

**Statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,
Subcommittee on African Affairs**

“NEXT STEPS IN CÔTE D’IVOIRE”

A Statement by

Jennifer Cooke

Director,

Africa Program

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

May 19, 2011

419 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Introduction and Summary

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Isakson, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the challenges of reconstruction and reconciliation in Côte d'Ivoire, challenges that will have important repercussions throughout West Africa and the broader continent, but most important in meeting the needs and aspirations of Ivoirian citizens for peace and for a voice in their political affairs. Having lived in Côte d'Ivoire in the days when it was considered an "oasis of stability" in West Africa, I have followed developments there over many years with considerable personal interest—and sadness. Now as director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, I follow the country as an important test case for the consolidation of democratic norms in Africa, for concerted international engagement in preventive diplomacy and crisis response, and, going forward, for the long, hard slog of reconstruction and reconciliation.

In my testimony I would like to emphasize three key areas for U.S. engagement over the longer-term in Côte d'Ivoire:

Security: In the short-term, the United States should give full support to the UN Mission in Côte d'Ivoire in the process of disarmament and reintegration, the repatriation of refugees and displaced, and the restoration of regular forces and authorities throughout the country. In the longer-term it should play a key role in assisting with the re-establishment of professional, accountable security forces in Côte d'Ivoire. It should also work to capitalize on its strong diplomatic and security relationships with neighboring West African countries—Ghana, Liberia, Burkina Faso, and Mali—to ensure a holistic, regional security approach.

Reconciliation efforts: In the short-term, reconciliation on the national level will depend to a large extent on choices the Ivoirian leadership makes in building a broad-based government and in ensuring even-handedness in investigating and prosecuting atrocities committed against civilian populations. Going forward, the United States should give special attention to efforts targeting local communities traumatized by violence. It should also give robust support to preparations for eventual national legislative elections, the restoration of credible, impartial judicial institutions.

Economic recovery and job creation: Job creation must be a priority for the Ivoirian government, with an emphasis on labor-intensive sectors such as agriculture and construction. To jump-start a mass employment program, the United States might consider supporting a major public works program in those areas hardest hit by conflict, and longer-term engagement in bolstering the agricultural sector in the North.

As important as the areas of engagement with the new Ivoirian government will be how the U.S. engages. The country is deeply divided, and mutual suspicions abound. President Ouattara

will face multiple conflicting pressures that he will need to balance carefully to preserve stability and a fragile accord. He has been portrayed by his hardline opponents as a puppet of the West and will need to shake off this perception to establish his authority. While the United States should avoid an uncritical embrace of the new leadership, it must also be sensitive to the precarious trade-offs that must be made in the short-term.

Finally, the United States should build on the powerful model of regional diplomatic engagement in the Ivorian post-election crisis. It should commend African regional organizations and leaders for their principled stance and encourage their continued commitment to the continental norms of democracy and governance that they have set for themselves.

Understanding the Fragility of the New Government

The five-month stand-off in Côte d'Ivoire between President Alassane Ouattara and previous incumbent Laurent Gbagbo ended on April 11 as opposition forces, with support from UN peacekeepers and French troops, forcibly extracted the former president, in flak jacket and helmet, from the basement of his residence in Abidjan. Gbagbo's refusal to relinquish power to President Ouattara, broadly recognized by the international community as the legitimate winner of the country's November 28 presidential run-off election, precipitated a post-election stalemate that has left at least 3,000 Ivoirians dead and displaced over one million from their homes and livelihoods.

The Ivorian crisis did not begin with the recent election stand-off nor with the persons of Alassane Ouattara and Laurent Gbagbo. Côte d'Ivoire's social, class, and political fissures have long-standing roots, dating to the years when the country was considered an African "success case" and an economic "miracle" (see endnote). Fissures have deepened over time through years of economic decline, malgovernance, cynical manipulation of social divisions by political elites, and ultimately civil war. The stand-off and post-election violence have served to deepen animosity, fear, and uncertainty in a society already deeply polarized and will make resolution of these issues all the more fraught and complex.

The new government under President Ouattara will face a monumental task in addressing the interrelated challenges of restoring security, responding to demands for accountability and justice, galvanizing economic growth and employment, and setting the tone for a longer-term process of local reconciliation and national unity.

