



VIDEOCONFERENCE BY SECRETARY-GENERAL'S SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR CÔTE D'IVOIRE

The Secretary-General's Special Representative for Côte d'Ivoire, Choi Young-jin, said today that the political impasse in the country was continuing, that outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo was still refusing to relinquish power following his request for a power-sharing arrangement with newly elected President Alassane Ouattara, and that there was "no common ground for dialogue".

Speaking to correspondents at Headquarters via videolink, in the wake of repeated acts of aggression against the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), Mr. Choi said a military intervention in Côte d'Ivoire was still being considered and that a meeting of defence staff of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was under way in Bamako, Mali. The goal of such an operation would be to oust Mr. Gbagbo — who, Mr. Choi noted, had lost the Ivorian election by a more than an eight point margin.

"They may make some decisions," said Mr. Choi of the Bamako meeting. But if and when an operation took place depended on many factors, including Mr. Gbagbo's ability to pay his 60,000 troops and 140,000 civil servants. If those payments were not made, the crisis might end on its own. Additionally, Mr. Choi noted that yet another option for ending the crisis would be significant action by the West African Economic and Monetary Union — which controlled the Ivorian currency and was putting pressure on Mr. Gbagbo's finances.

Tens of thousands remained internally displaced in western Côte d'Ivoire as regional authorities — led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union — considered their next move, said Mr. Choi. Additionally, more than 247 people had reportedly been killed, and human rights violations continued to be recorded.

Mr. Choi explained that the political polarization of ethnic groups, which had caused minority populations in both the north and south of the country to flee, was a main reason for the high number of internally displaced persons. Mr. Ouattara — who was currently holed up in Abidjan's Golf Hotel as Mr. Gbagbo retained power — was largely supported by groups in the north of Côte d'Ivoire. Mr. Gbagbo was popular in the country's south. But while the post-electoral conflicts were ethnic in nature, there was "equilibrium" between the involved parties. "This is not a one-sided ethnic harassment or cleansing," he said.

Responding to a question about the humanitarian situation of the displaced persons in Côte d'Ivoire, Mr. Choi noted the relative wealth of the "closely-knit" country, and said that conditions for the displaced were "not as bad as similar cases in other countries". Many residents had sought refuge with relatives. The United Nations was nonetheless providing food and medicine to displaced persons and would soon be issuing a humanitarian appeal from Geneva, he added.



In response to a question about the Golf Hotel blockade, Mr. Choi noted that, as the United Nations was providing both food and security to Mr. Ouattara and the others inside the hotel, the situation lacked great urgency. Nonetheless, the impasse was “a cat and mouse game” and the situation was deteriorating. “Something must be done” he said. “It cannot go on like this”.

In that vein, a study was being completed on ways to guarantee “at least partial freedom of movement” at the Golf Hotel, said Mr. Choi. Its finding would be revealed soon.

Responding to several questions related to the presidential election — and, in particular, to the Russian Security Council delegate’s concerns about the United Nations role in deciding the results — Mr. Choi stressed several times that he had received no pressure from either candidate’s camp. The United Nations electoral authorities performed impartial “due diligence” after reports of voting irregularities, and were confident that Mr. Ouattara had emerged victorious.

While the situation was “very, very hostile”, said Mr. Choi, the spirit of United Nations forces in Côte d'Ivoire remained high. Peacekeeping troops continued to carry out their mandate of protecting civilians and ensuring freedom of movement as best as possible. Several initiatives related to freedom of movement were being examined and would soon be implemented.

Noting that some 18 African countries would be holding elections in 2011, he asked: “if we let the incumbent cling to power... what kind of message are we going to give to the Ivorian people and the African people”?

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