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Crisis in Cote d'Ivoire: Implications for the Country and Region

Opening Statement by Chairman Christopher Smith
House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights
Excerpts of Remarks at Congressional Hearing
April 13, 2011

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Today's hearing concerns the continuing tragedy in Cote d'Ivoire, where a repeatedly-delayed presidential election and a subsequent runoff election failed to end longstanding political and civil unrest in that West African nation. Despite the arrest of sitting President Laurent Gbagbo this week, there remain obstacles to the return of peace and prosperity to Cote d'Ivoire.

Cote d'Ivoire had been one of the region's most stable governments and an African economic powerhouse. In fact, even during the worst periods of civil war in this troubled country, Cote d'Ivoire remained one of America's largest trading partners in Africa. Unfortunately, this nation has become a blight on its neighbors rather than the blessing it had been for so long.

As many as a million Ivoirians have been driven from their homes by the fighting. Nearly 44,000 Ivoirians have fled to Liberia, more than 7,000 have fled to Ghana and about 1,700 have fled to Guinea, as well as smaller numbers who have sought refuge in Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Nigeria and Mali. If this conflict is not brought to an end soon, there will be even more Ivoirian refugees in neighboring countries despite the announcement of the border's closing on March 31st. Unfortunately, there is no certainty that the various armed factions will lay down their weapons and forego reprisals as quickly as we would hope.

According to news reports last week, it was only a matter of days or hours before President Gbagbo resigned and accepted the internationally-recognized election of President Allesane Ouattara. Like much in Cote d'Ivoire's recent history that expected development didn't take place. The arrest this week was variously reported to have been at the hands of forces loyal to President Ouattara or the French military. Any lack of certainty will only add to the allegations of Gbagbo and his supporters that foreign forces overthrew an African government.

Ouattara had exercised executive power for the last three years of the life of founding President Felix Houphouët-Boigny, but when he died in 1993, the President of the National Assembly, Henri Konan Bedie, was named his successor. From that point forward, stability has been a thing of the past in Cote d'Ivoire.

Bedie was elected in 1995 in controversial balloting. He was subsequently overthrown and exiled in 1999 by Robert Guie, who was himself unseated and forced to flee after a popular uprising because of suspicions of a tainted election in 2000.

Laurent Gbagbo, believed to have been the rightful winner of the 2000 elections, was declared President, but his presidency was troubled by coup attempts and growing violence between Christian southerners and Muslim northerners. A 2002 military mutiny in the capital city of Abidjan grew into a full-scale rebellion, with rebels seizing much of the north of the country.

Beginning in 2003, cease-fires were agreed to and then broken. Elections, beginning in 2005, were repeatedly postponed. The 2010 elections were hoped to be the solution to the enduring human rights tragedy in Cote d'Ivoire. Like so many other expectations before it, however, this resolution was not to occur.

Meanwhile, human rights violations against Ivorians under the Gbagbo regime were rampant – from extra-judicial killings to torture to forced disappearances to rape. On March 30th, more than 800 Ivorians were massacred in the town of Duékoué when pro-Ouattara forces captured it. The incoming President disavowed responsibility of his forces in the massacre, and promised a full investigation.

Throughout the months since the runoff election last fall, Gbagbo used his leverage shrewdly to hold onto power and cast doubt on an internationally-supervised process to which he had agreed. According to the international accord, the Ivorian election commission would certify a winner that the international community would accept.

However, the Constitutional Council appointed by President Gbagbo declared the election unacceptably tainted.

During the months of wrangling over the election outcome, Gbagbo played on nationalist sentiment, raising concerns of French influence on the certification of the voting. He has repeatedly emphasized that the United Nations had no right to declare a winner of the elections in a sovereign nation – although he had agreed to such a process beforehand.

Even as his military's air force and heavy weaponry were stymied by UN and French forces and rebels surrounded his last stand in a presidential bunker, he knew that if he were killed or resigned without an undisputed elected successor, the constitution called for the Speaker of the National Assembly to become President.

For months, Gbagbo withstood international condemnation, especially by the Economic Community of West African States, which at one point threatened military action that never materialized. He had supporters among the African Union early on who delayed that body's full acceptance of the 2010 election outcome. Increasing African concerns of French and other international military interventions could be problematic in resolving the crisis among some in Africa and elsewhere who may now buy into the Gbagbo conspiracy theories of foreign interference in Cote d'Ivoire.

Above all, we must remember that President Ouattara has always been considered an international figure, even when he was brought in as Prime Minister to bolster an ailing economy in 1990. The North-South dispute in Cote d'Ivoire partly concerns his repeated exclusion from presidential elections and allegations that he was a foreigner. The treatment of Ouattara was seen as symbolic of the mistreatment of northerners and Muslims in Cote d'Ivoire. Resentments on both sides of the regional-religious divide in the country will not disappear overnight.

This hearing is intended to discuss the Obama Administration's assessment of the complicated situation we now face in Cote d'Ivoire, to examine strategies to unravel this mess and to look forward as to how this former bulwark of West Africa can be restored to its former place of prominence in the region and on the continent.

Given our current military involvements in the Middle East and North Africa, diplomacy seems to be the preferred method of American intervention, but what role does the United States play in a situation thus far dominated by the United Nations and France? Given our economic ties to Cote d'Ivoire, we are not casual bystanders in this matter, but how can we best play the role of peacemaker and assist in the lasting reconstruction of one of Africa's most important countries? Furthermore, how can we intervene without seeming to yet another foreign power trying to thwart the will of the people of Cote d'Ivoire?

This is the challenge being taken up this morning by William Fitzgerald, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in Bureau of African Affairs.

Before we hear from our witness this morning, I call on my distinguished colleague, the Ranking Member of this Subcommittee, Donald Payne, to make his opening statement.