



Meeting Summary

The Evolution of the Peace Process in Côte d'Ivoire

Guillaume Soro, Prime Minister of Côte d'Ivoire

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Summary

Before talking on the Côte d'Ivoire, I want to say that it is a country in West Africa which, like many other countries around the world, has experienced war. The origins of the war have been due to social and economic hardships. I should add that it is a former French colony, and that independence was gained on 7 August, 1960. For this war, as mentioned earlier, was started because of the economic imbalance between the north and the south. The south, as you know, is in a forested zone with many cash crops including cocoa and coffee.

My presentation today would not be complete if I did not mention that the political life of Côte d'Ivoire has been marked by our first President, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, whose death in 1993 heralded many political scuffles over time.

One can consider that when you couple an economic crisis with social difficulties, there are favourable grounds for war. On top of this we had political tensions which led to the situation which we faced, and so 19 September, 2002 marked the beginning of a revolt and war in Côte d'Ivoire. Obviously, the international community mobilised itself around Côte d'Ivoire not only to bring back peace but to give our country a second chance. But obviously the major turning point in this process was the direct dialogue initiated by the Head of State which meant that the two warring factions agreed to the Ouagadougou Agreement.

What is so striking about this agreement – there have been previous attempts in Pretoria and in Paris – is that it was the Ivorians themselves who decided to engage, and initiate a process which would lead to peace. Since the Ouagadougou Agreement, I have been appointed Prime Minister, and it has been two years since Côte d'Ivoire has made a lot of progress towards normality and peace. This means the restoration of the state's authority over the entire territory. The UN has also lowered its Security Grade – previously it was at level 5, but it is now at level 2.

This means that today, in Côte d'Ivoire we have a clearer view of the democratic process and we have established the next presidential election date as 29 November, 2009. Therefore, the election will represent a major democratic step in that it will legitimise political institutions and consolidate the peace efforts which have been underway for some time now.

From this perspective, the date of 29 November 2009 is realistic. We now have 6 million possible voters who have been registered and registration for ID cards is also going ahead. I understand that when one speaks of elections in Africa, it sparks genuine fears – look to the examples of Kenya and Zimbabwe. But prospects for Côte d'Ivoire are good. This is especially because Ivorians themselves who have pushed this forward. Consultation and dialogue are elements which will make it a serene election, open to all.

Now to say a few words about the economic situation: I'd like to say that since 31 March 2009, Côte d'Ivoire has successfully reached the point of decision for very poor and highly indebted countries (HIPC). Côte d'Ivoire has been accepted within the facility for reduction of poverty and the promotion of growth. This means that the World Bank and the IMF understand that Côte d'Ivoire is on the road to recovery. Côte d'Ivoire has made a return to the financial sphere and a more stable environment.

It is on these words of hope that I will end this intervention, and invite you to share my optimism for the end of the crisis and a return of our country which matters for West Africa, and Africa as a whole.

Q&A Session

Q: Will the process of registration and voter identification be completed by the time of the election? Will 100% of Ivorians have been registered?

A: There are 20 million inhabitants of Côte d'Ivoire, 8 million of whom we are concerned with registering. Out of these, we must ensure that those of 18 years and older are retained. The 6 million who have been registered represent 70% of the electorate, and they were registered within a six month

period. We have one month to register the remaining 30%, and we hope to do this by the end of June.

I would like you to recall that within this 8 million are people between the ages of 16 and 18 years of age who are not voters. They are part of the scheme for the deliverance of the national ID card, which is also taking place alongside voter registration. Therefore, our estimate for those who are eligible to vote is between 6 and 7 million, so we are close to reaching our target.

Q: I thank and congratulate the Prime Minister for speaking today. We represent the same generation and have suffered under the same circumstances. We have heard today about the registration of Ivorians at home and abroad. How do we protect the date of 29 November, and ensure that this is when the election will happen?

A: The date of 29 November was given by our independent Electoral Commission, which assessed the feasibility of the elections. I agree with you, in the past we have had instances where dates are given and not implemented. The difference between 29 November this year and 30 November 2008 is that we now have 70% of the electoral population registered. We can be assured where the voting rights of those abroad - around 70,000 Ivorians - are concerned the state of Côte d'Ivoire has all the tools to ensure that every citizen wishing to vote can do so.

