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Côte d'Ivoire: Progress in the peace process allows cautious optimism for IDPs

Côte d'Ivoire's 700,000 or more internally displaced persons (IDPs) are witnessing a new opportunity for cautious optimism, after the Government and rebel Forces Nouvelles leaders directly negotiated and signed the Ouagadougou Peace Accord on 4 March 2007. The Peace Accord provides for the formation of a new unity government and the reunification of the country through the dismantlement of the "Zone of Confidence" between the government-controlled south and the rebel-held north. While this progress is enabling some displaced people to return or resettle, the overall situation remains fragile, and needs to improve further before IDPs can voluntarily return to their areas of origin or resettle in another area of the country in safety and with dignity.

It remains unclear whether the new government will be able to implement the road map for peace according to the deadlines set out in the Ouagadougou Accord. Delays in the implementation of the plan were already registered due to the lack of funding, the capacity limitations of national institutions and the need for a careful balance between political and military aspirations over the sensitive issue of dismantling both pro- and anti-government militias and integrating them into the regular army. In its progress report on the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), the UN Secretary General recommended that UNOCI should not begin to reduce the number of troops at this stage and that only the completion of the presidential elections and the installation of the elected Government should trigger UNOCI's withdrawal. The human rights and humanitarian situations are of concern, with both pro-government militia and armed rebel groups continuing with impunity to commit serious abuses against civilians, causing ongoing low-level displacement, particularly in the volatile west of the country where ethnic tensions and inter-community clashes remain widespread. Access to services remains precarious, especially in the north and food vulnerability is particularly critical in areas where land has not been cultivated in the absence of security and freedom of movement.

While the Ivorian government has taken encouraging steps towards meeting its responsibilities to IDPs – including the assignment of the role of IDP focal point to the Ministry of Solidarity and War Victims, the drafting of an IDP Action Plan and the setting up of various humanitarian coordination bodies – a number of concrete results are still far from being achieved. Indeed, the country's displaced people will only be able to voluntarily return or resettle safely if all parties demonstrate a serious commitment to implementing the peace process and addressing the causes of Côte d'Ivoire's conflict.

