

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Historical involvement

France, Côte d'Ivoire's former colonial master, remains the West African nation's most intimate and traditional backer. Before the September 2002 crisis, there were 20,000 French nationals - some of them simultaneously holding Ivorian citizenship - in Côte d'Ivoire, and a further 20,000 Ivorians who held French citizenship. A 600-strong contingent of French troops was based in Abidjan. These troops, however, did not participate in crushing the coup attempt of September 2002, and France became involved in the crisis only after it spread to engulf much of the country, threatening a serious humanitarian catastrophe. There may be good reasons for the initial reluctance.

France's investment in Africa is five per cent of its external trade, and Paris has, since the 1960s, intervened militarily in at least nine African countries.¹³ France intervened in Mauritania, Senegal, the Congo, Gabon, Cameroon and Chad in the 1960s; in Chad again, as well as in Djibouti, Western Sahara, the Central African Republic and Zaire in the 1970s; and in Chad twice more in the 1980s; in Togo in 1986; and finally—and most controversially—in Rwanda in the 1990s. These interventions earned France the title 'the gendarme of Africa.'¹⁴

In fact, in early 2001, French President Jacques Chirac was a prominent proponent of intervention in Guinea, during a time when Liberian-supported guerrillas were ravaging the southeastern parts of the country; and France still maintains significant military bases in Senegal and Djibouti.¹⁵ Unlike other former colonial powers, especially Britain, France continued to regard most of its ex-colonies in West Africa, with the exception of Guinea, as its traditional sphere of influence and maintained a policy of *rayonnement* towards them.¹⁶ France's military aid to Africa was 800 million French francs in 1984, and in 1990, France had 6,600 troops stationed in Africa.¹⁷ This military presence by a major European power was a source of great disquiet among other, non-French-speaking African states, especially the West African regional power Nigeria, which viewed the recipient African nations as neo-colonial client states, and the intrusive French presence in West Africa as a kind of 'Trojan Horse' strategy.¹⁸ France could perhaps afford to ignore African nationalistic rhetoric of neo-

colonial intervention. But it could not brush aside the deeply embarrassing episode of its Rwandan adventure, which amounted, in the eyes of many around the world, to collusion in the genocidal campaigns of the Hutu leadership of the country in 1994. After that episode, France decided to be more cautious about militarily intervening in an African crisis.¹⁹

When the Côte d'Ivoire crisis broke out in September 2002, France's initial impulse was to use its forces to protect its interests and foreign nationals in the country. French troops staged a dramatic rescue of Western nationals from Bouaké during the first two weeks of the crisis. After that, the French called on the warring parties to observe a ceasefire and to resolve the crisis through peaceful negotiations. Meanwhile, 200,000 Ivoirians fled rebel-controlled Bouaké on foot and by bus in the first four weeks of the crisis.²⁰

The Linas-Marcoussis Agreement²¹

In January 2003, the French government, concerned about the escalating crisis, proposed to host peace talks in France between the government of President Gbagbo and the rebels. Earlier, in November 2002, less than two months after the crisis started, French Foreign Minister Dominique Villepin visited Côte d'Ivoire and held talks with the Ivorian government. His visit coincided with a government offensive, said to have included foreign mercenaries, on Vavoua, which alarmed the French. Villepin visited the country again, in January 2003, and obtained a promise from President Gbagbo to expel mercenaries from the country and halt air attacks against supposed rebel strongholds. Villepin was quick to disavow support for either side in the conflict. "France," he said, "has no other camp except the one for peace."²² Through ECOWAS and French mediation efforts, a ceasefire agreement between the government and the western rebel groups was signed on 13 January, and the participation of the rebel groups in proposed talks in France was assured.

Talks began on 15 January in Linas-Marcoussis, just outside Paris, and ended on 24 January 2003 with an Agreement that was signed by all the parties. The Agreement called for the establishment of a Government of National Reconciliation with wide executive powers, and was to be composed of ministers from the main political parties and the rebel groups on a roughly equal basis, but the current government of President Gbagbo was to be given primacy in the arrangement. Gbagbo was to remain President, but a Prime Minister with wide-ranging powers was to be appointed in agreement with the other groups.

The Linas-Marcoussis Agreement was anchored on three main principles, namely:

1. The need to maintain the territorial integrity of Côte d'Ivoire;
2. The creation of a Government of National Reconciliation, with a new Prime Minister; and
3. The need to conduct transparent and free elections in which people would not be excluded by means of churlish legislation.

Other concerns included the need to re-organise the army, the granting of amnesty - only slightly qualified - to the army mutineers and other militia forces which constituted the insurgent forces; and, most far-reaching, the need to address the issue of identity or nationality with new legislation that integrates and protects the millions of immigrants residing in the country. The Agreement states that "foreign nationals...have made a major contribution to national wealth and have helped confer on Côte d'Ivoire its special position and responsibility within the sub-region," noting that "the petty annoyances perpetrated by the administration and the police and security forces, which often disregard the law and human rights and which often affect foreigners, can be caused by using willful misapplication of identification laws." The new government, therefore, "will immediately eliminate the residence permit requirement...for nationals of ECOWAS countries and will carry out the immigration inspection needed by using means of identification not subject fraudulent misuse." The Agreement also called for changes to land ownership laws, in order to grant immigrants access to land.

