

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

A region at stake

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Between 3 and 6 April this year, a peace summit was held in Pretoria under the chairmanship of President Thabo Mbeki, in what many observers saw as a final chance to avert a return to open conflict in Côte d'Ivoire's slow civil war. What was remarkable about the event was that Mbeki not only secured the attendance of the principal players in the crisis, but let them know that they would not be leaving the venue until he had secured their agreement to a way forward in the stalled peace process. After four days of intense discussion, from which not only the press, but most of the politicians' numerous entourages were excluded, Mbeki emerged with an agreement which appeared to reaffirm and strengthen commitments first made at Marcoussis in January 2003, and offer a way to overcome such obstacles as had been raised in the way of the implementation of the accord reached there.

In this brief space there is no room to address the complexities of the historical situation that has brought Côte d'Ivoire to its present pass. Suffice it to say that the entanglement of economic recession, individual and community ambition had combined to turn group and individual identity into the central point around which the polity turned, in a cycle of increasing violence. In the course of a few years, the discourse about who were 'natives' and who 'strangers', with all the rights and privileges implied, came to be of vital importance at national and communal level. This discourse also resonated with communities across the

national borders, many of which have attempted to improve their own positions by interventions and manipulations involving the Ivorian disputes. In September 2002, an army mutiny had quickly become an attempted coup d'état against the government of President Laurent Gbagbo, from which his administration had been saved only by the prompt intervention of the French garrison stationed in Abidjan, which prevented the rebels from moving on the capital.

By the beginning of 2003, French military action had enforced a military stalemate along the frontline dividing the north from the south of the country. Nevertheless, political tensions continued to rise and suspected supporters of the armed or unarmed opposition became the target for murderous attacks; rebels were also guilty of widespread atrocities, and the humanitarian crisis in the west of the country was marked by massive flows of refugees. This was the background to the convening on a peace summit in the Paris suburb of Marcoussis in January 2003, where government, rebel and other opposition leaders met to hammer out a compromise under strict guidance from the French government.

The accords reached at Marcoussis could make no attempt to address these underlying and deepening causes of internecine conflict; this would have to be the work of years of concerted and dedicated effort on the part of the belligerents themselves. All that the peace agreement could attempt – and this was ambitious enough in the circumstances – was to achieve

an end to the fighting, the re-establishment of state authority throughout a national territory essentially divided by a ceasefire line; outline a programme leading to free and fair elections and the formation of an interim administration composed of both parties; and initiate steps to do away with the disastrous exclusionist policies instituted by President Konan Bédié after 1993 and reinforced since by his successors, General Gueï and President Laurent Gbagbo.

In a matter of months it became apparent that President Gbagbo intended to renege upon, ignore or distort the undertakings solemnly made at Marcoussis. The peace, he argued had been forced upon him by a neo-imperial France acting in concert with his opponents. In addition, he refused to abjure his constitutional rights as head of state and recognise the role afforded the new prime minister Seydou Diarra. Gradually, it became apparent that only larger deployments of French and UN forces could avert a return to full-scale war. Even so, xenophobic pogroms, executed mostly by government-aligned 'patriot militias', erupted across much of the country, including the principal centres, and in the country's western territories, where they merged into Liberia's continuing internal turmoil.

ECOWAS continued with little success to advance the peace process, and managed to secure a confirmation of the essentials of the Marcoussis agreement in two meetings in Accra. The idea was that the rebel forces would agree to begin their disarmament in exchange for the government's repeal of legislation preventing political competition on the part of certain individuals on grounds of their disputed nationality, and liberalising laws and regulations governing citizenship.

Now each side accused the other of breaking their compact: government effectively ignored the powers supposed to have been devolved to a neutral prime minister and the rebels refused to disarm until the required legislative changes had been implemented. Once again the rebels balked at what they saw as a ruse on the part of the president to delay matters until the balance of military power had shifted sufficiently for him to resume operations with greater hope of success.

In November 2003, the situation suddenly deteriorated as government forces launched an

air and land attack on rebel positions, in the course of which eight French soldiers were killed. The response from Paris was immediate, and most of the Ivorian air force was destroyed on the ground, nullifying Gbagbo's offensive options. Anti-French riots and threats to their troops in Abidjan were met with force and a number of Ivorians lost their lives in the ensuing clashes. Among the President's supporters these incidents served to confirm the imperialist and hostile image of France conjured up at Marcoussis. From now on there could be no chance of France mediating the dispute.