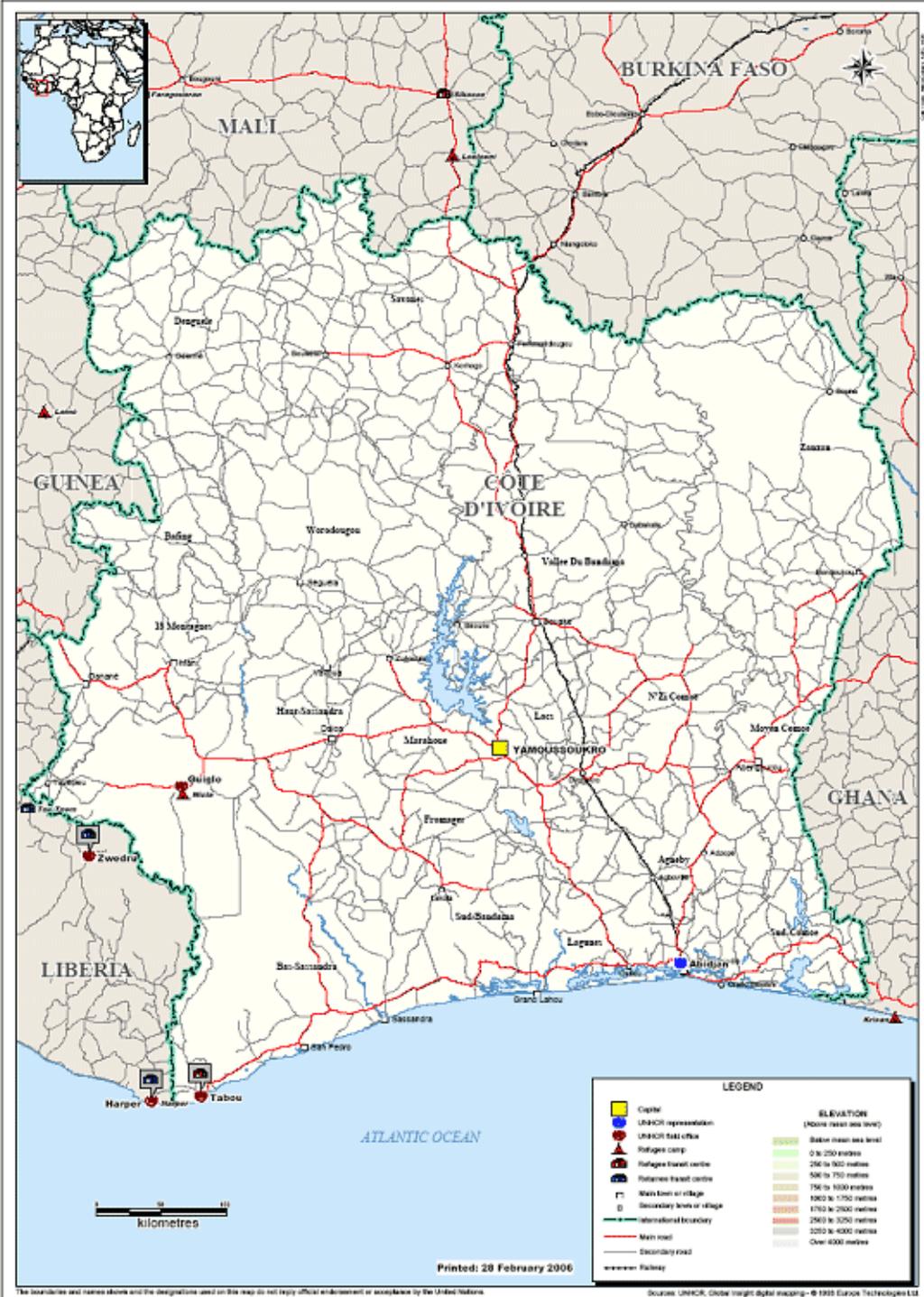


Côte d'Ivoire Administrative Map

As of February 2006

FICSS in DOS

Head Information and Communication Support Section
Division of Operational Services
Email: map@unhcr.org



Source: UNHCR, February 2006

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Disenfranchisement through "Ivoirité"

Over recent years, politicians have regularly exploited xenophobia for partisan purposes. For more than three decades, after independence from France in 1960 and until his death in 1993, the country's first President Felix Houphouët-Boigny broadly maintained religious and ethnic harmony in a country which had become an economic and intercultural hub for the region. However, his pragmatism and political opportunism failed to tackle existing tensions in any sustainable way (UN Commission on Human Rights, 22 December 2004).

Houphouët-Boigny's successor, Henri Konan Bédié, cultivated these seeds of ethnic discord in 1995 when he introduced the concept of "*Ivoirité*", or "Ivorian-ness". He used this to deny Ivorian citizenship to his main political rival, Alassane Ouattara, in order to exclude him from running in elections held that year. At the same time, around one quarter of the population of 17 million, especially in the north and west of the country, were disenfranchised. They included immigrants and those descended from immigrants, many from neighbouring Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana and Niger, but also many people with one Ivorian parent who had never left the country. From that point on, there was an increasing number of attacks on people of foreign descent (Human Rights Watch, August 2001).

A protracted political crisis erupted when the army, under the leadership of General Robert Gueï, overthrew the elected government of Konan Bédié in the country's first ever coup on Christmas Eve 1999.

Building on the theme of "*Ivoirité*", Gueï introduced even stricter eligibility requirements for the presidential election of October 2000.

The 2000 election was eventually won by Laurent Gbagbo of the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), and Gueï was forced to flee by a popular uprising after fraudulently claiming to have won. The election was marred by violence against civilians by all sides, and by state-sponsored human rights violations, with a clear ethnic and religious focus (HRW, 20 December 2000). Initial victims included supporters of both the FPI and Ouattara's Rally of the Republicans (RDR), but once Gueï had fled the country, the main victims were suspected members of the RDR, foreigners and Muslims (HRW, August 2001). Gbagbo, like his predecessors, made the issue of nationality central to his political agenda.

