Mediation Initiatives in Côte d'Ivoire

Following the second round of presidential elections on 28 November 2010, the security situation in Côte d'Ivoire sharply deteriorated when the incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo refused to abdicate power to the internationally recognized election winner Alassane Ouattara. The contested electoral results precipitated a four-month civil war.

While the final solution to this conflict was achieved by the military intervention of the pro-Ouattara rebel forces, the Forces Nouvelles, with the support of UNOCI, the UN peacekeeping mission in the country, and the French Armed Forces peacekeeping operation, Licorne, at the onset of this dispute various high-level mediation initiatives were undertaken by the UN, the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to find a political solution to the conflict.

Immediately following the electoral stalemate, ECOWAS, in firm support of Alassane Ouattara held an extraordinary summit in Abuja on 7 December, attended by heads of state, ministers, ambassadors and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) for Côte d'Ivoire and head of UNOCI, Y.J. Choi. The summit concluded with the decision to suspend Côte d'Ivoire from all ECOWAS decision-making bodies.[1] A follow up summit on 24 December was attended by representatives of every ECOWAS member state and the SRSG of the UN Office for West Africa, Said Djinnit – who was mandated to focus on the regional dimension of the conflict, complementing the role of UNOCI SRSG Choi. Participants backed the imposition of sanctions against Gbagbo, and further warned of the possibility of forceful intervention if the incumbent refused to cede the presidency. This threat soon caused divisions between those willing to support a military action, and those wary of its regional implications – a tension that ultimately limited ECOWAS's ability to effectively mediate between the two parties.

Concurrently, the AU appointed former South African President Thabo Mbeki to help resolve the dispute on 4 December 2010. Although Mbeki had met with both Ouattara and Gbagbo separately, he had little success in securing a joint-meeting with the two parties. Following Mbeki's mediation attempt, the AU announced that Côte d'Ivoire was to be suspended from the union until "the democratically elected president effectively assumes state power."[2] Meanwhile, Jean Ping, the Chair of the AU Commission, and the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Ramtane Lamamra, along with Nigerian President Jonathan Goodluck, the ECOWAS chair, and Victor Gbeho the President of the ECOWAS Commission in a joint mediation effort met with Ouattara and Gbagbo in Abidjan.

On 28 December, ECOWAS sent a mission to Abidjan comprised of the presidents of three impartial non-bordering states (Benin, Cape Verde and Sierra Leone), but soon left unsuccessful. A second visit by the delegation included Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga, the AU's new envoy, who arrived with the intent of negotiating Gbagbo's departure. However, Odinga's outwardly expressed support for a military intervention as a solution to the conflict somewhat limited his mediation capacity. Still, on 4 January the delegation issued a statement reporting the willingness of Gbagbo to support a peaceful negotiated end to the conflict without preconditions. Ouattara accepted this position provided Gbagbo abided by the results of election as announced by the Independent Electoral Commission – terms ultimately not accepted by Gbagbo.

The next major initiative culminated on 28 January as the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) called for the establishment of a High Level Panel composed of five current heads of state. With the support of designated experts, the Panel once more recognized Ouattara as the winner of the 28 November elections. Furthermore, the Panel suggested that Ouattara form and lead a national unity government pending Gbagbo's honorable withdraw, change the system of parliamentary elections, establish a new military structure and establish a high council aimed to promote social reconciliation. The PSC, endorsing the Panel's findings, thus called on the AU to appoint a High Commissioner to oversee the implementation of its recommendations.

However, the president of Gbagbo's political party rejected the findings of the Panel at AU headquarters in Addis Abba on 10 March. Despite final calls for a political solution throughout March and early April, a destabilizing security climate and enhanced military campaigns by domestic forces predetermined the ultimate military outcome. On 30 March, the UN Security Council in its resolution 1975 (2011) imposed financial and travel restrictions on targeted members of Gbagbo's inner circle and on 11 April after heavy shelling, Laurent Gbago was arrested and transferred to the north of Côte d'Ivoire, where at the time of writing he remains under house-arrest under the protection of UNOCI forces.

1   The decision was made in accordance with Article 45 of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

2   African Union, Communiqué of the 252nd Meeting of the Peace and Security Council, PSC/PR/COMM.1(CCLII) (9 December 2010).