In undertaking these tasks, Ouattara will be beset by multiple competing pressures. The president will be pressed hard to respond to demands by supporters and allies—many of whom will have expectations of recompense for their role in helping bring him to office—and at the same time to be magnanimous in victory and take concrete steps to allay the suspicions and uncertainties of his opponents. He will be pressed by human rights advocates and the international community to mete out swift and impartial justice to those most responsible for

the atrocities by armed actors committed over the last months and at the same time to maintain a fragile accord and avoid alienating powerful individuals and constituencies from among both his supporters and his political opponents. He will need the sustained assistance of the international community to rebuild and reintegrate the country, but will need to assert his own agency and that of his government and avoid the appearance of doing the bidding of external powers, an accusation used to powerful effect by his predecessor to discredit Ouattara in the eyes of pro-Gbagbo loyalists.

In assisting Côte d'Ivoire to rebuild, the United States and broader international community should avoid an uncritical embrace of President Ouattara, a tendency that has bedeviled U.S. engagement with a number of post-conflict African leaders. Ouattara's leadership skills, political will, and commitment to genuine conciliation are as yet untested in practice, and the United States will want to gauge progress objectively and calibrate engagement and support accordingly. Nonetheless, in the short-term at least, international partners need to be acutely aware of the precarious balancing act that Ouattara must perform and the narrow parameters in which he can operate. International partners must give him the space he needs to assert his leadership and authority, particularly as he seeks to build and maintain a ruling coalition and reestablish order and the authority of regular forces and administrative structures.

Priority Challenges and Areas for U.S. Engagement

Security and Security Sector Reform

A first priority for the new Ivoirian government must be to restore basic security to the country and rein in the various militias from all sides. Having marched southward in their campaign to topple Gbagbo, various factions of the *Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire* (FRCI, formerly the *Forces Nouvelles*) now occupy police offices, military headquarters, and neighborhoods in Abidjan, at times competing with one another to divide and control zones within the city. Populations in rural areas, particularly in the country's West, deeply traumatized by the brutal violence of the past month, remain vulnerable and fearful of renewed violence and the return of militias or mercenary forces from across the border in Liberia. Guillaume Soro, currently prime minister and minister of defense, has for now the allegiance of the majority of FRCI commanders, but his authority and commitment to peace (and to Ouattara) will be tested in persuading these forces to quit the spoils of Abidjan and other towns and return northward. Soro is a key personality to engage. He is young and politically ambitious, with the leverage of the FRCI behind him. He is very likely expecting to remain in a senior position in Ouattara's future cabinet, and he may balk at serious investigations of atrocities committed by forces under his ostensible command. The role of Soro's forces in neutralizing Ibrahim Coulibaly, his personal rival, in the aftermath of Gbagbo's arrest, reveals a ruthless streak that does not bode well for reconciliatory tendencies. But there is also an opportunity for him to demonstrate magnanimity, restraint, and his potential as national statesman. The United States should encourage him in this regard.

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of armed actors, as well as the integration of personnel into a professional national security force, will be somewhat less fraught than in the frozen uncertainty of the last five years, but it will nonetheless be a highly sensitive and difficult endeavor. In keeping with the 2007 Ouagadougou Accord, a force of 80,000 (55,000 military and 17,000 police) is envisioned, including 5,000 integrated from among the FRCI. A renewed mandate by the UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) is likely to include DDR in its purview. The U.S. should provide the support required to ensure this process can go forward quickly and should push for coordination with the UN mission in Liberia, given the flow of arms and fighters across the two countries' shared border.

The task of longer-term security sector reform (SSR) will best be undertaken by bilateral partners. Because French engagement has been so deeply polarizing in Côte d'Ivoire, the United States should consider stepping up in partnership with France and perhaps the United Kingdom, to support a more nationally credible and acceptable SSR process. The United States can build on experiences in SSR in Liberia, including vetting and training military forces, but also developing accountable and professional police services and institutions.

