

## **Côte d'Ivoire, A Crisis Foreseen**

The Côte d'Ivoire is now undergoing an attempted coup d'état that has cost numerous deaths. The situation is worsening and becoming more complex each day. Some observers are warning of another Rwanda.

For more than two years, the non-governmental organization (NGO), Prévention Génocides, based in Brussels, Belgium, has attempted to call attention both to Ivorians and to Western policy makers, of the dangers of ethnic, xenophobic identity politics that has developed for a dozen years during the Ivorian economic crisis. A film was produced entitled, "Ivory Coast, An Explosive Identity Crisis".

Paradoxically, this alert got more attention in Côte d'Ivoire than in Belgium and the West. The film was broadcast on Ivorian television in August 2001 and provoked a debate in the press.

### **Steps of the original analysis**

Our involvement began in October 2000. A team of sociologists of our NGO was sent to the Côte d'Ivoire. Field research was carried out including hundreds of in depth interviews at many levels of the society and in many geographical regions. An analysis of recorded narratives, testimony, and images by Spring 2001 resulted in a clear diagnosis: Ivorian society is undermined by several crises.

1. A crisis of the political elites: a battle among four leaders ( Bédié, Guéi, Ouattara and Gbagbo ) has rocked the political life of the country for ten years and has often led to petty tactical calculation to gain or preserve power at the expense of the long-term goals of development. Corruption has also undermined the foundations of the rule of law.
2. A crisis of finances of the Ivorian state due primarily to the fall of the price of cacao, and the suspension of certain international assistance in light of evidence of massive theft of subsidies from the European Fund for Development in the health sector.
3. A deep identity crisis.

For almost ten years the concept of "ivoirité" ("ivorianess") was fabricated by politicians in search of legitimacy.

An ideology and propaganda directed by those in power created, little by little, in the social imagination two identity groups: the "100 percent Ivorians" from the "roots"; and the "dubious Ivorians," of whom the leader is Alassane Ouattara, leader of the opposition RDR (former prime minister of Houphoët Boigny.) He was excluded from elections for his "dubious Ivorianess." Besides him, his whole community is targeted. Beyond his own community, there is a linkage of "dubious Ivoirians" with foreigners. An equation is readily made: Ouattara = RDR militants = people of the north = Muslims = Dioulas = foreigners. In these representations, the cleavage "us versus them" is deeply embedded.

There is nothing "natural" about such images. They are socially constructed. In Côte d'Ivoire, there is the desire to portray one part of the inhabitants as not belonging to the political community. It is the place of birth, the village, and blood that count. This is the logic of aristocracy, far from the values of democratic citizenship. It is a politicization of identity to gain or maintain power. It is an ideology founded on purity of identity determined by origin.

It is a paradox that such an illusion of identity founded on blood, on a myth of a common past, appears in particularly mixed societies, thereby including some and excluding others. It is said of a naturalized Ivorian whose family has lived in the country for many generations, "It is not because of his papers that he is Ivorian." Thus the culture is "naturalized." It becomes, as the sociologist Michel Wieviorka says, a sort of "genetic" attribute that one acquires at birth and that one cannot acquire otherwise. This is the idea of "essence." It is

why in the Côte d'Ivoire, certain people call themselves "100 percent Ivorian" of multiseccular origin. It is this way that collective life is deeply racialized and ethnicized. It leads to practices of apartheid, of forced emigration, and finally of ethnic cleansing.

A second aspect of this ideology and propaganda is the self-perceived victimization of the "true Ivorians." They are would-be victims of the RDR, the Dioulas, the foreigners, the foreign press, etc. Stereotypes are durably fixed in people's minds and feed their hatreds. These social markings are powerful.

The propaganda feeds fear and hatred of the "other", perceived as impure and menacing. Humiliations, extortions, and discriminations are daily. They constitute social landmines, and the smallest thing can make them explode.

### **The virus of origins and the powderkeg**

The Côte d'Ivoire appears to us to be a veritable powderkeg. Most of the elements that preceded the conflagrations like the ethnic cleansings in Bosnia and Kosovo or the Rwandan genocide are present. These are what we call the "constants." Among the most important of these is the policy of manipulating identity and ethnicity.

We are not determinists. On the contrary, we are convinced like the writer Gilles Deleuze, that history has forks in the road, and we think that even if the probability of a crisis is only one in a hundred, one must do everything to avoid it.

On the strength of this sociological analysis, and despite acts of intimidation by certain Ivorian groups, we have attempted to deliver our message of prevention and alert. We have notably pled for a substantial augmentation of the aid to the Côte d'Ivoire. (We have often called publicly for a Marshall Plan for the Côte d'Ivoire.) This aid should be directed to new socio-cultural conditions. For example: judgment of those responsible for ethno-political crimes, such as the perpetrators of the mass grave at Yopougon, because impunity always feeds the spiral of desire for vengeance; condemnation of the concept of "ivoirité" (Ivorianess); promotion of multiculturalism, development of a politics of integration, etc. Along with good government and formal democracy, addressing these new social dimensions would reverse the logic of hatred and rejection of the "other".

### **Prevention: Mission Impossible?**

In doing this, we have been confronted with difficulties in the work of prevention and in alerting Western decision makers.

This situation presents the following obstacles to awareness:

- How can one act when very little has happened so far?
- The regime of Laurent Gbagbo has launched several initiatives for reconciliation, including a forum held in Autumn 2001. Why not let oneself be convinced that the Côte d'Ivoire is taking the route of pacification, because that is the line of Ivorian opinion leaders?

