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Crisis in Côte d'Ivoire: Africa's Time to Step Up?

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For weeks, the winner of Côte d'Ivoire's presidential election, Alassane Ouattara, has barricaded himself in a hotel. Meanwhile, Ouattara's opponent, incumbent Laurent Gbagbo, clings to office despite demands from the African Union and other governments to relinquish power.

The United States has emphasized that this crisis is an African issue and that it is the responsibility of African leaders to stabilize the political climate. While the U.S. has offered its assistance and support by implementing financial and travel sanctions on Gbagbo, his family, and his inner circle, the Administration is right to let African leaders lead in resolving this problem.

November Election. November's presidential election follows a turbulent road in Côte d'Ivoire's past. In 2002, a failed coup resulted in a civil war splitting the country in half. In 2007, President Gbagbo and Guillaume Soro, leader of the rebel forces, signed the Ouagadougou Political Agreement, a plan meant to move the country toward political stability. Under the agreement, the United Nations was invited to oversee the peace process, and a U.N. peacekeeping force remains there today.

Despite Gbagbo's term ending in 2005, elections have repeatedly been delayed until recently. After the second round of the election was held, Ouattara was declared the winner by the independent Electoral Commission. The government's Constitutional Council quickly declared these results null and void and announced Gbagbo the winner with 51 percent of the vote.¹ The U.N. quickly recertified Ouattara's

victory by 8.2 percentage points. With each passing day, the possibility of a major humanitarian crisis increases.

U.S. Response. The U.S. and its European partners have responded to the crisis through financial and travel sanctions. The U.S. first imposed travel sanctions on persons supporting or benefiting from Gbagbo's efforts to retain power. These were followed by the Department of the Treasury's financial sanctions against Gbagbo, his wife, and his senior advisors. President Obama has also backed Ouattara's call for the ban on cocoa exports, the country's leading source of income. Denying Gbagbo the financial resources derived from the export of cocoa will diminish his ability to buy support from other political actors and the military.²

These actions appear to be working. According to Phillip Carter, U.S. Ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire, Gbagbo has resorted to "pirating" by extorting money from companies to pay the salaries of the military and civil service. He states, "There is an effort for [Gbagbo] to marshal as many resources as he can to get money together to meet his payroll probably to acquire additional weapons, to keep his fight going."³ As funding dries up, so do Gbagbo's options.

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What Africa Is Doing. From his compound in l'Hôtel du Golf, Ouattara has attempted modest efforts to claim the presidency. In addition to calling for a ban by international leaders on Ivorian cocoa, Ouattara also took control of the West Africa Central Bank, thereby claiming state reserves once controlled by Gbagbo. Private companies have also followed calls for a boycott on payment of taxes during the crisis—money that would otherwise be available to Gbagbo.⁴

Ouattara has also received broad support by African leaders. The African Union (AU) has sent former South African President Thabo Mbeki, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanko, and Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga to broker an agreement. Those attempts failed, as did meetings conducted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and efforts by other African leaders. The AU's most recent team of mediators' departure this week portends yet another failed attempt to resolve the crisis. As garbage fills the streets of Abidjan, power is shut off, and people are unable to access funds, Côte d'Ivoire could quickly see a new host of problems derive from the political instability, including increased violence, financial failure, and health issues.

What the U.S. Should Do. While the U.S. and the international community have an interest in preserving peace and supporting the rightful leader of Côte d'Ivoire, this matter is a prime opportunity for African leaders to assume responsibility for holding each other to the standards they have set for themselves in the AU's Charter on Democracy, Election and Governance.⁵ As President Obama emphasized during his trip to Ghana, Africans must take responsibility for their future. The Administration has consistently emphasized this principle by not-

ing that the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire is an African issue. According to Ambassador Carter, “we stand with ECOWAS,” and “we work with our African partners.” The U.S. should continue to follow its current role in the crisis by doing the following:

- *Lend a hand rather than taking charge.* U.S. leverage and influence is limited. International sanctions against Gbagbo appear to be working. Gbagbo's funds are quickly diminishing, and he will not be able to continue funding his resistance for much longer. The U.S. should continue to levy sanctions on his supporters and assist African institutions where applicable.
- *Support the election results, not individuals.* While President Ouattara is the rightful victor of the election, the U.S. should demand that once in power, Ouattara practice good governance. Too often the international community rallies behind a political leader promising democracy, an end to corruption, and a better way of life only to become a tyrant. Ouattara must earn and maintain support from the United States through his actions, demonstrating good governance and economic reforms necessary for Côte d'Ivoire to recover from its lengthy crisis.
- *Resist power-sharing.* The idea of a power-sharing agreement has been raised. This solution has been tried in Kenya and Zimbabwe, and while it has decreased internal violence, it has not resolved polarizing political divisions.

An African Opportunity. The crisis in Côte d'Ivoire is an opportunity for African institutions to step up and hold political leaders accountable for poor governance. To the extent that the U.S. can support their efforts, the Obama Administration should do so. African governments are fiercely pro-

1. Phillip Carter III, “Special Briefing on the Current Situation in Côte d'Ivoire,” February 4, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/spbr/2011/156036.htm> (February 10, 2011).
2. U.S. Department of State, “Daily Press Briefing,” January 24, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/01/155163.htm> (February 10, 2011).
3. Carter, “Special Briefing.”
4. John James, “Will Deadlock See Ivory Coast Shut Up Shop?” BBC, February 2, 2011, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-12346944> (February 10, 2011).
5. African Union, African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, 2007, at <http://www.un.org/democracyfund/Docs/AfricanCharterDemocracy.pdf> (February 10, 2011).

tective of their sovereignty and resent interference from countries outside the region. Considering their history, this is understandable.

But repeated inability by African governments to deal internally with situations like Côte d'Ivoire or otherwise tolerate tyrants has given past interventions justification. Resolving the situation in Côte d'Ivoire would signal that Africa has taken another step toward making electoral democracy the only option in Africa.

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