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Ivory Coast on fire: West African Church at risk

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World Evangelical Alliance (08.04.2004) / HRWF Int. (21.04.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: www.hrwf.net -- The present situation in Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) is already a national tragedy. Dr. Alassane Outtara, the former Cote d'Ivoire Prime Minister who now heads the Rally of the Republicans (RDR) party, has played ethnic/religious politics for personal political gain. This has torn the nation apart along ethnic and religious lines and poisoned its spirit. The hostility and distrust is now so great, and the racial identification and Islamic zeal now so intense, that one wonders if a return to war is not inevitable. It is certainly impossible to turn back the hands of time. As the 29 March 2004 editorial in the Accra Mail (Accra, Ghana) rightly noted, nations should never start on this road of ethnic politics because once it gets going, "there is no stopping it until we have bled ourselves dry".

West Africa at risk

Cote d'Ivoire (officially 38% Muslim and 31% Christian, with full religious freedom) has been a haven of prosperity in West Africa and a safe, free and prosperous home-base for many mission organisations. Since their 19 September 2003 coup failed, the political aim of the rebels has been to change the constitution so that all the immigrant workers in Ivory Coast (around 50% of the total population and virtually all Muslims) can be naturalised, giving Cote d'Ivoire a clear Muslim majority that will then democratically elect a Muslim government (RDR) and Muslim president (Dr. Outtara). It is suspected that because the rebels have Islamist aims, they have international Islamist support. They certainly have good supply lines for weapons and funds. At a recent rally in the rebel stronghold of Bouake, rebel soldiers were guaranteed a salary.

If Cote d'Ivoire falls to Islamic domination through civil war or constitutional coup, it will destabilise all of West Africa along that ethnic religious fault-line that runs from the Sierra Leone/Liberia border in West Africa, east through Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, southern Chad, central Sudan, to Asmara, Eritrea on the Red Sea. It is quite possible that if Cote d'Ivoire falls to Islam, then Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria will topple like dominoes, and Sudan might find a more radical anti-peace Islamist faction rising above Bashir. It is not unreasonable to suggest that by the end of this decade, the ethnic religious fault-line of West Africa could be pushed south into the Gulf of Guinea.

This may sound terribly alarmist. However, both Nigeria and Sudan have put down coup attempts in recent days. How much more motivation will Islamists have should Islamists succeed in Cote d'Ivoire? Also, Ivory Coast, Togo and Benin, with Muslim minorities of 38%, 24% and 20% respectively, are already members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), as is Nigeria (41% Muslim).

This belt from Liberia east along the coast through to and including Nigeria, is the non-Islamic, religious freedom, evangelical Christian growth and mission-sending stronghold of West Africa. If we look at things from a more cosmic perspective, there are more than just earthly actors interested in the destabilisation of this region of West Africa. As for earthly

actors, there are Islamists, there are megalomaniacs, and there are career criminals, mercenaries and arms traders who make their living in the conflict industry.

Neighbouring Ghana feels the heat

Concerning Cote d'Ivoire, the Accra Mail 29 March editorial states, "What's happening in our western neighbour, Cote d'Ivoire is too close for comfort. "Time was when we looked westwards with envy because Cote d'Ivoire, we thought, had all the best things going for her. If you wanted a drug you couldn't find in Ghana, you tried Abidjan. If it was a special spare part for your car which was not available in Ghana, you sent an SOS to Abidjan. If it was fashion trends, you sought inspiration from Abidjan. Indeed Ghanaians used to say that plantains and other food items from that country were bigger than the Ghanaian varieties.

"Then over night, all of that went up in gun smoke." Pastor Archibald Ako-Nnubeng, the Administrative Secretary of the Deeper Christian Life Ministry in Ghana, has expressed his concern that Ghana is being caught up in the backwash of Cote d'Ivoire's ethnic and religious politics. Pastor Ako-Nnubeng has appealed to Ghanaian Christians not to "follow the ostrich's principle of burying their heads in their church activities as if everything was right". Rather, he says, be prayerful, especially for peaceful elections, because "no one is safe from the cyclone when it strikes".

