



Cote d'Ivoire: ONUCI Forum for Civil Society moves to Daloa

Neither the distance, nor the torrential rain that pounded Daloa and turned its roads into mud banks prevented the inhabitants of the west-central town and surrounding areas from flocking to the Banbatt Engineering Compound to exchange ideas with UN officials on the latter's role and action in the search for a solution to the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire.

It was Friday 14 October and the occasion was the second forum of the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) for civil society, the first one having been held in the central town of Bouaké. There was a warm, convivial atmosphere in the Banbatt compound, located some distance from the town centre. A main attraction was a music group, whose mainly Bangladeshi members sang in French and local languages to rhythms ranging from slow-soft to rock-'n-roll. Not to be outdone, one of the group's Ivorian singers rendered songs in Bengali.

A frank, honest dialogue

Political, administrative, religious and customary authorities looked on as the traditional chief of Daloa blessed the meeting while pouring libations and invoking the Gods of the rain. A few seconds later, the powerful downpour shrank to a drizzle, gradually making way for radiant sunshine.

The some 500 participants listened attentively as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's message for International Peace Day was broadcast, followed by an address by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Côte d'Ivoire, Mr. Pierre Schori, read by ONUCI's Director of Public Information, Ms Margherita Amodeo. In her opening remarks, Ms Amodeo called for a frank, honest and direct exchange of ideas.

Recalling the role and functions of UNOCI, she spoke reassuringly about the mission's presence in the area. "The West is one of the regions that have suffered the most from the crisis," she said. "We are by your side." Expressing appreciation for the work done by UN agencies in the field, she called for complementarity and a synergy of all energies.

"No-one can give peace to the Ivorians »

The host of the ceremony, Brigadier Zahurul Alam, who commands ONUCI's Sector West, gave an idea of the activities of the UNOCI Bangladeshi battalion stationed in the zone. The tasks of the ONUCI force include monitoring all parties, in keeping with the

cease-fire agreement, supporting the Government of National Reconciliation in the area of disarmament and making sure the embargo on the supply of weapons to Côte d'Ivoire is respected, he said.

“No-one in this country can give peace to the Ivorians,” he insisted. “It is in your hands and it is up to the population of Côte d'Ivoire to restore peace to the country. We, ONUCI, can only provide support.”

The UNOCI force based in Daloa has been providing medical assistance to the population, which hotel manager Cyprien Bouabré described as beneficial. “UNOCI organises free vaccination sessions, » he said. « My wife and daughter go there regularly and I encourage my friends and colleagues to go, too.”

The representatives of UNOCI's divisions – military and civilian – and UN humanitarian agencies presented the roles and actions of their units before fielding questions from the floor. These focused on disarmament, human rights, the role of non-governmental organisations in the peace process and the exact role of UNOCI in Côte d'Ivoire.

Traditional chiefs, an interface between the authorities and the youth

Digbeu Marcellin, a traditional chief, lauded the holding of the forum and said he was happy with the discussion. “This kind of meeting is healthy because the young people ask us questions and since we are the interface between them and the international community, we try and calm them down when they get angry,” he said. “I've been given satisfactory answers, but I still have some concerns which I shall relay to the mission's [ONUCI's] services in Daloa. »

Pay special attention to women – women's NGO tells UNOCI

The president of the Daloa chapter of the Association of Spouses of Gendarmes urged UNOCI to pay attention to women's needs. “I am optimistic,” she said, “but I'd like to ask for a special programme for the biggest victims, who are the women of this country.”

Apart from a few diatribes against France, the tone of the debate was even and the participants took their leave in the late afternoon under a still-radiant sky, some of them laden with prizes won at a quiz on the United Nations, organised on the spot by ONUCI's radio.

The Daloa Forum, like that of Bouake, was part of ONUCI's Month for Peace in Côte d'Ivoire, which started on International Day of Peace, 21 September. It ended in the Ivorian capital, Yamoussoukro, on 24 October, the 60th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations, with a colloquium on the role of female intellectuals in the development of a culture of peace, followed by a peace concert.





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