
CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Republic of Côte d'Ivoire

Population: 16.4 million (8.1 million under 18)

Government armed forces: 17,050 (estimate)

Compulsory recruitment age: 18

Voluntary recruitment age: 18

Voting age: 21

Optional Protocol: not signed

Other treaties ratified (see glossary):

CRC, GC AP I and II, ILO 138, ILO 182

Ivorian government and allied forces recruited children, including Liberian refugees, as soldiers. Forces opposed to the government, including Liberian-dominated Ivorian armed political groups and Liberian armed political groups with bases in Côte d'Ivoire, also used child soldiers. Children were often recruited forcibly and used in combat. Armed political groups abducted girls into sexual slavery. Ivorian child soldiers fought alongside Liberian armed political groups in Liberia.

Context

In September 2002 armed conflict erupted in Côte d'Ivoire following an attempted coup by an armed group formed in Burkina Faso by soldiers loyal to the former Ivorian president, General Robert Gueï. The uprising came after two years of turmoil, human rights violations and xenophobia which had divided the country in two. By the end of September 2002 most of northern Côte d'Ivoire was under the control of the *Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI), Patriotic Movement of Côte d'Ivoire, an armed political group formed by the insurrectionists.¹ Under a ceasefire agreement in October 2002 the government and the MPCI agreed not to recruit and use mercenaries and child soldiers. However, government forces attacked opposition positions in the west of the country, and by November 2002 two new armed political groups were formed: the *Mouvement pour la justice et la paix* (MJP), Movement for Justice and Peace, and the *Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest* (MPIGO), Ivorian Popular Movement for the Great West. MPIGO was composed largely of fighters from armed political groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone. As the war in the west of the country intensified, civilians were recruited, some forcibly.²

Interests within neighbouring countries fuelled the war. Although the full extent of

Burkinabè support for the MPCI is not clear, the Burkinabè authorities, who were certainly aware of preparations for the September 2002 coup attempt, reportedly supported and probably armed the MPCI, which recruited hundreds of hunters from Burkina Faso, Mali and northern Côte d'Ivoire as the war began. The Liberian government of President Charles Taylor reportedly supported armed opposition groups in western Côte d'Ivoire, including the MJP and MPIGO. The Ivorian armed forces fought alongside the Liberian armed opposition in Liberia. Two pro-government armed groups also fought alongside government forces in Côte d'Ivoire: the government-supported Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL), and the *Forces de Libération du Grand Ouest* (FLGO), Liberation Forces of the Great West, a pro-government militia dominated by Liberians. Liberian fighters and Liberian nationals recruited from refugee camps in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana fought in both government-allied and opposition forces.³

The conflict drove hundreds of thousands of people from their homes, and fighting in eastern Liberia forced Liberians as well as Ivorian refugees back into Côte d'Ivoire. Liberian refugees suspected of supporting the armed opposition in western Côte d'Ivoire were harassed and abused by Ivorian government supporters and forces. The Ivorian armed forces also themselves recruited Liberian nationals, including children and sometimes forcibly, in addition to Liberian mercenaries.⁴

In January 2003 a second ceasefire agreement was signed by all parties to the conflict, which aimed at bringing them all within a transitional government of national reconciliation. Pro-government youth militias demonstrated in protest for four days, and implementation of the ceasefire was hampered by political disagreements between signatories and further fighting in the west of the country, both sides using Liberian combatants.⁵ In September 2003 the former armed political groups, now known as the *Forces Nouvelles*, New Forces, suspended participation in the transitional government, and violence broke out again in November.⁶ In March 2004 the security forces and the pro-government militia *Jeunes Patriotes*, Young Patriots, killed scores of civilians after a banned demonstration organized in the capital, Abidjan, by some political opposition parties with the support of the *Forces Nouvelles*. The *Forces Nouvelles*, which had rejoined the government in January 2004, again suspended their participation in protest.⁷

In February 2004 the UN Security Council agreed to send a peacekeeping force, scheduled to deploy in April 2004, to supervise the disarmament of opposition forces and the presidential elections planned for October 2005.⁸ A French peacekeeping force, in Côte d'Ivoire since 2002, stated its intention to remain until after the presidential elections.

