Côte d’Ivoire: Marking time
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Following the application of severe pressure by the international donors on whom the Ivorian government remains so dependent for support in its efforts to reunite and rebuild a country divided effectively in two since the mutiny of 2002 and the civil war that ensued, agreement was eventually reached between Prime Minister Charles Konan Banny and President Lauren Gbagbo that the contentious processes of identification of Ivorian citizens, voter registration and disarmament should occur simultaneously.

The initial steps took the form of a modest pilot scheme carried out in seven locations. Yet, although Gbagbo agreed to these steps, he made no secret of his distrust of the rebels, saying that massive fraud would take place in those areas under their control so as to allow immigrants to obtain certificates of nationality and voting cards. As the pilot

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scheme was about to begin, the pro-Gbagbo press mounted virulent attacks on Alassane Ouattara, leader of the opposition Rassemblement des républicains (RDR), who obviously stood to gain most from this registration exercise in the north.

Prime Minister Banny also came under heavy criticism from leading Gbagbo hardliners, who accused him of being the UN and France’s puppet. These inflammatory statements appeared to give the lie to claims that political trust had been re-established between the principal parties.

The pilot scheme was launched at seven sites, with considerable fanfare, but little administrative preparation. Official sources were reticent about the initial impact of the scheme, but anecdotal accounts spoke of an absence of public response in at least two of the sites, beyond protest demonstrations by the ‘Young Patriots’ loyal to President Gbagbo, who want the elections to be held according to the 2000 voters’ roll simply updated to include those citizens who have since come of age. This, they know, would effectively exclude the bulk of Gbagbo’s principal rivals’ supporters, whose contested claims to citizenship, denied in the census of 1998, lie at the heart of the domestic conflict.

Banny’s expressed conviction that he and President Gbagbo are working as a team in promoting the agreed twin processes of voter registration and disarmament of the rival armed groups is a polite fiction. The president and his leading supporters have made every effort to distance themselves from Banny’s attempts to provide some impetus, expressing the conviction that it is impossible to continue implementing the political components of the accords until the rebel forces have been disarmed and national authority restored over the entire country.

In the meantime progress on disarmament and demobilisation has been dilatory, which is hardly surprising given the manifest absence of mutual trust on either side of the ceasefire line.

The obstructions noted in the pilot scheme were repeated on a more violent scale once the identification process went into full swing.

On 14 July, the president of the ruling party, Pascal Affi N’Guessan, called upon young militants to halt the registration exercises by all means possible, an appeal calculated to dissuade the rebels from beginning the disarmament process. The allegation was made that the identification and registration process would be exploited by the opposition in the rebel-held north to enfranchise foreigners in that part of the country.

Two days later President Gbagbo himself delivered a vitriolic speech accusing the UN of pro-rebel bias and reminded the peacekeepers that they were in the country only at his government’s invitation. Beyond marking a singular change of presidential sentiment
since Kofi Annan’s visit on 5 July, when Gbagbo had been at pains to avoid any anti-UN demonstrations, this seemed to signal that, in the event of the elections not occurring before the end of October as planned, the president would feel himself free to continue in office regardless of the decisions of the international community.

The result of this incitement, quite predictably, was the violent attempt by the Young Patriots to prevent the registration exercise in the territory under government control. The UN Security Council issued a stern warning that steps would be taken against anyone attempting to derail the process, but the threat of sanctions probably carries little weight with those concerned.

The presidential camp might well feel that it could make some concessions at this juncture, before moving the point of contention to some other issue, or by arguing about technicalities. Whatever the case, the thrust of Banny’s initiative is in danger of being diverted, and the sense of mild optimism that was beginning to manifest itself is dissipating. Gbagbo’s party has now begun making overtures to the southern members of the opposition alliance, probably hoping to alarm them sufficiently about the handling of the registration process in the north to secure their compliance in a campaign of obstruction.

Kofi Annan has said that a UN mission will revisit Côte d’Ivoire in September, at which time a decision will be made as to whether the October elections can take place. By the time this article appears in print, it should be evident that the necessary preparations for a presidential poll are nowhere near completion, and that a free and fair election even in 2007 would be an accomplishment in itself. What the UN will then decide to do about extending the presidential term should present that body with one of its trickier problems.