Briefing

A Tale of Two Councils – The African Union, the United Nations and the Protection of Civilians in Côte d’Ivoire

Walter Lotze
Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
walter.lotze@gmail.com

On 28 November 2010 Ivorians went to the polls to elect their first full president following a four-year transition period brought about by the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement of 2007. Ivorians were hopeful that finally, given the chance to express their political ambitions through a process of public participation, a history of decades of conflict could be left behind once and for all. The primary contenders in the electoral race were incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo, already in power for ten years, and his opposition challenger, Alassane Ouattara. While the elections proceeded in a relatively calm manner, Côte d’Ivoire rapidly descended into vicious post-electoral violence, witnessing the wide-spread targeting of and abuses against the civilian population, the commission of human rights violations on a large scale, and, possibly, the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity. As quickly as the violence erupted, it was brought to an end by the middle of April 2011, when Gbagbo was deposed.

The role of the international community was critical to bringing an end to the conflict, and in particular, halting violations against the civilian population. Yet curiously, the roles played, and approaches adopted, by the United Nations (UN) Security Council and the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council, two bodies mandated to deal with peace and security matters in Africa, were quite distinct. Indeed, while the protection of the civilian population in Côte d’Ivoire seems to have been a primary motivation underpinning decision-making in both Councils, the responses formulated by the...
two Councils when developing strategies to bring to an end gross violations of human rights appear to have differed quite sharply from one another.

Developing Initial Responses to a Political Crisis

As Côte d’Ivoire geared up for the presidential elections on 28 November, many in the international community were convinced that the elections would proceed smoothly, and would bring a successful end to the Ouagadougou peace process. Yet others, correctly, feared that the elections could bring about a return to violent conflict in the country. Anticipating that the elections might not go off without a hitch, the UN Security Council on 24 November decided to redeploy three infantry companies and an aviation unit comprised of two military utility helicopters from the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to the United Nations Operation in Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI), anticipating that the mission in Côte d’Ivoire might require the ability to project additional force should the post-electoral period prove problematic.

While election day on 28 November proceeded in a relatively calm manner, tensions soon erupted when the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) declared Alassane Ouattara the winner of the elections. Incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo refused to acknowledge the electoral results, and instead had the Constitutional Court back him and swear him in as president of Côte d’Ivoire once more. Ouattara and his entourage, based at a coastal hotel in Abidjan, soon found themselves surrounded by a military blockade, and cut off from the rest of the world.

In its initial meetings, the AU Peace and Security Council was uncertain of how to act, and Côte d’Ivoire’s presence in the Council (Côte d’Ivoire had commenced a two-year term on the Council on 1 April 2010) did not make it easy for the Council to develop a position. While the Council on 4 December urged all parties to respect the outcomes of the presidential elections, as proclaimed by the Independent Electoral Commission, it did not go much further in proclaiming itself on events in Côte d’Ivoire. Instead, the Council waited for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to articulate its position. ECOWAS, meeting during an Extraordinary Session of Heads of State and Government in Abuja on 7 December, recognised the

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2 The other members of the Council at the time were Benin, Burundi, Chad, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Djibouti, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe.