



## MISSION STORIES

### **Côte d'Ivoire: Water, identity issue and UNOCI's mandate dominate Bouaké forum**

It was a simple, straightforward question that formed the core of the shortest of interventions, but the emotion in her voice transformed it into distress call. “What is (UNOCI's) Human Rights Division doing so that exams can finally be held in the areas under the control of the Forces Nouvelles?” she asked.

Mrs. Sénou was the vice president of the Collectif des ONGs Actives Féminines de Côte d'Ivoire (Collective of Active Women's NGOs in Côte d'Ivoire) but she emphasized in her intervention that she was speaking “as a mother”.

The thorny matter of end-of-cycle examinations, postponed repeatedly by the Ministry of National Education, was one of the main issues raised by participants in a forum that the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) held on 1 October for civil society representatives in the central town of Bouaké, with the participation of United Nations humanitarian agencies.

The forum was among activities planned by UNOCI for its Month of Peace in Côte d'Ivoire, which began on 21 September, on the occasion of the International Day of Peace. It was also the first in a series of meetings, which UNOCI plans to hold with civil society in each of Côte d'Ivoire's 12 regions.

### **Despite various efforts, still no exams in FN-controlled areas**

Stressing that tens of thousands of children in Central and Northern Côte d'Ivoire had not been able to sit national examinations for over two years, some civil society representatives did not hesitate to use the term “cultural genocide”. “What are you doing to enable our children to enjoy this fundamental right?” they basically wanted to know.

Their counterparts spoke of the efforts they had made. ONUCI said it had promised the government to guarantee the security of examination sites and transport examination materials. Others promised funding when the Ministry of Education said it did not have enough money. Humanitarian NGOs and agencies, including the UN Children's Fund, said they had met with top government authorities but that their efforts had not yet borne fruit.

### **From water shortages to the identity issue**

Civil society representatives also used the Bouaké Forum to bring up other issues of crucial importance to them.

Some were immediate, such as a water shortage that constituted a major source of concern for inhabitants of the town as well as humanitarian agencies. The latter explained what they had done to alleviate it. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), for example, had installed water bladders in four of Bouaké's six maternity clinics, and they were filled each week by UNOCI's Moroccan contingent.

Other concerns were more chronic, including the identity issue. Many inhabitants of the region only have expired identity cards. Others have none at all. This situation, participants said, exposed them to various abuses whenever they traveled southward. "They told us 'as long as we have not begun to make the new identity cards, the old identity cards are valid, even if the date has expired', but they [the security forces] pick up the identity cards, put them on the table, then they say 5,000! 5,000! [CFA francs]," said one imam who explained that he had stopped traveling for fear of the harassment.

### **The perception of UNOCI**

A major discussion point was the perception that the United Nations, particularly UNOCI, was not firm enough in Côte d'Ivoire and that it was even powerless. This perception, civil society representatives said, spawned a feeling of insecurity. "I suggest that UNOCI first changes its mandate," one man said. "UNOCI's mandate should go from one of monitoring the cease-fire to a peace-enforcement mandate," another said.

The Bouaké Forum gave UNOCI an opportunity to address certain misunderstandings. The mission does not take sides, the UNOCI representatives stressed when the mission's impartiality was questioned. It does not consider politicians its sole interlocutors, and the fora with civil society are evidence of this, was the response to another question. Nor is UNOCI here to deliver a ready-made peace to Ivorians: they, civil society in particular, needed to be more involved in the search for solutions, and they needed to demand of their politicians that they work in that direction.

### **Involve the traditional chiefs**

One participant proposed that UNOCI ensure that the customary authorities are more involved in the search for solutions to the crisis. "We need to turn back to our traditional chiefs to be able to make reconciliation a success," he recommended.

Another suggestion was for UNOCI to organise a meeting in the zone of confidence between civil society groups in governmental and FN areas. "Direct contact must be created between civil society represented in the governmental zone and civil society represented here (in Bouaké)," one participant said. "Something has to be organised in the zone of confidence so that the populations that are agitated and take to the streets here and over there can sit and talk."



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