Based on our sociological analysis of the Ivorian culture (the images of self and of others, the relationship to the world, to time and space), we remain convinced that the conditions for long-term reconciliation have not yet come together. Without them, reconciliation will be reduced to an arrangement at the top, which can only leave buried the seeds for future conflict. As Claudine Vidal (CNRS, specialist on the Côte d'Ivoire) has noted, "the political action of the principal leaders is entirely oriented toward the 2005 presidential elections, without addressing the fundamental conflicts that divide the society." (Le Monde, 27 September 2002)

### **The blindness of the Western lenders**

In reality, international lenders are content to condition the resumption of aid, notably that of the European Union, upon economic structural adjustment (privatization) and formal political reforms.

It is a sign of short-term memory.

Collette Braeckman, journalist for the Brussels newspaper "Soir" and recognized internationally as an expert on Africa, reminds us in her interview at the end of the film, "Ivory Coast, An Explosive Identity Crisis" that in Rwanda, the Arusha Accords, praised by Western foreign ministries as a decisive step for reconciliation, preceded the genocide by only a few months.

The fundamental problem is to understand the reality of a society, of its dynamics, in order to deduce the role that international aid can play.

The sociological task attempts to understand the rationality of individual or collective actions. It analyzes representations, beliefs, values, and social discourse that determine the social behavior of actors as functions of the results they expect. For a sociologist, abstract collective entities such as the state, the nation, the law, or the school have no autonomous existence by themselves, but can only be understood according to the representations of actors, even when these abstractions are the objects of proceedings by jurists or diplomats.

### **A powderkeg and the pyromaniacs**

Today, in the light of the sparks from the fire, we see that the risks that we pointed out yesterday, are unfortunately becoming realities. Listening to the speeches of political leaders and reading the press, one is led to conclude that the fragile reconciliation process is dead. More than ever, fear and hatred of the other are manufactured. Old stereotypes are again dominant. Everything is to be done again. If only the worst could be avoided!

### **What is to be done?**

As administrators and directors of the NGO, "Prévention génocides" :

- We earnestly and strongly call upon all Ivorians (political, press, and leaders of civil society) to voluntarily abstain from any act that could accentuate the ethnicization of the conflict. This often results from speech that is indirect but damaging.

For example,

- When Alassane Ouattara reported that "the police who came to assassinate me spoke the Bété language," his words could be perceived as suspicion cast upon the whole ethnic group of his rival, the president Gbagbo.
- When the President called on television for the "cleansing of the neighborhoods" and the press of his party cited explicitly Burkina Faso as an invader of the Côte d'Ivoire, such statements could appear as encouragement of ethnic cleansing of Burkinabes living in the country. They are about three million out of sixteen million inhabitants ! Passing from these words to deeds, the police have burned many Abidjan shantytowns where the majority of foreigners live.

All references to individual acts can in this context lead to the collective: it is the whole group that is immediately designated for popular revenge, if not for massacres.

The most xenophobic Ivorian press fans the flames, accusing pell-mell the Western media, neighboring African countries, opposition parties, and foreigners on Ivorian soil of wanting to destroy the country. They are thus putting in place all the conditions necessary for a large-scale conflagration.

- We ask the international community to quickly conceive an integrated plan for the support of the Côte d'Ivoire in order to create conditions for long-term reconciliation.

We reiterate our call for criteria of good government and formal democracy to be well-suited to socio-cultural conditions in the Ivorian context.

Without this intervention, the worst-case scenario is to be feared.

If the calls for xenophobic and ethnic hatred do not stop and if, on the contrary, politicians continue to exploit ethnicity, the following may occur:

- Massive emigration of a major part of the three million Burkinabes living in Côte d'Ivoire to their country of origin.

For Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries on earth, this would be a catastrophe; they would be unassimilable because of incapacity to receive, much less to feed, such an influx of refugees. An essential resource of its fragile economy would disappear – financial transfers from its citizens working in Côte d'Ivoire.

The economy of the Côte d'Ivoire would probably be heavily affected by the brutal disappearance of such a large number of laborers essential to the survival and vitality of its economy.

- Consequences for Ivorian society would be frightening: virulent ethnic hate speech, growing rancor, search for economic scapegoats, and social catastrophe that could lead straight to civil war.

Contrary to what is sometimes prophesied, this will not be a “simple” war of secession between North and South.

Many religious and ethnic groups of the Côte d'Ivoire are present in each city, village, neighborhood, and courtyard of the country, as intricately inter-related as are the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda.

A civil war in Côte d'Ivoire would soon turn into thousands of local pogroms, and if there were secession, it would come at a price of mass forced displacements of the population as occurred in India and Pakistan.

The dissolution of the state and the rule of force that would follow could only lead the Côte d'Ivoire into a situation like Sierra Leone or Liberia, with all the predictable effects on the stability of the sub-region, of which the Côte d'Ivoire is the economic heart (40 percent of the GDP of the West African Economic Community).

Brussels, 3 October 2002

- Guy HAARSCHER, Professor of Philosophy, ULB,

- Jacky MORAEL, Minister of State, Senator Ecolo,

- Michel MOLITOR, Vice-Rector, UCL,

- Pierre MERTENS, writer,

- Jean CORNIL, Senator PS,

- Georges DALLEMAGNE, Senator CdH,

- Josy DUBIE, Senator Ecolo,

- Alex PARISEL, former Director General of Médecins sans Frontières,

- Greg STANTON, founder of the International Campaign to End Genocide,

- Marie STENBOCK, Political scientist,

- Alexandre PYCKE, Sociologist,

- Benoît SCHEUER, Sociologist

Text