refugees was slowing, but said tensions remained high in Ivory Coast, particularly in the main city, Abidjan.

Aid workers in the southern city on the Atlantic coast reported a tense situation, according to the UN's humanitarian coordinating agency (OCHA).

There were also reports of attacks on civilians along the dividing line between the rebel-held north and government-controlled areas, where UN peacekeeping forces had increased patrols, OCHA spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs told journalists.

"There are also tensions and a precarious humanitarian situation in Korhogo (north), where it is still risky for aid workers to leave the town," she added. Ivory Coast slid back into violence after the government launched air strikes on rebel areas on November 4, in violation of an 18-month-old ceasefire, killing nine French peacekeepers and a US civilian.

Military action by France following the attack sparked anti-French riots by supporters of Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo, while thousands of foreigners and Ivorians fled the country.

The refugees are straining supplies in impoverished and war-scarred **Liberia** and the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) said it had flown about 60 tonnes of food to the border region.

Aid agencies were examining ways of moving the refugees away from the border area, despite the huge logistical difficulties involved.

"Support or distribution of food close to the border could provoke a new influx of Ivorians to get food," WFP spokesman Simon Pluess said.

COTE D IVOIRE: Economic aftershocks of crisis may be felt around region for years to come

23 Nov 2004 19:26:14 GMT

Source: IRIN

DAKAR, 23 November (IRIN) - The turmoil in Cote d'Ivoire has brought cross-border trade screeching to a halt and with thousands of people already flocking to the borders to escape, top UN officials fear the conflict could rock the economy of the impoverished West African region for many years to come.

"In the medium and long term there are still serious concerns. We are not on the eve of a lasting settlement of the crisis," Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the United Nations Special Representative for West Africa, told IRIN in a recent interview.

"This is not good for understanding between countries and it is certainly not good for confidence in the economy of the region."

Cote d'Ivoire, with its vast cocoa and coffee plantations, was once the economic success story of the region, attracting immigrants from neighbouring countries and European expatriates alike. The gleaming skyscrapers in downtown Abidjan paid testament to what many called the "Paris of Africa".

Before the outbreak of civil war, Cote d'Ivoire accounted for 40 percent of the economic output of the Economic and Monetary Union of West Africa (UMEOA), a group of eight mainly French-speaking countries that share the CFA franc as their common currency

But a coup attempt launched by northern rebels against President Laurent Gbagbo in September 2002, unleashed a deadly cycle of violence. Earlier this month government troops shattered a precarious 18-month ceasefire, bombing rebel strongholds and raising the spectre of a return to full-scale fighting.

"How can we hope to attract foreign investment, essential for creating the jobs that so many millions of West African youths desperately need, if some of our leaders continue to pursue the logic of war and vendetta year after year?" Ould-Abdallah said.

Gbagbo's attack on the north petered out after French peacekeeping troops in Cote d'Ivoire destroyed most of his small air force on the ground. The United Nations subsequently slapped an arms embargo on both sides in the conflict and African leaders are scurrying to resolve the crisis.

However, many diplomats think the lull in hostilities is just temporary and they are worried about the regional fallout of the Ivorian conflict.

"We will most likely see a slow but lasting degeneration of the economies (of neighbouring countries)," said Herve Ludovic de Lys, the head of UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (OCHA) regional support team in West Africa.

"The informal sector, which can generate up to 70 percent of the revenues of certain countries in the region, will be disrupted in the long-term by this crisis," de Lys said. "Workers and vendors will move around with great difficulty from now on because of all the roadblocks and searches."

He noted that many of the four million immigrants in Cote d'Ivoire, from Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea and other nearby countries, would find it difficult to make the trip back home and hand over vital funds to their extended families.

"Seasonal migrations, that are tied to the coffee and cocoa harvests, have been interrupted by recent events, depriving neighbouring countries of revenues from Cote d'Ivoire," de Lys said.

Economic Standstill

Ould-Abdallah agreed that the latest unrest had taken a toll on cross-border traffic.

"The economic exchanges at the border are at a standstill," he said in an interview in his Dakar office. "And related to it, but making it worse are roadblocks... People have been stopped, had money taken away from them, and they have been ransomed."

An IRIN correspondent who visited Zegoua, a town on the main border crossing between Mali Cote d'Ivoire, earlier this month, witnessed this knock-on effect first-hand.

The town lies on the all-important Highway 7, the road used by truckers used to ferry cotton, Mali's main export, to the Ivorian port of Abidjan. A host of imported goods, including fuel, cement and construction materials, are brought back into landlocked Mali on the return journey.

Local officials said that normally about 700 trucks use the Zegoua border crossing each day, earning the Malian state between 180 million and 200 million CFA francs (US \$360,000 to \$US 400,000) each month in customs duties. Now that revenue has vanished.

"When the crisis broke out, the big trucks suddenly stopped coming and, as if by magic, the town emptied," Fatogoma Ouattara, the mayor of Zegoua, explained. "Transit agents and other economic operators simply left town."