Nevertheless, Gbagbo's unilateral violation of the ceasefire had left him in no position to resist renewed international pressure, and he relented to the extent of allowing the national assembly to pass the requisite constitutional changes, but then insisted that these be submitted to referendum in accordance with the law. The rebels, understandably interpreted this development as another government ploy to escape their commitments, and refused to begin the disarmament process. For its part, the government insisted that without disarmament and a renewal of a unified administration, no legislative progress could be made.

It was at this juncture, with the UN and other international players fearing a renewed conflagration of violence with dire implications for the entire region, that President Mbeki took determined steps to use his African Union mandate as mediator to bring to an end the uncertainty and violence in Cote d'Ivoire. The concern was that should the country return to full-scale war, Burkina Faso and Mali would be drawn in, followed possibly by Guinea, and that the fragile post-conflict processes in Liberia and Sierra Leone could well be endangered.

The Pretoria Agreement of 6 April committed the signatories to respect the undertakings made at Marcoussis and confirmed later at summits in Accra. It bound them to abide by the roadmap elaborated by President Mbeki as mediator, and to all UN resolutions on the crisis. It confirmed the unity of the country. It expressed a determination to organise presidential elections in October 2005 and legislative polls shortly afterwards. All signatories also pledged themselves to create a political climate conducive to lasting peace.

In more concrete terms the parties to the Pretoria Agreement called for the immediate

dissolution of all militias and the beginning of the process of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration of other armed forces. Changes were to be made to the national electoral commission and provision was made for a major UN role in the organisation and conduct of the next polls. A new special parliamentary session would be convened to pass the legislation required to implement the undertakings of Marcoussis, and the role of Seydou Diarra as prime minister was confirmed.

In what will likely prove to be the most controversial of the articles of the Agreement, it was determined that President Mbeki, as mediator, would consult with President Obasanjo and the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, following which he would communicate to the Ivorian leaders his determination of who would be eligible to stand for the presidency of Cote d'Ivoire.

All parties left Pretoria claiming to have secured their objectives, though the emphasis on what had been achieved naturally differed. For Gbagbo, the rebel commitment to disarmament and the holding of an election was of paramount importance, not least because after October 2005 his legitimacy as president could have been called into question. For the rebels and the unarmed opposition, the government's commitment to implement the legislative reforms demanded at Marcoussis was the principal benefit.

A week later, President Mbeki made his decision: that all signatories to the Marcoussis agreement would be eligible; this meant that Alassane Outtara, whose candidacy had been deliberately blocked since 1993 by the nationality laws, would be allowed to stand. In a letter to President Gbagbo, Mbeki suggested how a legal path might be found to avoid the necessity of holding a referendum on the constitutional changes required to open up peaceful political competition. He pointed out that in terms of the constitution, the head of state could invoke special powers to promulgate constitutional amendments in the

event of the country's territorial integrity being under threat, as currently was.

The Ivorian opposition was jubilant at the arbitrators findings; the government reacted cautiously to what it now described as Mbeki's 'suggestions'. At the time of writing President Gbagbo has embarked on 'consultations' with representatives of various constituencies within the presidential camp to secure their reaction, possibly in an attempt to dilute the political impact of the concessions he has made, possibly to seek some amelioration of these on grounds of expediency.

In accordance with their undertakings in Pretoria the commanders of the FN and the Ivorian military met on 14 and 16 April to discuss a mutual withdrawal of their forces from the "zone of confidence" and the beginning of plans to arrange for the disarmament and integration of their troops in a new united army. Details of these plans follow in the next section, but so far it is in the military area that most practical progress appears to have been made, with heavy weapons already being removed from the front lines.

On the political side, matters are somewhat less clear at the time of writing. Logic suggests that the politicians should be aware that unless they seize this opportunity, the violent and extreme forces they themselves encouraged would take control of the crisis, driving it into an unpredictable and destructive trajectory, from which recovery would be a distant prospect at best. But logic seldom prevails in the political world.

Even so there will be the challenge of ensuring the presidential election campaign does not degenerate into a form of civil war by other means. The Marcoussis and, by extension, Pretoria Agreements have forced the adoption of policies inimical to the ruling party in Cote d'Ivoire; on what platform does it now campaign without violating the spirit and text of the accords? This would seem to pose an interesting conundrum in the months ahead.