Testimony on "The Reconstruction and Reconciliation Process in Côte d'Ivoire"

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Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and your colleagues for the invitation to join you in today's hearing on "The Reconstruction and Reconciliation Process in Côte d'Ivoire". My name is Mike McGovern, and I am an anthropology professor at Yale University. I was previously the West Africa Director of the International Crisis Group, where I conducted research in Côte d'Ivoire and neighboring countries. My book, *Making War in Côte d'Ivoire*, deals with the conflict we are discussing.

The situation in Côte d'Ivoire has been worrying for over a decade. Xenophobic policies promoted by three successive governments began by attempting to exclude rival candidates, and ended by fuelling interethnic massacres. A virulent and inflammatory press has used innuendo, lies, and ethnonationalist rhetoric to incite violence. President Gbagbo worked hard to take what had been an ethnically representative army, and to stock it with members of the relatively small number of ethnic groups that supported him. The security forces consequently became more of a praetorian guard than a law-abiding neutral force to protect the country and its citizens. On top of this, both the Gbagbo government and the former rebels in the north (who are now aligned with President Ouattara) have relied heavily on militias and on mercenary fighters, most infamously from Liberia. All sides have abused civilians, and have regularly done so with impunity.

All of these factors fed into a pattern of dramatic spikes in violence, followed by equally quick de-escalations. The fighting in March and April of this year was the most significant such outbreak since the 2002 coup attempt turned civil war. These dynamics pose serious challenges to the reconstruction of Côte d'Ivoire's social, economic and political institutions, but I would also like to make a comparison. All of the dynamics I have described above--from arguments about citizenship rights, to land disputes, to the deleterious effects of a polarized and irresponsible press--are considered to be among the causes of the Rwandan genocide. Indeed, people on both sides of the Ivorian conflict have regularly signaled the possibility that Côte d'Ivoire could melt down into Rwandan-style genocidal violence. And yet, while every death in Côte d'Ivoire is undoubtedly a tragedy, those killed in this conflict over the past twelve years can be counted around 8,000 to 10,000, not in the hundreds of thousands.

Part of the credit for this goes to international actors including the UN, West African body ECOWAS and even the U.S., which have taken active steps to tamp down incipient violence. However, I think we must also credit Ivorian society with having significant capacity to manage conflict internally. These capacities are not easily visible at first glance, and they have been placed under tremendous stress in the last months. I believe the role of the US government and its agencies should be to find these areas of resiliency and strength, and to support them further.

In the area of **social and political reconciliation**, President Ouattara has already established a Commission on Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation. The Head of this commission, Charles Konan Banny, is respected and is a relatively neutral figure. He is trained as an economist, is a former West African Central Bank head and was the Prime Minister proposed as an honest broker by international actors during the middle years of the Ivorian conflict (2005-2007). The Commission probably has the greatest chance of success if the parameters of its operations are kept modest. It could gather the many different versions of the events of the last decade, and recounting these events may or may not bring some solace to certain witnesses. However, researchers who have looked closely at Truth and Reconciliation Commissions around the world have become increasingly skeptical of the therapeutic value of such recounting of past violence and injustices for those who do the telling. In some cultural contexts (and West Africa may be one), there is a relative discomfort with verbally rehashing the painful events of the past, and little sense that such recounting is cathartic. What people may prefer is rather a situation in which the conditions of possibility are set in place for people to *act* properly, operating according to an implicit dictum that "actions speak louder than words." One invaluable service such a commission can render is to give an exhaustive accounting of who did what to whom and when. This will serve as an important historical starting point for Ivorians as they decide to address these events over the coming decades. Neutrality and the appearance of neutrality are key here, and the United States government could play a role as a relatively uninvolved actor that has been invited by all sides in the conflict to become more involved in helping to resolve the conflict.

The deeper psychological and sociological processes of reconciliation will probably not be accomplished by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and it may be unhelpful to expect that it could. That work will have to take place at very local levels in ways that may well be different from village to village, or from block to block within the cities. I am not sure that such processes can be orchestrated at the national level, let alone from outside the country. However, I believe there is one area of crucial importance in this process that should be accomplished in the context of a country-wide conversation about the events of the past decade. Many Ivorians have taken a certain moral distance from the events in their country, even while they may have played a role, however small, in the process of polarization, vituperation and violence that has led to the country's slide into conflict.

An excellent example of this is the way that many of the really gruesome massacres in the Ivorian conflict have systematically been blamed on Liberians, even while both sides in the conflict blame the other for having engaged the services of these "barbaric"

mercenary fighters. What joins Ivorians who are otherwise opposed is their shared notion that no Ivorian could be capable of burning whole families alive in their houses, or of killing people with machetes. However, in many cases it has indeed been Ivorians who have undertaken this violence, Ivorian military who have benefited by shaking down civilians at roadblocks, Ivorian militias who have systematically raped their female compatriots, Ivorian villagers who have used the fog of war as an opportunity to murder those with whom they have contested ownership of land. There is a kind of playfulness surrounding the "game" of plausible deniability where everyone from leading politicians through the national press and down to ordinary people utilizes barely-veiled code for xenophobic speech or uses the threat of violence to get what they want, and then claims they did not really mean what they said or did. This is a form of playing with fire that has gone too far in Côte d'Ivoire. Too many people have been burned by it, and Ivorians need to take stock of the fact that they bear primary responsibility for allowing this poisonous political culture to flourish in their country.