Government

National recruitment legislation

The Armed Forces Code of 7 September 1995 establishes a minimum age of 18 for compulsory and voluntary military service for men and women (Article 82), and prohibits acts contrary to international law governing armed conflicts. A postponement or exemption may be granted to complete education (Article 88).⁹

The 2000 constitution prohibits forced labour, provides guarantees for the protection of children, and establishes that the defence of the nation is assured solely by state defence and security forces according to conditions set down in law (Articles 3, 7 and 24).¹⁰

In August 2003 the National Assembly passed an Amnesty Act, granting amnesty to opposition forces of Ivorian nationality for acts threatening the state since September 2000. It excluded from the amnesty “serious violations” of international human rights and humanitarian law.¹¹

Child recruitment and deployment

During the conflict the government and its armed forces were supported by state militias, youth groups and local self-defence groups, as well as mercenaries and fighters from armed political groups. Child soldiers served in all forces.

As fighting escalated in December 2002, 3,000 new recruits joined the government armed forces, some of them schoolchildren under the age of 18, although there were no reports of forced recruitment of children. Many new recruits were sent as “cannon fodder” to the war in the west of the country.¹² The government also recruited European and African mercenaries to its forces, as well as Liberian veterans of armed conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone, many hundreds of them child soldiers or former child soldiers. Liberian children were reportedly recruited under an arrangement between the Ivorian government and the Liberian armed opposition group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), that the children would be allowed to keep their guns and return to Liberia if they accomplished their mission in Côte d’Ivoire.¹³

From December 2002 both Ivorian children and Liberian children in refugee camps were recruited into the FLGO. Dominated by Liberians, FLGO appeared effectively to be a Liberian armed political group backed by Côte d’Ivoire.¹⁴ Liberian fighters carried out most recruitment. Recruits were offered payment, but those who refused to join up were harassed and threatened. Children as young as 14 were reportedly recruited, some after heavy intimidation, and sent into combat.¹⁵ By May 2003 over 9,000 refugees, including boys as young as eight, had reportedly been recruited and approximately 200 killed.¹⁶ Liberian fighters recruited Ivorian children in villages around Toulepleu, by asking the chiefs for children to

train. Witnesses described boys or girls aged between nine and 12, posted at roadblocks in the area, as barely able to control their guns and firing at anything. The government regained control of Toulepleu in late January 2003.¹⁷

Urban pro-government militia groups, referred to collectively as the *Jeunes Patriotes*, proliferated following the September 2002 crisis. Several groups – the Bees, the Gazelles, the Ninjas and the Panthers – were known to have received training from the armed forces, and some were reportedly armed by government forces and included under-18s in their ranks. Membership was estimated to be in the thousands.¹⁸ Some observers put the figure as high as 100,000.¹⁹ These militias quickly spread outside Abidjan, transforming or appropriating rural self-defence committees. They incited violence and attacked civilians, often on the basis of nationality or ethnicity.²⁰

Opposition armed groups

Forces Nouvelles

The MPCJ, the MJP, and the MPIGO all recruited child soldiers, many under the age of 15 and some as young as ten years old. Child soldiers were among the Liberian fighters, particularly in the MJP and MPIGO. Some Guineans are also reported to have joined the MPCJ.²¹ It is not known whether they included child soldiers. Further recruitment by these groups also took place in Liberian refugee camps in Ghana.²²

In December 2002 the MPCJ authorities in the northern city and opposition stronghold of Bouaké said that there were no child soldiers in their ranks and that soldiers might appear younger than they were because of inadequate nutrition. These claims were clearly false.²³ In September 2002 all schools in MPCJ territory had been closed as the educational system collapsed. Children were then recruited by the MPCJ and in December 2002 were seen posted at roadblocks.²⁴ In December 2003, MPCJ roadblocks in one area were largely guarded by child soldiers, mainly aged between 10 and 15, and armed with Kalashnikov rifles or rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Unpaid, most were surviving by begging or extortion.²⁵