Q: We have heard about the agreement, but we are told that there are not sufficient means to carry the process through. How can the Prime Minister guarantee that financial means are made available?

A: Our generation looks clearly at its credibility and wishes to safeguard it. To the question of whether Côte d'Ivoire is rich or poor: one cannot deny that we have resources, but we are indebted. There is 6 trillion CFA francs of debt, and a quarter of the budget goes towards servicing this debt. Structural problems will be solved in due time. Financing this project depends on our international partners, who have now set up a basket fund. 20 billion CFA francs have been made available for the elections. At our last meeting in

Ouagadougou, the Electoral Commission asked for 5 billion CFA, which was put at its disposal. This will put us in a more comfortable position.

Meeting the requirements for the poverty reduction facility has also put us in a more comfortable financial position, so let me reassure you, everything is being done.

Q: I'd like to ask you to speak for a while not just on the technicalities of organising the election, but also on the issue of disarmament. How will you combat the small armed groups, particularly those who are levying taxes from civilians?

A: On this issue, I'd like to say that we have made great progress. 8,000 men from both armies are in the territory now. There are 4,000 from the loyalist army and 4,000 from the *Forces Nouvelles* army. They are the ones who will safeguard the territory. These men will be reinforced by UN troops currently in Côte d'Ivoire in order to ensure that the rights of citizens are preserved during the election process.

You also mention taxes and levies in some areas. This is a process which is ongoing. We are speaking of having one state account in which all taxes and levies are deposited.

Q: Can you clarify your position as former leader of *les Forces Nouvelles*? It was an armed organisation, not a political party. How do you envisage what will happen in the elections, given that there is already the RDR party which finds its base in the north? The perception is that whichever group had power concentrated would head the state of Côte d'Ivoire today.

A: I would like to say that we mutually supported each other, so my feeling is that we would have a similar political fate, although there are some differences. Armed groups have two options. One is reform, and the other is integration.

As far as I am concerned, I am not a candidate for these elections. I see myself as a referee. My responsibility is to win the trust of all the different camps. Democracy is when rightly conducted elections lead to a winner who is in charge of governing, but some people have a problem with this. My personal feeling is that after a crisis, there should be a coalition. In 2000 when President Gbagbo defeated Guei, it was difficult, so the President decided that all parties should be represented. It is important for us to remain in the framework of political dialogue.

Q: What about the private sector? How does it operate in Côte d'Ivoire, what are your future policies towards it and what assurances can you give to businesses looking to invest?

A: The government has successfully transformed the macroeconomic environment, and we now have partnerships with the International Investment Bank, Club de Paris, World Bank and the IMF. The financial, political and legal environments are healthy and fit for successful visits by investors. We make up 40% of the monetary union, and there is infrastructure: airports and ports etc. The port of Abidjan is the second most important after Durban.

Q: Returning to the issue of disarmament, do you have a timetable for it? Can you ensure that the *Forces Nouvelles* will be disarmed before the election?

A: 26 May this year is the date when the question of disarmament and the transfer of power will be dealt with. The process was supposed to begin tomorrow, but as I have engagements here in London, the process will begin on my return to Côte d'Ivoire.

I modestly say that I believe I have the authority to encourage my group to give up its arms.

Q: You haven't told us why you took up arms in the first place in 2002. Although I am optimistic regarding the disarmament process, I would like to know where you see your own political future after the process.

A: There are times in the life of a nation when major contradictions appear. In September 2002, there was a rebellion because of concerns about the issues of citizenship and democracy.

I am a believer in taking life one step at a time, and for the time being I am content as Prime Minister. I will leave it to the future to see what may happen.

Q: Will *les Forces Nouvelles* be transformed into a political party before or after the election?

A: Force Nouvelle will absolutely not become a political party. In French we say that being in a political party makes you a partisan, but as I said before, my role is to be the referee.

Concluding Remarks

We are here in London for the promotion of cocoa, an important cash crop. Côte d'Ivoire is an important regional player, and will return to normality and peace. We hope to rely on your support in the wish that Côte d'Ivoire will return to being a nation of development.