The Ghanaian Chronicle reports, "Pastor Ako-Nnubeng urged all politicians to tone down their language to tolerate other peoples' views." Pastor Ako-Nnubeng's fear is that "ethnic polarization and incitement by people who should have known better is gradually pushing our dear Ghana towards the precipice of an abyss". (Link 2)

Ghanaians are certainly feeling the heat and becoming greatly anxious about their own future. Consider the words of a 5 April editorial in the Ghanaian Chronicle (Accra, Ghana): "Who would have ever thought that the Ivory Coast, the bastion of stability in West Africa would today descend into the darkness and chaos of petty ethnic politics? "Who indeed, would have predicted a decade ago that beautiful Abidjan would one day become the scene of horrendous crimes against humanity - amid the beauty and splendour of its high-rise hotels, beautiful tree-lined avenues and truly magnificent private houses? And yet today, many have fled that beautiful city.

"And the only reason they fled was that a few unscrupulous politicians are playing the ethnic card for their own parochial interests." The Chronicle believes in the adage that when one's neighbour's house is burning, it is prudent to have buckets of water ready, just in case one's own house also catches fire." (Link 3)

The fire spreads

The Ghanaian Chronicle's illustration of the burning house is exceedingly apt. Ghana is due to have elections in December 2004 and reports in Ghanaian media indicate that sparks of ethnic politics have already created heat in Ghana.

A Ghanaian Chronicle editorial on 25 March said, "The Chronicle thus finds it sad and disturbing that some politicians, desperate for power, are trying to play the dangerous ethnic game in order to gain votes in the impending parliamentary and presidential elections." (Link 4)

An article on Ghanaweb.com, 5 April 2004 entitled "Northerners urged to avoid divisive politics," reports, "Mr Andrew Awuni, Deputy Minister of Information, has urged residents and the people of Northern Ghana to eschew divisive politics. 'Let us be focused on what unites us as a people,' the forthcoming elections, notwithstanding."

This current trend towards ethnic politics by some politicians in Ghana, most notably the former Ghanaian ruler Jeremiah John Rawlings, should not surprise us as the ethnic politics

and violence in neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire has been remarkably successful. The French-brokered, UN-supported peace deal for Cote d'Ivoire legitimized the violent action of the Cote d'Ivoire rebels and rewarded them with power-sharing. Also, the left-leaning international media has been overwhelmingly supportive of the rebels, often accepting and reporting their claims and grievances with great excitement but without analysis or investigation.

Ivory Coast rebels provoking conflict

As for Cote d'Ivoire, the rebels who walked away from the government of national unity in September 2003, refusing to disarm and threatening a return to war, have been provoking confrontations with the Cote d'Ivoire security forces by defying a blanket ban on all political demonstrations that was imposed for security purposes.

An illegal, rebel-led demonstration in Abidjan on Friday 25 March turned ugly, resulting in injuries and official toll of 37 deaths. The rebels however, alleged hundreds of deaths and mass graves (without evidence), blamed the government, cried "oppression", and likened President Laurent Gbagbo (a Christian) to "Saddam Hussein", saying the international community should remove him. The rebels then called upon their supporters to repeat the political demonstration. However, the rebel's supporters did not return to the streets of Abidjan. Sekou Kone, a rebel supporter, explained his reluctance to demonstrate again, "Our leaders should go into the street with us, to motivate us, instead of calling for marches where we are massacred and shot at," he said. (Link 5) The rebel leaders have no doubt learnt that civilian deaths - especially when at the hands of security forces - will generate great international sympathy. It is a familiar scenario. Thankfully however, the rebel's supporters in Abidjan were not so willing to be sacrificed.

The situation in Cote d'Ivoire is extremely serious. It truly is the first house on the block and it is burning. Every effort must be made to put this fire out quickly and decisively, and to seek the path to reconciliation, or peace, prosperity and religious freedom may just disappear from the southern coast of West Africa.

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Links

1) Cote d'Ivoire: What Are the Lessons for Ghana?

EDITORIAL. Accra Mail (Accra) 29 March 2004

<http://allafrica.com/stories/200403290672.html>

2) Rev. Minister Warns Against Ethnic Politics

Ghanaian Chronicle (Accra) 5 April 2004.

By George Kyei Frimpong & Dominic Jale

<http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/200404050709.html>

3) Ethnic Politics - Matters Arising EDITORIAL

Ghanaian Chronicle (Accra) 5 April 2004

<http://allafrica.com/stories/200404050707.html>

4) Saying No to Ethnic Politics EDITORIAL

Ghanaian Chronicle (Accra) 25 March 2004

<http://allafrica.com/stories/200403250408.html>

5) Ivory Coast opposition stays home

CNN 30 March 2004

<http://edition.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/africa/03/30/ivorycoast.ap/index.html>

African strife inflamed by mysticism

by Abraham McLaughlin and Tim Cocks

The Christian Science Monitor (27.02.2004) / HRWF Int. (01.03.2004) - Email: info@hrwf.net - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> -- In northern Uganda, a band of mystic-Christian rebels mounted its biggest-ever attack on civilians, killing some 200 with guns, clubs, and machetes last Saturday.