Other child soldiers were left in the care of the MPCJ as their Liberian commanders left the country in May 2003, including 21 child soldiers left behind in Man, aged between 13 and 16. Although the MPCJ initially did not attack civilians, as the war progressed and with the entry of the MJP and MPIGO into the conflict, such attacks, including rape and looting, increased dramatically. Women and girls were abducted into sexual slavery. In one reported case, five girls and young women aged between 14 and 20 were abducted, held for a week at a military camp, probably an MPIGO camp, repeatedly

raped by Ivorian and Liberian fighters, and forced to do domestic labour. Ivorian child soldiers were reportedly being trained in a camp near Bin Houye in March 2003. Observers of conditions in the rebel areas stated that in every Liberian unit of five to six fighters attached to the MPIGO, there would usually be at least one child soldier, often as young as 10 or 12.²⁶

Widespread human rights abuses by the MPIGO and MJP forced civilians and Liberian refugees in western Côte d'Ivoire to flee into government-held territory. Both groups recruited refugees, sometimes forcibly, including children.²⁷ They also recruited some Liberian refugees from camps in Ghana.²⁸

Liberian armed political groups

As well as fighting alongside government forces, after breaking away from LURD in early 2003, MODEL forces launched an offensive into Liberia from bases inside Côte d'Ivoire. MODEL recruited children from refugee camps to fight in Liberia with the open support of the Ivorian government.²⁹

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)

Save the Children and UNICEF negotiated with the MPCl, which agreed in principle to demobilize children bearing arms.³⁰ Other armed political groups agreed to a DDR program for child soldiers coordinated by UNICEF.³¹ However, the program did not include Liberian armed groups operating in western Côte d'Ivoire, and it was not clear whether it would include Liberians who were still involved in Ivorian government and opposition forces.³²

On 11 July 2003 the official international headquarters for the DDR process was set up in Bouaké. UN officials, French military commanders, and representatives of the Ivorian armed forces, the MPCl, MPIGO and MJP, staffed the office.³³ UNICEF had opened three centres for child soldiers in Bouaké, including one for girls, and one in Man by mid-2003. In January 2004 a government official stated that a national DDR program would cover pro-government militias and members of armed political groups, as well as 4,000 people recruited into the government armed forces in September 2002.³⁴ The program had not been launched by March 2004. After the killings of demonstrators and other civilians in Abidjan in March 2004, the *Forces Nouvelles* announced that they would not disarm their forces.³⁵

Other developments

The UN Secretary-General expressed concern on several occasions about human rights abuses during the conflict, including the use of child

soldiers by all sides and the sexual slavery of young girls. In the Secretary-General's November 2003 report, the Ivorian armed forces and the MPCl, MJP and MPIGO were identified as recruiting or using child soldiers.³⁶

In December 2003, at an open meeting of the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs expressed concern at the "pervasive involvement of youth" in the conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire and neighbouring countries. He said that the "extensive engagement of largely young unemployed men in the militias fighting in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire threatens to undermine the security of the region". He called for comprehensive regional protection programs to control the flow of arms and address the needs of young people brutalized by war, including child soldiers.³⁷ The call for a regional approach to issues such as child soldiers and mercenaries was echoed by the UN Security Council in March 2004.³⁸

In July 2001 the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child criticized the situation of child rights in Côte d'Ivoire more broadly, including that the age of criminal responsibility was ten years. Among its concerns were discrimination faced by children, including members of ethnic minorities and street children, and continued child labour and trafficking. The Committee however welcomed the 2000 constitution, which abolished the death penalty, which had previously been applicable to children of 16 years and older, and the treaty concluded between Côte d'Ivoire and Mali prohibiting child trafficking.³⁹