Côte d'Ivoire's security must be seen in the context of the broader West African region. Renewed conflict in Côte d'Ivoire could re-energize militia groups, regional warlords, and young men with few economic opportunities. In this recent stand-off, we saw the re-entry of Liberian mercenaries into Côte d'Ivoire's Western region. Likewise, securing Côte d'Ivoire could push Ivoirian militias and warlords over the border into neighboring states to seek mercenary/profitteering opportunities elsewhere. Already, reports of Gbagbo's rump forces fleeing into Ghana with apprehension mounting that they may seek to base there to mount a coup or destabilizing putsch. The United States should leverage its strong diplomatic and security relationships with Côte d'Ivoire's neighbors to assist in monitoring and pre-empting any efforts to destabilize or reignite violent conflict.

National and Local Reconciliation

Reconciliation will be a long and arduous process, but the country's leadership must take immediate steps to set the tone and translate promising rhetoric into action. At a national level, Ouattara's follow-through on promises to form a broad-based, inclusive government will be closely scrutinized. Equally important will be his seriousness in investigating crimes committed by all sides during the conflict and bringing key perpetrators—of whatever political leaning—to account. Even-handedness and regional balance in restoration of basic services, delivery of humanitarian assistance, and longer-term investments in education, reconstruction, and employment generation are equally critical components of reconciliation. Free and credible legislative elections, slated to take place in the coming year, and empowerment of the legislature and an independent judiciary will be important in building a genuinely national government. U.S. assistance with electoral preparations and in strengthening judicial institutions should be a high priority, along with security sector reform.

Equally— if not more—important will be reconciliation throughout the country at the local level. Much of the violence of the last ten years, and of the last five months, was inflicted on local civilian populations by local militias with parochial rather than national objectives. As a first step, citizens need to be assured of their safety, their grievances must be heard and redressed, and investigations into the crimes committed must be robust and credible. Over the longer-term, the U.S. and international community should support local initiatives on reconciliation through civil society actors, media and communication strategies, with a particular emphasis on youth, who have grown up in an increasingly divided country with national youth role models like militia leaders Blé Goudé and Guillaume Soro. This is an area where the U.S. might consider supporting innovative uses of communication technology, which has been so transformative in neighboring Nigeria and further afield in building constituencies and national dialogue.

Jump-starting the economy and generating economic opportunity

The many tasks that confront the new government will be made easier in a climate of economic recovery and growth. Businesses suffered major losses during the stand-off, and investor confidence was badly shaken. Financial flows and loans cut off during the stand-off to increase pressure on an intransigent Gbagbo need to be quickly restored. Cocoa and the agro-industry can likely recuperate in reasonable time, although the government may wish to offer tax advantages or similar incentives to mitigate the damage inflicted during the crisis and accelerate recovery. The government should be pushed to ensure far greater transparency in the big-money public contract arena, such as oil, electricity, and customs—both to ensure efficiency and set a new standard for opening public accounts to public scrutiny. Over the longer-term, job creation must be a priority with an emphasis on labor-intensive sectors such as agriculture and construction. This will be particularly important in the impoverished North where investments in traditional agricultural mainstays—cotton and cashew production—have languished and should be accelerated. The government might consider launching in the near-term a major public works program to rebuild a decaying infrastructure, restore electrification, sanitation, and expand access to clean water.

As an economist and former senior official in the International Monetary Fund, President Ouattara should be well-suited to map out a plan to restructure and revitalize the economy, but he will need considerable external support to implement such a plan in the short- to medium-term.

The Regional Implications of the Ivoirian Crisis

Throughout the post-election stand-off, the international community came together with remarkable resolve and consensus in seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Its efforts were critical in averting what very easily could have been a much longer and more devastating humanitarian disaster. It should now seek to preserve that unity of purpose and resolve in assisting the country to rebuild, reconcile, and respond to the needs of its citizenry.

Côte d'Ivoire has not generally been a top-tier issue in U.S. policy toward Africa, as it has traditionally been seen as more firmly within the French sphere of influence and engagement. But the post-election crisis brought home in a very stark way what was at stake for broader U.S. interests in Africa: in upholding the principles of democracy and supporting the aspirations of citizens to choose their leaders; in conflict prevention; in safeguarding investments in regional security; and in supporting regional organizations as they seek to entrench norms of good governance and respect for the rule of law. The U.S. response was exemplary: swift, intense, and sustained high-level diplomacy, with the personal support and engagement of President Obama. It was undertaken in close concert with regional and international partners, and offered a balanced approach of gradually escalating pressures, as well as incentives for peaceful resolution. That the crisis was ultimately ended through the use of force should not detract from the merits of the approach, which isolated Gbagbo, weakened his systems of support, and prevented what could have been a much bloodier conflagration.

