



## MISSION STORIES

## SOCIAL COHESION UNDER THREAT IN THE WEST

*The killings in early June in the area of Duékoué, western Cote d'Ivoire, shocked the Ivorian nation. Weeks later, the effects are still being felt, especially by the thousands of people whom the violence forced from their homes.*

The *Enfant de Jesus* Catholic Mission in Duékoué is full of people. Thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs), most of them elderly or children, have found refuge there following the sad events in the nearby villages of Guitrozon and Petit-Duékoué. “There are times when the mission hosted more than 15,000 displaced people,” says the parish priest, Father Francisco. “They come on their own or are brought by the municipal authorities and there is nothing we can do about that.”

At the entrance to the mission is an open-air market where dried fish, vegetables and local foodstuff are on sale under deplorable hygienic conditions. The vendors are mainly women, trying to earn a few francs so that they can still look after the needs of their households despite being displaced. A few metres further, elderly people lie on old mattresses or mats under tents put up by humanitarian agencies. Groups of men are involved in lively discussions, while the women cook. The menu is almost always the same: *placali* (mashed manioc) and a dark sticky sauce. The young people have little to do so they wander about all day long in groups, chatting, some of them smoking. What do they talk about? “Our future,” says Koulade Basile, who sells cigarettes and sweets. Children try as best they can to fight off boredom: some throw stones at one another and then scatter in all directions.

About 40 people were killed when armed men attacked the villages of Guitrozon and Petit Duékoué on the night of 30 June to 1 July. The killings sparked a mass exodus, which continued as violence spread to nearby villages. Drove of people left their homes and fields and headed for the town of Duékoué, where most sought refuge in the mission. They refused to go back to their villages unless they received guarantees for their safety. The chief of staff of the armed forces of Cote d'Ivoire, the prime minister and the President all visited the area, but that was not enough to reassure all the IDPs. Many refused to return to their villages.

On the day ONUCI-PIO visited the mission in late June, Father Francisco had an important message for some of the displaced people. “For everyone who came from Duékoué neighbourhoods, it’s time to leave the mission. ONUCI [the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire] and the FANCI [National Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire] are doing mixed

patrols as you can see and safety is guaranteed everywhere, Go back to your families and villages. Life is better there,” he said.

Father Francisco was well aware of the problems the IDPs faced at the mission, where sanitation was gradually deteriorating. “Latrines and showers need to be emptied and if we do not do so quickly, I’m afraid there might be a cholera epidemic,” he said.

Awareness campaigns conducted at the mission with a view to allaying fears and preparing the IDPs for their return home have borne fruit. Thousands of IDPs have returned home. Those remaining at the mission were mainly people who had lost everything, according to Gba Victor, a representative of the displaced. “There are specific cases that have to be taken into consideration such as people from Fengolo, Diapahi, Yrozon, Blodi and Gozon; they can’t go back since their houses were burnt down,” Gba explained. “They have nowhere to sleep and, for the moment, they do not have the resources they need to rebuild their homes,” added Gba, who said there were still about 6,000 IDPs at the mission. Those who remained were also afraid to go back because of the insecurity, he explained.

The west has been militarized – extra troops have been sent there and civilian prefects replaced by military ones –with a view to ending the insecurity in the area, but Gba doubted that would work. “These measures concern the towns above all,” said Gba. “No-one will protect us in the villages, only if 10 to 15 soldiers are stationed in each village.” A military source who requested anonymity said that was unlikely since the armed forces did not have enough men to send so many soldiers in the villages.

To help improve the situation, ONUCI has placed emphasis on closer contact with the population: for example, a detachment of Togolese Blue Helmets was sent to Diaye Bernard neighbourhood, also known as Carrefour, a cosmopolitan area inhabited mainly by people from the Guere community, the main ethnic group in the area. Elsewhere, units from other French-speaking countries, such as Benin, have been deployed. Although one militia leader challenged the deployment in Carrefour, area residents have generally welcomed the arrival of peacekeepers with whom they can communicate.

“Today, dialogue has resumed and we hope that the Guere will soon return to their neighbourhood,” said Cheikh Toure of ONUCI’s Human Rights Division, which has been playing a pivotal role in advocacy and mediation in villages affected by the crisis in the west.

While tension has lessened somewhat in the towns as a result of sensitization efforts, people in villages and camps were still being affected by vengeance killings one month after the Duekoue events. Hardly a week went by without reports of at least one death in remote camps, and people there lived in fear attacks.

While adopting strategies to keep out of harm’s way if attacked, they said, they hoped the security measures announced by the head of state would protect them.



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