A regional displacement crisis

President Gbagbo failed to resolve the growing ethnic and religious divisions across the country. In September 2002, a failed coup by disaffected soldiers set off civil war. Intense fighting left the rebels of the *Mouvement Patriotique pour la Côte d'Ivoire* (MPCI) in control of much of the centre and the predominantly Muslim north of the country, with government forces holding the largely Christian south, and hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced.

At least 200,000 people were estimated to have fled the rebel-held northern town of Bouaké, and several thousand were made homeless in the economic capital Abidjan by a government demolition policy (UN OCHA, 15 October 2002; UNHCR, 8 Oc-

tober 2002). The main targets of the demolition were immigrants whom the authorities accused of supporting the rebellion. Many Ivorians, as well as refugees from neighbouring countries, were displaced, causing population movements that threatened the stability of the entire region.

At the end of November 2002 two new rebel factions emerged in western Côte d'Ivoire: the *Mouvement pour la Justice et la Paix* (MJP) and the *Mouvement Populaire Ivoirien du Grand Ouest* (MPIGO). Fierce fighting between government forces and the rebel groups, who became collectively known as the *Forces Nouvelles*, and systematic human rights abuses against civilians, displaced an estimated one million people, of whom some 150,000 fled to neighbouring countries (IRIN, 29 January 2003).

Peace efforts do not prevent further displacement

International efforts to end the civil war had limited success. The three peace agreements brokered between 2003 and 2005 failed, notwithstanding the deployment in 2004 of a 6,000-strong UN peacekeeping mission (UNOCI) in addition to an existing contingent of 4,000 French troops. Opposition parties and leaders of rebel forces accused President Gbagbo of failing to meet his obligations under the peace accords.

In March 2004 at least 120 people were killed by government troops and allied militia during an opposition march in Abidjan. A UN report accused government security forces of indiscriminately killing innocent civilians, and of targeting individuals from the north of the country

and immigrants from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (IRIN, 4 May 2004).

In November 2004 government warplanes bombed the rebel stronghold of Bouaké in an operation to regain control of the north, killing nine French soldiers. The ensuing violence spread to Abidjan, and thousands of foreigners were evacuated (IRIN, 7 November 2004). The UN Security Council subsequently imposed a 13-month arms embargo on Côte d'Ivoire, which has since been extended and will remain in force until October 2007 (UN Security Council, 15 December 2005; 15 December 2006).

The political impasse became more intractable when it became clear that presidential elections scheduled for 30 October 2005 would not go ahead. The planned disarmament of both rebel forces and pro-government militia was shelved as the parties continued to wrangle over legislative reforms relating to citizenship and land tenure. In addition, opposition leaders rejected a proposal for South African mediation on the grounds of bias towards the government (UN SC, 26 September 2005). The Security Council finally supported African Union proposals to allow Gbagbo to remain in power for up to 12 months beyond the end of his mandate, as long as he delegated various powers to a new and more powerful prime minister – Charles Konan Banny, governor of West Africa's central bank – named in December 2005. Banny formed a transitional government that was faced with the formidable task of organising disarmament, identification and elections within just ten months (International Crisis Group, 17 May 2006).

Following a wave of anti-UN violence in January 2006, which resulted in the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from the west of the country and the evacuation of humanitarian agencies (IRIN, 18 January 2006), new attempts at ironing out the differences between the main political rivals were recorded in early 2006. No consensus, however, was reached on the main issues standing in the way of elections, principally voter registration and disarmament. The fact that the long-awaited presidential elections could not be held by the October deadline was finally accepted by the Security Council which in its November Resolution formally extended both Gbagbo and Banny's mandates by another year. After this last failure, the home-grown Ouagadougou Accord has therefore given some hope that the peace process may move forward.

Ouagadougou Accord brings new hope

In March 2007, the Government of Côte d'Ivoire and the *Forces Nouvelles* signed a peace agreement reaffirming the need to bring peace and stability to the country. Under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, the signatories have again recognised *inter alia* the need for the identification of the population and the registration of voters. The Peace Agreement, in fact, provides for the organisation of nationwide public *audiences foraines* (public identification hearings) to issue *jugements supplétifs* (supplementary judgements), which will certify the nationality of the applicant's parents and therefore the nationality of the applicant. *Audiences foraines* and tribunals can only issue birth certificates or *jugements supplétifs* to

people born within their jurisdiction, and for those outside of it substitute documents can be provided only on the basis of birth registration. The specific documentation needs of IDPs, therefore, are not specifically addressed in the Peace Agreement as concerns remain for those IDPs whose birth was never registered.

The Peace Agreement has an ambitious timetable with the elections planned for early January 2008 (Government of Côte d'Ivoire, 4 March 2007; UN SC, 8 March 2007). Some first steps, such as the appointment of Guillaume Soro, Secretary General of the *Forces Nouvelles*, to the post of Prime Minister, the creation of a new government and the gradual lifting of the 'Zone of Confidence' buffer zone have already been taken, while the deployment of mixed armed patrols in some areas and the gradual redeployment of the administration to the north have been initiated. Ivorians and the humanitarian community, however, have expressed only cautious optimism that this last peace agreement will bring long-awaited security and the restoration of services disrupted by the conflict (Jesuit Refugee Service, 12 March 2007).

In terms of security, the dismantlement of the Zone of Confidence under the agreement initially led to an increase in the number of violent attacks against civilians, especially in the area around Bangolo (Médecins Sans Frontières, 25 April 2007). Inter-ethnic clashes, particularly in the fertile western region, have continued to cause fatalities and some displacement, notably around the town of Duekoué, where, although President Gbagbo installed a military administration after a series of massacres in May and June 2005 (HRW, 3 June 2005), banditry and ethnic

tensions contribute to a continued and pervasive sense of insecurity (IRIN, 22 March 2007).

IDP numbers remain elusive

A UNFPA-funded survey, carried out by government statistics institute ENSEA in late 2005 and published in March 2006, put the total number of IDPs in five government-held regions at around 700,000. This figure was later revised to 750,000 in the UN's mid-year review of the Consolidated Appeal (UN, 18 July 2006). The current estimate used for planning purposes by humanitarian agencies puts the number of IDPs at 709,000 in the five regions of the Government-controlled south surveyed by ENSEA (UNHCR, 23 March 2007). This figure does not take into account the ongoing small-scale returns or consider displacement within rebel-held areas.

The majority of the displaced people stay with host families, with only some 7,000 living in an established IDP camp in the western town of Guiglo and some 300 in the Mie Gou Centre in Yamoussoukro. The commercial capital Abidjan hosts almost 70 per cent of IDPs included in the survey, for the most part northern Ivorians or persons from neighbouring countries having been in the country for decades and who may be entitled to Ivorian nationality. Many of them live in deplorable conditions in shanty towns. Each host family has on average six IDPs living with them, putting an enormous strain on their resources (ENSEA, March 2006).

Obstacles to return

Small-scale return movements were recorded throughout 2006 and at the begin-

ning of 2007 but these movements have not been documented. The lack of data is largely due to the complexity of the displacement patterns themselves, as well as a lack of resources. There has been reported some secondary displacement due to insecurity in areas of return or resettlement. For example, displaced Burkinabés and displaced Ivorians living in the Guiglo IDP camp say their plantations around the western town of Blolequin are now occupied by persons from the Guéré ethnic group, who were in turn displaced from their land in the Zone of Confidence by other people from the north (US Department of State, 6 March 2007).

As the peace process moves forward, attempts multiply to facilitate the return or resettlement of the hundreds of thousands displaced by the conflict (IOM, 23 March 2007; UNHCR, 23 March 2007). However, obstacles to return remain. When asked, IDPs cite the lack of security, employment and access to land among their main concerns over returning to their areas of origin or resettling elsewhere (UNOCI, 4 May 2007; UN HRC, 18 October 2006). A number of agencies are supporting efforts to promote reconciliation between local and non-indigenous communities over land issues, which remain highly politically sensitive.

Inter-ethnic conflicts over complex land issues in western Côte d'Ivoire are still a regular occurrence (IRIN, 22 March 2007). Although landowners have in some cases encouraged the return of IDPs to prepare for the start of the agricultural season, the return of presumed foreigners has raised tensions in some local communities. Likewise, some IDPs are unwilling to return before disarmament takes place. In some cases where return has been en-

couraged, for example by the UN's pilot return project in the village of Fengolo, returnees have found their plantations occupied, resulting in dangerous inter-community tensions and necessitating interventions to ensure local peace and reconciliation (IDMC Interviews, Fengolo, 23 September 2005).

There is therefore a risk, linked to the implementation of the Ouagadougou Accord, that IDPs may find themselves forced to return to or to resettle in areas where the conditions necessary for their safety and dignity are not yet in place.

Protection concerns

Due to the ongoing inflammation of ethnic and religious tensions, displaced Ivorians have been particularly vulnerable to abuse at the hands of armed fighters as well as local communities, particularly in the fertile western region. There, UNOCI's Human Rights Division reports almost continuous inter-community clashes and displacements, particularly where IDPs no longer have access to their plantations. More than 4,000 people were displaced in June 2006 by ethnic disputes near the town of Bangolo in the Zone of Confidence (UN SC, 17 July 2006). Militant youth groups continue to be particularly active between Guiglo and Bolequin, towards the Liberian border, which saw an upsurge of violent attacks in September 2006, according to UN OCHA in Côte d'Ivoire.

Both the UN and human rights organisations have reported continuing human rights abuses against civilians, committed by government forces and their allied militia as well as *Forces Nouvelles* rebels, mostly with impunity. Abuses docu-

mented by UNOCI include summary executions, disappearances and death threats, rape and sexual exploitation, human trafficking, torture, as well as interference with freedom of expression, freedom of movement and freedom of association (UN, 30 November 2006; UNOCI, March 2007). Impunity continues to contribute to the poor human rights situation in Côte d'Ivoire, which highlights the fact that the administrative, police and judiciary authorities are either absent or not fully operational in most of the country (UN, 30 November 2006).

Protection concerns remain particularly high in the Zone of Confidence, where extensive human rights abuses have been recorded over the last two years. According to human rights workers, security forces have routinely subjected civilians to extortion, robbery and physical attack, particularly at road blocks. This impacts mainly Ivorians from the north of the country and nationals of neighbouring states, some of whom may by law be able to acquire Ivorian nationality. On these occasions, displaced persons without identity papers are particularly vulnerable to harassment and racketeering (Refugees International, 31 January 2007; UN HRC 18 October 2006). Almost-daily attacks against civilians have been reported by Médecins Sans Frontières since the neutral area's dismantlement on April 16 as part of the Ouagadougou Accord (MSF, 25 April 2007).

Sexual and gender-based violence, particularly against displaced women and girls, is of major concern. Information gathered by Amnesty International shows that women and girls continue to suffer sexual assault committed with complete impunity by members of the security

forces as well as by members of armed opposition groups. Protection needs of women and girls are great, but support is practically non-existent due to the lack of qualified medical personnel in many rural areas and the crisis affecting healthcare infrastructure (Amnesty International, 15 March 2007). Repeated displacement and lack of access to education has also resulted in rising levels of prostitution and women and girls being subjected to unacceptable labour conditions.