Perhaps the single most important factor in building international resolve was the early and relatively united response from the regional grouping ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States. That early commitment and voice helped catalyze a series of expanding circles of consensus that helped shape an international strategy remarkable in its unanimity. The U.S. should acknowledge and support that kind of principled, collective diplomatic approach by African regional players, and could encourage other regional bodies to step up in defense of rule of law in similar situations—the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the protracted political debacle in Zimbabwe, which may come to a head fairly soon, come most immediately to mind. The U.S. should commend the leadership role of ECOWAS chair President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria, who despite his engagement in electoral preparations of his own nonetheless gave heft and drive to the regional grouping's response. In late March, Nigeria co-sponsored with France a Security Council resolution condemning the use of heavy weapons against civilians by Gbagbo forces and mandating UNOCI to remove them.

The early ECOWAS response brought the African Union initially on side. Both organizations recognized Alassane Ouattara as the legitimate electoral winner and suspended the country from membership as long as Gbagbo remained in office. Their voice was almost certainly critical in bringing China and Russia on board in the Security Council in recognizing Ouattara as the winner (although U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice reportedly played an important role in doggedly persuading the initially reluctant Russians to agree) and in generating a unanimous General Assembly vote recognizing Ouattara as Côte d'Ivoire's legitimate leader.

The concerted international response enabled a gradual layering on of sanctions—suspension of World Bank assistance and funding from the West African Central Bank, travel bans against Gbagbo and his coterie by the U.S. and European Union, freezing of Gbagbo's U.S. assets, a boycott of Ivoirian cocoa exports, withdrawal of Western banks, and ultimately a UN resolution giving greater powers to UN forces for civilian protection. As the crisis went on, fissures appeared within the African Union, with major powers Angola, South Africa, and Uganda persisting in support for Gbagbo, making an end-run around ECOWAS leadership. Ultimately a

five-member panel of African heads of state, including South Africa's Jacob Zuma, came on side with ECOWAS and the broader international community, an important signal to Gbagbo and his supporters of how isolated he had become.

The international response to Côte d'Ivoire was an important rebuke to the precedent in which a presidential incumbent, in the face of electoral defeat, need only cling to office and threaten force to maintain power, or at worst keep a seat at the table in a negotiated power-sharing deal. There were circumstances unique to Côte d'Ivoire that made concerted push-back possible, but the experience will nonetheless send an important signal to other African leaders who may wish to prolong their stay in office.

But the crisis is not yet over, and the Côte d'Ivoire will remain fragile for many years to come. A return to civil conflict could have devastating regional consequences, with the possibility of destabilizing outflows of refugees and economic impacts on neighboring countries that rely on the country for goods, jobs, and access to the port in Abidjan. Côte d'Ivoire was a critical piece in the regional "conflict system" that engulfed Liberia and Sierra Leone from the mid-1990s, with arms, young men, and proxy militias moving fluidly across borders, with instability in one country metastasizing to broader regional insecurity. This conflict system, spearheaded by Liberia's Charles Taylor, engulfed Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire; drew in proxy fighters from Guinea; was facilitated by Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso; and was fueled by financial and military support from Muammar Qaddafi of Libya. Both Sierra Leone and Liberia remain vulnerable, despite major international investments in UN peacekeeping missions and development assistance. Neighboring Guinea narrowly escaped a violent post-election meltdown just last summer. President Compaoré is facing a sustained challenge to his rule both from elements of his military and his general public.

ECOWAS was clearly attuned to the potential regional impacts of renewed crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, and going forward the United States should work with ECOWAS and the broader international community in a long-term regional security strategy.

Conclusion

The United States has played a robust and positive diplomatic role in bringing the immediate crisis to a conclusion and reinforcing the evolving role of African regional bodies in upholding principles of democracy and good governance. It must now sustain its engagement as Côte d'Ivoire embarks on the long road to economic recovery, national reconciliation, and security sector reform. In this it should give robust support to President Ouattara's efforts to rebuild the country and restore social cohesion, but it should condition longer-term support on demonstrable commitment to conciliation and participatory governance.

