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COTE D'IVOIRE: UN finds 99 bodies in mass graves after rebel clashes

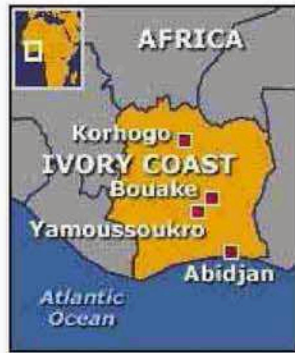


Photo: BBC News

ABIDJAN, 3 August 2004 (IRIN) - UN human rights experts have uncovered three mass graves packed with at least 99 bodies in the northern town of Korhogo where heavy clashes between rival rebel factions took place in June, the UN mission in Cote d'Ivoire (ONUCI) said.

"Some of these people were killed by bullets. And according to reliable and consistent witness accounts, others suffocated to death," ONUCI said in a statement on Monday night. It said that the UN team which visited Korhogo to probe the clashes would publish its final report as soon as possible.

A bulletin from the UN's World Food Programme, issued on Friday, suggested an even bleaker picture.

"The UN mission in Cote d'Ivoire is investigating reports of human rights abuses in Korhogo... So far, four mass graves have been found with 150 corpses. The investigation continues," it said.

On 20 and 21 June, clashes erupted in the rebel capital Bouake, in central Cote d'Ivoire, and Korhogo, a rebel-held city 225 km to the north.

Fighters loyal to rebel leader Guillaume Soro said at the time they had fought with supporters of Ibrahim Coulibaly, a former army sergeant known by the initials "IB." He lives in France, but is widely seen as a challenger to Soro for the rebel leadership.

The New Forces rebel movement accused President Laurent Gbagbo of masterminding the two attacks as an act of provocation in conjunction with President Lansana Conte of Guinea. It said that 22 people died in the clashes, but diplomats and humanitarian sources suspected from the start that the death toll was much higher.

Several residents in Korhogo told IRIN that the number of dead could reach 500, since many people were killed in the city after the fighting when supporters of Soro went on a manhunt for people suspected of backing IB.

The same sources said that those who died of suffocation had been crammed into a container which for several months has been used by the rebel forces in Korhogo as a makeshift prison.

In its statement, the ONUCI human rights team said it remained concerned about those people still in detention.

New Forces officials declined to comment on the statement, saying they were waiting to see the United Nations' final report on the Korhogo clashes.

"We are surprised because we participated in the investigation and we haven't yet received the findings," rebel spokesman Antoine Beugre told IRIN by telephone from Bouake.

A spokesman for IB told French news agency AFP that Soro's troops had engineered the massacre in the north to dispose of any opponents to his regime.

"The existence of these mass graves prove that UN peacekeepers must be deployed rapidly around the country, both in the north and the south, to ensure the protection of all people," Vincent Rigoulet said from Paris.

The ONUCI team spent 17 days investigating allegations of human rights abuses, wrapping up on 26 July.

However, the statement of its initial findings was only published a week later after a West African summit in the Ghanaian capital Accra aimed at putting the faltering peace process in Cote d'Ivoire back on track.

"They waited because they did not want it to obstruct the Accra meeting," one West African diplomat told IRIN..

The two-day summit on Thursday and Friday last week extracted a fresh pledge from all sides in the conflict to implement the political reforms demanded by the French-brokered Linas-Marcoussis peace agreement of January 2003. It also committed the government and rebels to start a long-delayed process of disarmament by October 15.

The West African diplomat said the ONUCI statement would pressure the rebels into "keeping up their side of the (Accra) bargain" and remind them that the international community was keeping a close eye on them.

It would also send a positive signal to those Ivorians who think that the UN has been shielding the rebels, he added.

Last May, the government of President Laurent Gbagbo was severely criticised by a UN human rights investigation for its bloody repression of a banned opposition demonstration in the commercial capital Abidjan on March 25.

The UN human rights experts concluded that Gbagbo's security forces had killed at least 120 people, many of them innocent civilians, in two days of bloodletting.

It said most were killed by soldiers, policemen and shadowy paramilitary gunmen linked to Gbagbo during a manhunt for suspected rebel supporters after the street demonstrations had been dispersed.

Given the preliminary findings of the UN probe into the events in Korhogo, the rebels' own treatment of suspected opponents in their ranks appears to have been no less brutal.

Theme(s): Human Rights, Conflict,

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