In February 2004 Côte d'Ivoire signed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.⁴⁰

* see glossary for information about internet sources

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- 3 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Côte d'Ivoire: "The war is not yet over"*, Africa Report No. 72, 28 November 2003, <http://www.crisisweb.org>.
- 4 AI, *Liberia: No escape – Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire*, 24 June 2003, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>.
- 5 HRW, *Trapped between two wars*, op. cit.
- 6 IRIN, "Côte d'Ivoire: Rebels announce their return to government", 22 December 2003, <http://www.irinnews.org>.
- 7 Information from AI, May 2004.
- 8 IRIN, "Côte d'Ivoire: UN sends peacekeepers, but disarmament on hold", 29 February 2004.
- 9 Initial report of Côte d'Ivoire to UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, UN Doc. CRC/C/8/Add.41, 27 April 2000, <http://www.ohchr.org>.

- 10 Constitution, Law No. 2000-513, 1 August 2000.
- 11 IRIN, "Côte d'Ivoire: Amnesty law approved", WA Weekly 187, 2-8 August 2003.
- 12 Marie Chantal Obinde, "Côte d'Ivoire, Belligerents Recruit Child Soldiers", Inter-Press Service, 28 January 2003; ICG, *Côte d'Ivoire: "The war is not yet over"*, op. cit.
- 13 HRW, *Trapped between two wars*, op. cit.
- 14 HRW, *Trapped between two wars*, op. cit.
- 15 Report of UN Panel of Experts on Liberia, UN Doc. S/2003/498, 24 April 2003, <http://www.un.org/documents>.
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- 17 HRW, *Trapped between two wars*, op. cit.
- 18 HRW, *Côte d'Ivoire: Militias commit abuses with impunity*, 27 November 2003.
- 19 Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER), *Crisis in Côte d'Ivoire: "Pax Marcoussis" – Emerging challenges and prospects*, 18 December 2003.
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- 21 ICG, *Guinée: Incertitudes autour d'une fin de règne*, Africa Report No. 74, 19 December 2003.
- 22 ICG, *Côte d'Ivoire: "The war is not yet over"*, op. cit.
- 23 AI, *Côte d'Ivoire: Without immediate international action, the country will descend into chaos*, 19 December 2002.
- 24 AI, *Liberia: No escape: Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire*, op. cit.; Marie Chantal Obinde, op. cit.
- 25 IRIN, "Côte d'Ivoire, Age – 10 to 15, Occupation – Soldier", 12 December 2003.
- 26 HRW, *Trapped between two wars*, op. cit.
- 27 AI, *No escape: Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire*, op. cit.
- 28 ICG, *Côte d'Ivoire: "The war is not yet over"*, op. cit.
- 29 HRW, *How to fight, how to kill: Child soldiers in Liberia*, February 2004; *Trapped between two wars*, op. cit.
- 30 IRIN, "Liberia: Child soldiers are back on the frontline", 9 June 2003.
- 31 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) official, confidential report, April 2003.
- 32 Information from Save the Children, 30 June 2003.
- 33 Child Soldiers Coalition briefing for the 4th UN Security Council debate on children and armed conflict, January 2004.
- 34 IRIN, "Côte d'Ivoire: US\$111 million to demobilize 30,000 ex-fighters", 19 January 2004.
- 35 IRIN, "Côte d'Ivoire: Ivorians pessimistic about future of peace deal", 31 March 2004.
- 36 Report of the UN Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, UN Doc. A/58/546-S/2003/1053, 10 November 2003, <http://www.un.org/documents>.
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- 38 4933rd Meeting, reported in "Security Council calls for regional approach in West Africa to address such cross-border issues as child soldiers, mercenaries, small arms", UN Press Release SC/8037, 25 March 2004, <http://www.un.org/documents>.
- 39 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations: Côte d'Ivoire, UN Doc. CRC/C/15/add.155, 9 July 2001, <http://www.ohchr.org>.
- 40 African Union, <http://www.africa-union.org>.