Endnote: A (very) brief history of the crisis

Côte d'Ivoire's social, class, and political fissures have long-standing roots, dating to the years when the country was considered an African "success case" and an "economic miracle." In the 1960s and 70s, Côte d'Ivoire was a major economic engine in West Africa, the world's largest producer of cocoa, the third largest producer of coffee, rich in gold and timber resources, with a major port, good infrastructure, and an attractive investment climate. Among the reasons for the country's economic growth was that the country's first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, encouraged and welcomed workers from the north of the country and from northern neighbors Burkina Faso and Mali to work the lucrative plantations in Côte d'Ivoire's West and South. In addition to providing labor in the plantations, these migrants and immigrants often took on jobs that southern Ivoirians considered menial and underpaid. Many migrants settled and had children and families, who have been there now for generations. An estimated 25-30 percent of the population is of immigrant stock.

Although Houphouët brought considerable economic prosperity to Côte d'Ivoire, he did little to strengthen institutions and norms of participatory governance, political succession, or equitable economic growth. The country's strong economic performance masked unresolved issues of national identity, land tenure, and social fissure. In the 1990s, Houphouët's anointed successor, Henri Konan Bedié, presided over increasing levels of corruption and an economic decline brought on by global commodity price shocks and financial mismanagement. As his political support began to wane, Bedié popularized the concept of *Ivoirité*, or a "true" Ivoirian identity. Bedié's xenophobic rhetoric resonated with many in the South who were seeing their fortunes decline and began to blame foreigners for taking jobs away. Burkinabé were the principal scape-goats, but northerners more generally came to be lumped in as well. Alassane Ouattara, despite having served as prime minister under Houphouët, was excluded from successive elections because of questions about his parentage and nationality. He became a rallying point for northern grievances and feelings of exclusion.

A military coup in 1999 ousted Bedié, and elections in 2002 (also contested) brought Laurent Gbagbo to power. Ouattara was again excluded from those elections on the basis of his alleged nationality, intensifying northerners' feeling of disenfranchisement and exclusion. In September 2002, members of the Ivoirian military (largely northern) mutinied and quickly seized control of key positions in the country's north. These forces ultimately joined with other opposition militias to create the *Forces Nouvelles*. Conflict escalated and in 2003 a UN peacekeeping force was deployed, backed by French forces. The French deployment created a buffer zone between North and South, dividing the country in two and freezing it into a situation of neither peace nor war. Gbagbo's five-year term came to an end in 2005, but elections were postponed six times in five years, as progress on disarmament and resolving questions of identity and voter eligibility stalled.

Elections were eventually held on October 31, 2010, and a run-off between Ouattara and Gbagbo was held on November 28. After the Independent Electoral Commission announced a 54.1% to 45.9% outcome in favor of Ouattara, the country's Constitutional Council annulled results in select northern precincts, giving Gbagbo a 51 to 49 percent victory. ECOWAS and the UN, which in successive agreements signed by Gbagbo in Pretoria and Ouagadougou were given an explicit role in ensuring the integrity of the election process, endorsed the Electoral Commission's announced tally, recognizing Ouattara as the country's chosen president. Gbagbo and Ouattara swore themselves in as president in separate ceremonies, precipitating the stand-off that ultimately ended on April 11.

It is important to note that in signing the AU-brokered Pretoria Accord in 2005 and the ECOWAS-brokered Ouagadougou Accord of 2007, Gbagbo himself explicitly invited the UN and ECOWAS to engage in all phases of the electoral process to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections and to act as guarantors of the agreements. An amendment to the Ivoirian electoral code in 2008, by Gbagbo's decree, gives the UN Special Representative in Côte d'Ivoire, as well as the ECOWAS facilitator (Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré), a role in certifying the results. Security Council Resolution 1765, issued in 2007, with Gbagbo's acquiescence, gives the UN Special Representative in Côte d'Ivoire the mandate of certifying the election processes and results. On the domestic front, the Ivoirian Constitutional Court, which has the power either to annul or endorse election results in their entirety; it is not empowered to simply cancel results in select precincts and thereby change the final tally.