Appropriate measures were also to be taken to ensure the freedom of the media, but the Agreement condemned "the incitement to hatred and xenophobia propagated by certain media." Measures were also to be put in place to facilitate the liberation of prisoners of war.

Implementation of the Agreement has been slow because of a lack of political will on the part of the signatories, including the government of President Gbagbo. Observers have accused Gbagbo, in particular, of bad faith. He is said to have "a long practice of publicly endorsing agreements while privately ensuring that they are undermined."²³ With respect to the Agreement, Gbagbo is said to have found "a way to resist the peace pact and stay in power without actually saying no, artfully flicking a switch on when he wants a protest and off when it is time to appear cooperative."²⁴ A counter-factual argument, advanced during the workshop, is that the Agreement is so profoundly radical, entailing major alterations of the constitution as well as the national character of the country, that any elected President would find it extremely difficult to carry it through and still remain in power.²⁵

On the other hand, there have been a number of significant achievements that should not be negated. The President has expanded the government to include some members of the anti-government groups; the security of these people has been assured; amnesty laws have been passed; laws protecting migrant workers are being legislated; and military personnel, including French, ECOWAS and UN troops, have been deployed around the country to protect civilians and to oversee a disarmament process.

In key areas, however, there appears to be a gap between signatory promises and intentions. No progress has been made with respect to preparation for the elections in 2005; the anti-government forces insist on elections before disarming; the security situation is still precarious; and the country is still divided into two, with the government holding on to the south, and the rebels the north.

The Licorne Force²⁶

The French government dispatched Licorne force to Côte d'Ivoire on 6 February 2003 partly to facilitate the implementation of the Linas-Marcoussis Agreement and to protect French interests across the country. The mission of the Licorne Force was backed by UN Security Council Resolution 1464. The French Force was mandated, among other things, to participate in the establishment of security within the border zone with Liberia, and to provide security for foreigners and evacuate them when necessary.

In quick order, Licorne force deployed across the country and was able to check the spread of the violence. But there were limitations. Côte d'Ivoire is a large country, and the borders between the country and its neighbours, for example Liberia, are extremely porous. The French troops were spread rather thin over a large geographical area that is well forested, posing something of a logistical nightmare, particularly in the rainy season.

With respect to the use of force, simple but detailed rules of engagement (ROE) were developed in close collaboration with the Legal and Political Council of the French government. However, the rebels in the west of the country were located in a largely inaccessible area and merged themselves with the civilian population. Since they did not wear uniforms, use of direct force against them posed a serious dilemma for Licorne force.

There were also refugee problems around the Liberian border regions, as well as around San Pedro and Tabou, involving Burkina Faso. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) set up camps in San Pedro, protected by

Licorne force, to handle the refugees. Licorne force prevented the rebels from coming downward toward the south. It also intervened in some events in the San Pedro region and St. Paul encampment zone where some Liberians were looting and burning properties. Rebels attacked parts of southern Côte d'Ivoire where it was difficult for Licorne to gain access, however.

In terms of co-ordination with FANCI, Licorne force collaborated with FANCI in this operation using a great deal of tact and diplomacy. There remains a high level of logistical and other cooperation between the two forces. Regarding co-ordination with Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Licorne force escorted UNHCR officials to facilitate movement of refugees. However, the force was not multi-dimensional in nature and hence had to re-organise itself to assist in humanitarian matters. While various NGOs complemented the efforts of Licorne force, competitive objectives did emerge, and this called for intense co-ordination.

On the positive side, the mandate of Licorne force was clear and direct, and the Force operated as a legitimate entity with UN backing. The rules of engagement were clear and unambiguous - protect the civilian population and prevent an escalation of the conflict. Hence, there was a need to be strong and firm.

On the negative side, there were logistical constraints in a rather large theatre of operations. Protection of the people on the ground, therefore, was not adequate. There were also few military vehicles, including armoured personnel carriers on the ground, and soldiers were therefore exposed to risks. Also, co-ordination at the operational and tactical levels was limited, with the battalions having limited autonomy and having to work on the ground with a variety of different actors.

At a more fundamental level, there seems to have been a change with respect to the character of French intervention and how it is conducted, and the perception of Africans regarding French interventions has changed accordingly. While the colonial past may still detract from the legitimacy of such intervention, this is unlikely to happen during the current phase of the peace process. Since the deployment of the UN force, the Licorne force has been aligned to the UN operation in a more or less supportive role, and will remain on the ground throughout the peace process. Prior to this, Licorne had operated also in co-operation with ECOWAS, in a remarkable convergence of mutual interest.