Aside from this stock-taking, however, I am somewhat skeptical of the idea that reconciliation can be engineered from above. What makes politics and ordinary life in Côte d'Ivoire tick is money, and the greatest possible boon to Ivorian reconciliation would be the creation of new jobs. This will require reinstating security and stability, tamping down the criminality that has as often as not been perpetrated by actors claiming to work on behalf of the state, and it will require economic growth. However, I must emphasize that what Côte d'Ivoire needs is jobs, not growth per se. Many of the forms of "growth" measured by economists do not necessarily translate into jobs that pay a living wage for Ivorians, even if they result in economic activity. I hope that the activities of the US Agency for International Development, and those of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, African Development Bank and other institutions that receive American government funds will take this distinction to heart. What was once called the Ivorian "miracle" has been tarnished by thirty years of economic decline, and if there is a single root cause to the xenophobia and intercommunal violence in the country, it is that this decline has led to the perception that one's neighbor's gain is one's own loss.

The winner-takes-all political culture that emerged over the last twenty years was driven by the reality that the economic pie was shrinking and that the only way to promise jobs to one's base was to gut the civil service and the military upon taking power, and to fill those positions not with those who were best qualified, but with those who were perceived to be most loyal. A good example of this was the FESCI student union that turned into a criminal and quasi-military organization, and that gave us both Charles Blé Goudé, the most inflammatory of Laurent Gbagbo's youth supporters, and Guillaume Soro, who was head of the Forces Nouvelles rebels until he became Prime Minister first in Laurent Gbagbo's and then in Alassane Ouattara's governments. In order to quiet them after the December 1999 coup d'état, it was first putschiste Robert Gueï who turned over the stock of university dormitory housing to the FESCI so that they could skim money off the top of every student's rent, and dole out the best rooms to their members and favorites. The FESCI thus was not presenting student concerns about grading practices or complaints about food in the cafeteria but was transformed into a mafiaesque protection racket that provided the country with some of its most ruthless and violent

young politicians. Returning to the issue of jobs, the reason this was possible was because everyone involved understood that this type of distribution of political and economic favor stood in for the possibility that hard-working students might make a decent living upon graduation. The many young people who refused the violent and cynical trajectory of the FESCI students sat for years, even decades, unemployed, and in some cases returned embittered to their villages only to contribute to tensions over land ownership, as they reclaimed land their parents or grandparents had sold to "strangers" who have now often lived in those villages for decades or even generations.

I mentioned that one of the challenges for creating jobs and thus social reconciliation was reinstating security. There are both challenges and opportunities for the **disarmament, professionalization and integration of the security forces** in Côte d'Ivoire. The greatest challenges are first that the Ivorian security forces have come primarily to terrorize, rather than to protect the civilian population, and second that inclusion into the army, gendarmerie and the multiple militias in the country has become the primary means of employing potentially volatile unemployed young men. Members of all the armed services and all the militias, from the north and the south, have been credibly accused of abuses including rape, extrajudicial killings and torture. There is a UN commission of inquiry in Côte d'Ivoire now, and it is the fourth such commission to have to undertake investigations of human rights abuses in Côte d'Ivoire since 2002.

Security Sector reform in Côte d'Ivoire will be difficult given obvious pressures to integrate the members of all of the northern forces that ultimately contributed to putting Alassane Ouattara in power. Whether he asked them to or not, they defeated the ostensibly pro-Gbagbo army, and then fought their way through Abidjan against pro-Gbagbo military units, militias, and mercenary forces. They expect to be compensated for the risks they took. Managing these expectations will be a delicate balancing act. On one hand, incorporating the *Forces Nouvelles* Zone Commanders and other fighters into the military will help to take pressure off of Ouattara's civilian government. On the other hand, isolating the former *Forces Nouvelles* in the army could lead to an eventual coup. Either way, Ouattara will be far more beholden than he would like to Guillaume Soro and the other members of the ex-rebel forces that have now become the pro-Ouattara forces. The fact that these forces have been credibly accused of committing war crimes and atrocities both in Abidjan and in the interior introduces yet another complication. Ouattara needs to be seen to deal justly with these abusers at the same time that he deals with those from the Gbagbo side. Still, if he is too aggressive in pursuing Gbagbo and those close to him, he could plausibly find himself losing vital support in the country's south. This could take place not only among those who voted for Gbagbo, but also among those ambivalent supporters (many of them from Henri Konan Bédié's PDCI party who might have voted as much *against* Gbagbo as *for* Ouattara) who are most interested in restoring a functioning state rather than pursuing what some will see as a settling of political scores.