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have been trying, with limited success, to divert their external trade to other ports on the West African coast since the Ivorian conflict began. But the economies of all three countries have been hard hit by the disruption of foreign trade and a reduced flow of remittances from migrant workers.

Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea have also struggled to absorb an influx of more than 600,000 returning migrants fleeing conflict in

Cote d'Ivoire. UN analysts have warned privately that the exodus could more than double if the country relapses into full-scale civil war.

The race now is to stop the economic aftershocks toppling West African countries like dominoes.

"We know there is a real "domino effect" linked to instability or the deterioration in living conditions for people which provides ripe ground for conflicts and crises," OCHA's de Lys said.

He used the example of Burkina Faso, which is rated third from bottom in the UN's Human Development Index. Thousands of Burkinabe, mainly cocoa workers, have fled Cote d'Ivoire since 2002, fearing ethnic reprisals and allegations of being in cahoots with the rebels. Gbagbo has repeatedly accused Burkina Faso of supporting the insurgency.

"What is the exact impact of 350,000 Burkinabe returning to the villages their families come from?" de Lys said.

"The idea is to have an urgent economic plan for countries that are emerging from conflict and for the neighbouring countries that are suffering the consequences of those conflicts," he added.

One of the key problems facing aid agencies is that most of Cote d'Ivoire's neighbours are already grappling to shrug off their own war-torn past, or trying desperately to prevent their own descent into chaos.

Fragile neighbours

"The neighbouring countries certainly cannot cope with this," UN representative Ould-Abdallah said. "Liberia has just started finding its feet, as has Sierra Leone and the Forest Region of Guinea is a difficult area. Exposing these countries, not to mention Burkina Faso and Mali, to economic constraints of this kind is a big problem."

Even for better-off countries like Ghana, which is considered a beacon of stability and relative prosperity in the region, worries remain, particularly when it comes to refugees from Cote d'Ivoire.

"It's the easiest destination for political reasons. And Ghana does not need large inflows of refugees or displaced persons. They have presidential elections in two weeks," Ould-Abdallah explained.

But so far the main flow of refugees has been into eastern Liberia.

Officials of the UN refugee agency UNHCR told IRIN that up to 20,000 Ivorian refugees had marched through dense jungle or squeezed into canoes over the past three weeks, to reach safety in Liberia, even though that meant setting up camp in a country which is only just recovering from its own 14-year civil war.

Residents in the Liberian border town of Butuo have been experiencing the fall-out from the conflict next door at first hand. The town had a population of about 1,000 at the beginning of November, but that has sky-rocketed to 6,000 as the refugees flood in. Host

families are sheltering up to 10 refugees in a house.

"Because those brothers and sisters who seek refuge here are mostly of the same tribe, we ordered our local dwellers to accommodate them into their homes and share with them whatever food they have," Albert Fanga, the superintendent of the district, told IRIN. "But the food is getting low."

Another concern around the porous border areas, is that combatants, idle for more than a year since the end of the Liberia civil war, might be sucked back into conflict across the frontier.

"If they find a new employer, they will go," Ould-Abdallah, the UN's top official in West Africa, said.

Aid workers are also fretting that child soldiers may be a particularly vulnerable prey for foreign recruiters.

"(We are concerned) that many of the Liberian child combatants recently disarmed, demobilised and reunified with their families... will be re-recruited by the fighting factions in Ivory Coast," said Samuel Kamanda, a child protection officer with the US-based International Rescue Committee.

Stealing the limelight

Mediation efforts to break the political deadlock have intensified this month. The UN Security Council has weighed in with an arms embargo and has warned that travel bans and asset freezes will swing into action next month if the key players do not haul themselves back onto the peace path by 15 December.

The African Union has designated South African President Thabo Mbeki to mediate and bring the two sides together. He has already met with Gbagbo as well as opposition and rebel leaders to try to find a way out of the impasse. The Economic Community Of West African States (ECOWAS), chaired by Ghanaian President John Kufuor, has also been playing a key role.

But experts noted that the diplomatic whirlwind around Cote d'Ivoire, while crucial, was also sapping attention away from other important but less headline-grabbing problems in West Africa.

"It is a strain on these institutions and a drain on their resources," Ould-Abdallah said. "We have other problems -- Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone. We have countries that need to be supported, but no-one has time to think of them because of the crisis in Cote d'Ivoire."

"How do we draw the attention of the international community and development partners to... others when you have a crisis of such magnitude?"

It was a message echoed by a senior World Food Programme (WFP) official at the weekend in Sierra Leone, a country which is still recovering from a decade-long civil war that ended in 2002.

Jean-Jacques Graisse told a WFP conference that donors had given

the agency just three quarters of funds requested for the West African region for 2004 -- around US\$ 61 million of a US\$ 82 million appeal.

"With all the crises in the world, it is easy to overlook Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where headline-grabbing conflict has ended," Graise said.

"But this would be exactly the wrong time to neglect this sub-region. It is up to the world community to secure this peace."

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