In nearby eastern Congo a few days later, militia killed 100 civilians and soldiers, cutting off body parts, ostensibly to use for warding off evil spirits.

The geopolitical climate may be tilting toward peace in Africa, helping to stall major conflicts in Congo, Burundi, Sudan, Rwanda, and Liberia. But the change is also bringing into sharp relief smaller battles - and the mysticism and religion often intertwined with Africa's most-brutal killings. Such spiritualist elements can add an uncompromising or extremist component to conflicts, complicating and inflaming clashes that arise for political or economic reasons. And they can be manipulated to prolong otherwise fading tensions.

Here, like elsewhere in the world, "Religion is fundamental in conflict situations - not always overtly, but certainly covertly," observes Weli Mazamisa, a professor of religion at South Africa's Cape Town University. Now this element appears to be coming to the fore.

Religion is certainly not the sole motivator. In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels come from the north, home to the Acholi people, who have been disempowered and discriminated against since the days of British colonial rule. Over the course of their 18-year insurgency, they've increasingly targeted civilians, apparently in a bid to enforce loyalty. In their latest attack, some 500 huts with civilians hiding inside were torched or destroyed by rocket-propelled grenades.

In subsequent mass protests in Lira, several Acholis were beaten to death. The UN-sponsored International Criminal Court plans to investigate the massacre, and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni has vowed again to crush the rebels.

The LRA is the latest in a string of Ugandan insurgencies that involves a mixture of traditional African spiritualist beliefs and a theology derived from Catholic missionaries. LRA leader Joseph Kony is a former Catholic altar boy who has said he aims to create a Ugandan government based on the Ten Commandments. It would also restore economic and political power to the Acholis.

Indeed, there are political and economic elements to the war, "But in the understanding of the people, it is a religious conflict," says Erhard Kamphausen, director of the Academy of Mission at Germany's University of Hamburg, who has studied the war.

Like many African groups influenced by Christian missionaries, Acholis tend to believe their long-running misery is caused by their disregard of "the Ten Commandments and their God," says Mr. Kamphausen.

Traditional beliefs hold strong, too. Kony claims to have magical powers derived from the "Holy Spirit." He is also said to channel several spirits, including ones that dictate war strategy. He apparently manipulates beliefs in witchcraft to instill fear in his followers. Virtually all LRA recruits are abducted children who are brainwashed or forced into committing violent acts.

Father Sebhat Ayele, a Catholic priest in northern Uganda who helped evacuate survivors of the latest massacre, said on one occasion that rebels exhumed eight bodies that had been buried following an attack. "This is clear evidence of witchcraft. You don't touch tombs in Africa. People fear them," he says. Former LRA fighters describe rituals in which victims' body parts are cut out, cooked, and eaten.

Likewise, in the recent massacre in the Congo - reportedly carried out by soldiers led by a General "Chinja-chinja" or "the Ripper" - victims' genitals and faces were cut off.

The belief that "power exists in your enemy" is often behind the taking of body parts, explains Mr. Mazamisa. "My enemy has great hearing," goes the logic. "So I'll take his ears."

Indeed, the belief in powers or spirits is strong. "In African religions, the practitioners are not only the living - but also the living dead," says Mazamisa.

For instance, one belief common in the region, also held by the LRA, is that when a militia member kills an enemy, a purification must be performed to prevent the spirit of the dead soldier from taking revenge on his killer - and on the entire militia. "If the ritual isn't done properly, the soldier must be killed," says Kamphausen, because "he is a danger to his own army."

Kony's foes have also considered spirit-based warfare. A group of traditional healers in Kampala, the capital, last year proposed a plan to cast spells on Kony. The government hasn't accepted the proposal.

Some observers say beliefs of groups like the LRA represent a perversion of traditional African religions, often for political gain. In South Africa, the postkilling purification ritual, for instance, would cleanse the killer of the need to kill again.

The LRA has never stated coherent demands. And no Ugandan officials have ever been able to have a dialogue with rebels, although peace groups note that they have not tried very hard. A peace-talks initiative collapsed last year after rebels failed to turn up for talks.

The spiritualist elements certainly would complicate any talks. "Kony consults the spirits on a daily basis to dictate the battle," says one UN official. "How do you negotiate with spirits?"

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