Living conditions of civilians and IDPs still inadequate

In the north and west of the country basic social services are inadequate or non-existent. The main issues of concern include the lack of drinking water, food security, access to health services, education and the judiciary. Public infrastructure in the rebel-held north has deteriorated to the point that the region is at severe risk of epidemics of water-borne diseases and others such as bacterial meningitis, according to the UN (IRIN, 21 February 2007; IRIN, 29 September 2006). An estimated 60 per cent of the general population has no access to basic healthcare facilities, according to UNICEF (IRIN, 5 September 2006). Malnutrition rates remain high, especially in landlocked areas and where roadblocks and checkpoints have been reported (WFP, 2 January 2007). Poor nutrition and disease surveillance and control, as well as reduced immunisation coverage, have contributed to a serious increase in child and infant mortality rates (UNICEF, 27 March 2006). Curable diseases have been on the increase, while the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate has reached at least seven per cent – the highest in West Africa – worsened by the reduced provision in ARV treatment

(IRIN, 20 October 2006). The deplorable living conditions of IDPs in the camp in Guiglo and the Mie Gou Centre in Yamoussoukro also need urgent attention (UNHCR, 23 March 2007). While their eventual dismantlement is on the agenda, UNHCR is negotiating with international partners to provide income-generating schemes for the return or resettlement of IDPs from the Mie Gou Centre.

Education has been particularly affected by the division of the country, with the north facing a shortage of full-time teachers and the deterioration of school infrastructure (UNICEF, 29 January 2007). An attempt to return to normality was made with the organisation of exams after a three-year break in March and September 2006. The UN estimated in 2005 that more than 700,000 Ivorian children, mostly girls, had been denied access to primary education since 2002 due to a lack of teachers and worsening living conditions (UN SC, 26 September 2005). Furthermore, many displaced children or children of host families do not have access to education because of a lack of resources (UN, 30 November 2006).

In and around Abidjan, as many as 500,000 IDPs (ENSEA, March 2006) are living an extremely precarious existence, many of them in shanty towns housing presumed foreigners as well as Ivorians of predominantly northern ethnic groups. In the Boribana shanty town bordering the lagoon in the north of the city, more than 30,000 people (with an unknown number of IDPs among them) are crammed into a maze of squalid shelters separated by streams of open sewage. Families live with an average of ten to a room. According to residents, some of whom have lived in the shanty town all their lives, the situa-

tion was bad before the crisis in 2002 but became much worse afterwards (IDMC Interviews, Boribana, 20 September 2005). Some estimates indicate that the overall population of Abidjan has grown by up to one million since the conflict began in 2002, making a total of nearly four million – completely overwhelming social and health services (IRIN, 5 September 2006).

Government response limited despite positive steps

The overarching goal of the government is the return of all displaced persons to their original homes. The Ouagadougou Accord focuses only on the drafting of a national strategy document to facilitate the return of IDPs and it remains silent on the option of voluntary resettlement in another part of the country, as stated in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

Since the start of Côte d'Ivoire's civil conflict in September 2002, the state's response to the situation of internal displacement in the country has been hampered by the fact that at both the policy and operational levels there was little knowledge or general experience of tackling humanitarian crises. While several government ministries have worked to varying degrees on issues related to displaced persons – including the Ministry of Solidarity and War Victims, the Ministry of National Reconciliation and Institutional Relations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Reconstruction and Reintegration – the lack of a government focal point greatly hampered UN OCHA-led efforts to put in place a coordinated IDP response structure. However, in mid-2006, the Ministry of Soli-

darity and War Victims officially took the lead role on IDP issues, and drafted an action plan for IDP return which it discussed with international humanitarian agencies. The Government has also set up a number of bodies, including an inter-ministerial committee, in charge of coordinating the protection of and assistance to the country's internally displaced people (IDMC, 8 February 2007; GoCI, 20 March 2007), but the lack of necessary resources has limited their effectiveness.

International response is constrained

The UN response to the humanitarian crisis in Côte d'Ivoire is headed by the Humanitarian Coordinator, Georg Charpentier, who is also the Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, supported by UN OCHA in Abidjan and other strategic locations. He leads the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Coordination Committee (IAHCC), which includes UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, the International Organization for Migration and international NGOs.

