

Time to Act to Save Cote D'Ivoire is Now

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The killing fields of Cote D'Ivoire! How could that be so? How did a country so famous for its economic prowess become known as one of the many 21st century sites of murder? The killing in Cote D'Ivoire was systematic and in most cases based on "if"; the perpetrator felt that the victim was a supporter of Allasane Outtara.

Outtara was one of the presidential hopefuls, denied the right to run for presidency because the Cote D'Ivoire constitution recently made it impossible for individuals with a "foreign parent"; to run for presidency. How the "foreignness"; of the individual was determined remains questionable.

The slaughter of an estimated two hundred Dioula people in the capital Abidjan, during the month of October 2000 came as a horrible surprise. It is hard to imagine that Cote D'Ivoire and Ivorians could have fallen so low as to kill each other like that.

Suspicion, dislike, and hatred among different ethnicities are part of the problem whose roots can be traced to the colonial times.

When France exited Cote D'Ivoire in 1960 it left behind the eloquent and much loved Houphouët Boigny. President Boigny is considered responsible for the influx of immigrants in the country.

He allowed immigrants from the neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso to come into the country and take up jobs, which were at the time perceived as supplementary to the then affluent Abidjanaise population.

The notion of a "political other," who through propaganda becomes the cause of "all things wrong"; and must therefore be annihilated has for many years been propagated to destructive ends.

The Dioula have conveniently become responsible for things going wrong in Cote D'Ivoire. Over time, they have come to be perceived as money-hungry, backward and perpetually destructive to the development of Cote D'Ivoire. The split in Ivorian society has the Dioula against all possible odds.

It is not clear whether President Laurent Gbagbo has done enough to rebuild a united spirit amongst his people. The North has not seen much development of social services since the crisis of 2000.

In fact images on the BBC website showed boxes of mail in a post office in the northern city of Bouake that have not been delivered since 2002. Hospitals, schools and other government institutions have turned into white-elephant projects.

So why is no one giving Gbagbo a little nudge? The president must be reminded that Cote d'Ivoire's and indeed Africa's future is dependent on unity and not on dividing people.

So far, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of the rebels, also called "Forces Nouvelles"; based in the North are taking longer than expected. Guillaume Soro, the former rebel leader, is said to be doing a good job but with little help.

Gbagbo's regime has exhausted its five year mandate. The president is currently under an extended two-year mandate since 2006 and has pushed elections back all the way to November 2008 from the earlier UN request of April 2008.

Though Cote D'Ivoire has seen relative peace since the crises of 2004, work still needs to be done in terms of democracy. Many northerners and "perceived immigrants" still do not have the right to vote.

Most of all, president Gbagbo has still not signed an agreement that would allow for Ouattara to run for presidency. It is clear that the incumbent is trying to buy all the time he can for reasons that may not be so noble.

No one was ready for what happened in Kenya earlier this year. It does not take a genius to know that Cote D'Ivoire could be going down that road. If the international community does not intervene, God knows what will happen to the country.

Like Kenya in East Africa, Cote D'Ivoire is a regional giant in West Africa. It would be bad to let the country lose its glory to ethnic violence. The collapse of Cote d'Ivoire would portend a lot of bad for the region. The international community must step in to save the situation if we are to rescue the coast of ivory from anarchy.