The US government has growing experience in security sector reform in Africa. There are a variety of approaches to this challenge. At one end of the spectrum is the process undertaken in Liberia, where the army was drawn down to zero, and a new military was

recruited, vetted for human rights abuses, and trained from scratch by contractors hired by the US government. At the other end is the strategy (or non-strategy, perhaps) used in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where members of all the combatant groups were integrated into the national army, most of them being allowed to retain the inflated ranks they had been given (or had given themselves) in the bush while fighting.

The strategy in Côte d'Ivoire will probably have to borrow elements of both these approaches, and may resemble the SSR process undertaken in Guinea, in which the US is already involved. There should be vetting of accused human rights abusers and war criminals from all sides, but it is unrealistic to think that the army will be drawn down to zero. Instead, non-criminal elements from all sides of the conflict should be incorporated, with clear plans to gradually draw down the size of the military over ten to fifteen years on the basis of meritocratic evaluation. In this way, the military can serve a useful function as a temporary social "sponge," soaking up some portion of the most volatile young men who have experience making a living with guns. At the same time, by establishing clear criteria for evaluation, review and promotion (and ultimately for retention in the security forces), SSR could help to begin the process of re-professionalizing a military that has become overly politicized, abusive, and characterized by extremely weak command and control discipline.

Finally, there are several key measures that should be taken to promote **the functioning of the Ouattara government and long-term peace and stability** in Côte d'Ivoire. My first recommendation is that the US government lend significant financial and technical support to ensuring that legislative elections take place in a timely and credible manner. This will begin the important process of supporting a balance of powers, and will give supporters of Gbagbo's FPI party, Henri Konan Bédié's PDCI party and the other political parties in the country a sense that they will have their voices heard in the governance of their country. These elections (like last year's presidential elections) are more than five years overdue, and the 2000 legislative elections were badly flawed and characterized by high levels of violence. The US government should also support upcoming municipal elections. The 2002 municipals are probably the most credible elections the country has known, and new municipal elections will help to reinstate the presence of a single government throughout the territory of Côte d'Ivoire.

Far too often, foreign actors including the U.S. lend too much attention to presidential elections and then walk away precisely at the moment that democratic practice is just getting a toehold in a country with limited democratic experience. Especially in the case of highly contested elections like the recent presidentials in Côte d'Ivoire, it is vitally important for voters supporting all candidates to have the sense not that they are out in the cold for five or more years, but that they still have a role to play as voters and as citizens, and that their votes can lead toward the creation of a vibrant, balanced, and fair system. Most importantly, in such a system, their means of redress are not limited to taking up arms. Many African intellectuals are becoming increasingly cynical about the democratic mantra they sometimes portray as a Eurocentric import that is ill-suited to African realities. I disagree, but the single-minded obsession with presidential elections in fact gives an anti-democratic message, and contributes in very direct ways to creating

autocrats, not democrats. The US Senate and the House of Representatives like legislatures in Europe, Japan, and the emerging BRIC countries all have a role to play by budgeting for electoral support for legislative elections. What might seem an exorbitant amount now will only be dwarfed by the cost of US support to peacekeeping missions when those on the outside decide that insurgency warfare is their only chance of getting into power.

In the same vein, judicial reform is essential. Côte d'Ivoire has many well-qualified lawyers and judges, but the judicial system has become tremendously polarized and politicized. One area where the Ivorian justice system should play a central role is in the creation of improved systems of economic governance and financial accountability. For decades, the cocoa and coffee marketing board served as a political and personal slush fund for the party in power, its elites, and even French politicians, who would receive money from this fund when they had election campaigns in France. To say that these practices created very deleterious patterns that further contributed to the perception of politics as an all-or-nothing competition is an understatement. Over the past decade, the petroleum sector has become more lucrative than cocoa and coffee, and is in much greater need of reform. Initiatives like the World Bank-sponsored Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative offer a valuable model, but such an undertaking should be driven by Ivorian actors. The Ivorian judiciary and the legislature, should play central roles in drafting, enacting, enforcing and adjudicating Ivorian laws that will hold Ivorians to account for managing the country's wealth responsibly and honestly. Given the importance of Ivorian initiative and ownership of this process, this is an area where American support would be best undertaken in a spirit of advice and accompaniment, whereas in the area of security sector reform, the new government may welcome a more robust initiative by a US government that could be seen as a neutral third party.

This third party role is not inconsequential. Especially given the French military role in ousting Laurent Gbagbo, President Ouattara will (or should) be keen to seek out less politically costly sources of support and advice. The US has played this role in a number of other francophone African countries that have tense relations with France, such as Guinea and Rwanda. Provided that US engagement remains truly neutral, such an engagement would be beneficial both to Côte d'Ivoire and to the US, which has already invested heavily in helping Liberia, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire achieve peace and development.

Thank you.