The coordinated response for the protection and assistance of IDPs has generally improved in the past year. The UNFPA-funded IDP survey, carried out in five government priority zones, fills an important information gap and may serve as a basis for improved response to IDPs' protection and assistance needs (ENSEA, March 2006). Various protection forums now exist, with varying levels of focus on IDPs. UN OCHA's Protection Network, developed in July 2005, was an important advocate for IDP protection and assistance in line with the UN Guiding Principles, and coordinated the development of

an inter-agency IDP strategy (UN OCHA-CI, 11 July 2006). The more-recent IDP Protection Cluster under the leadership of UNHCR, which replaces the Protection Network, is intended to bring greater accountability and predictability to the protection of civilians, including IDPs, in line with the global humanitarian reform. After the set up of regional clusters in Tabou, Guiglo and Bouake, the national Protection Cluster and its partners are currently establishing a monitoring system for the return and resettlement process as well as preparing benchmarks for guiding it (UNHCR, 23 March 2007). Additional activities include the establishment of a subgroup on identification and documentation issues, which are central to finding a sustainable exit strategy from the crisis.

Various constraints have hampered the response of international agencies to the needs of IDPs in Côte d'Ivoire. The lack of information about IDPs' numbers, needs and locations has been a fundamental obstacle, one which the UNFPA-funded evaluation should help to alleviate, although it was only carried out in five areas in the government-held south of the country (ENSEA, March 2006). The poor state of roads, particularly in the rainy season, has made access to remote areas in the north and west of the country practically impossible, according to WFP.

Humanitarian access has also been limited to varying degrees by the insecurity in some areas of the country. Agencies have at various times been harassed, blocked in their movements, or deliberately targeted with violence. Following the resumption of hostilities in November 2004, many humanitarian agencies were forced to suspend operations and personnel were temporarily evacuated. Following

orchestrated attacks against UN offices in various parts of Côte d'Ivoire in January 2006, which caused widespread destruction and forced the evacuation of hundreds of peacekeepers, as well as most humanitarian agencies, from the western town of Guiglo, IDPs and other vulnerable populations were left without assistance for several weeks (UN News, 26 January 2006; UN OCHA, 9 February 2006).

Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland's visit to Côte d'Ivoire in February 2006 helped to focus international attention on the humanitarian situation in the country, albeit briefly. Condemning the anti-UN violence in the country, Egeland said that "the humanitarians are hanging on by their fingernails in many areas due to decreasing humanitarian space" mainly referring to the west and that "international support is desperately needed if we are going to continue to help the Ivorian people" (UN OCHA, 17 February 2006). The acute lack of funding for humanitarian programmes has been another major constraint, largely as a result of donors' wariness for the country's 'no war no peace' situation and the perceived lack of transparency and good governance (IRIN, 6 February 2007).

High-level advocacy on the situation of IDPs was also undertaken by Walter Kälin, the Representative of the Secretary-General on the Human Rights of IDPs, following a visit to the country in April 2006. Describing the situation in Côte d'Ivoire as "a protection crisis in terms of the human rights of the internally displaced", Kälin called on the authorities and humanitarian organisations to draft without further delay a comprehensive strategy to address the challenges of in-

ternal displacement in the country as well as a detailed plan of action to improve the current situation of the country's internally displaced people. He also requested the donor community to support a long-term strategy to identify and implement durable solutions to the internal displacement crisis. Kälin further recommended that a law providing for indemnities be adopted as soon as possible (UN Human Rights Council, 18 October 2006; OHCHR, 25 April 2006).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's Internal Displacement profile. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

Media contact:

Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer

Head of Monitoring and Advocacy Department

Tel.: +41 (0)22 799 07 03

Email: jens.eschenbaecher@nrc.ch

Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

Norwegian Refugee Council

Chemin de Ballexert 7-9

1219 Geneva, Switzerland

www.internal-displacement.org

Tel: +41 22 799 0700

Fax: +41 22 799 0701