

Cocoa plundered by Ivorian warlords

NEW YORK, USA: - Warlord military commanders in Ivory Coast are making hundreds of millions of dollars by plundering the country's exports of cocoa and other resources, according to a report by UN experts.



Forces Nouvelles militia leaders who took the side of President Alassane Ouattara in his showdown with Laurent Gbagbo in 2011 are part of a "military-economic network" taking advantage of "rampant" smuggling and parallel tax networks, said the report.

The former rebel leaders have been integrated into the national army "without the commanders having abandoned their warlord-style predatory economic activities, which they have now extended to the entire Ivorian territory," said the report.

Ivory Coast is the world's leading cocoa producer, but about 153,000 tons out of the 1.47m tons produced in the 2011-12 season was lost to smugglers, according to government figures quoted by the UN sanctions experts.

The lost cocoa was valued at about US\$400m and much of it went through Ghana, the experts said.

A third of the country's 450,000 tons of cashew nuts, worth about US\$130m, was lost to the smugglers, added the report. Ivory Coast is the world's second biggest producer of these nuts.

The experts also raised doubts about trade in gold, diamonds, cotton, timber and other resources in the report for the UN Security Council, which renewed the mandate of the experts last week.

The report said the balance of power after the 2011 crisis and the security situation in the West African nation was "precarious."

UN and French forces helped dislodge then-president Gbagbo when he refused to relinquish power after a presidential election won by Ouattara.

International Criminal Court charges

Gbagbo is now at the International Criminal Court in The Hague facing charges of crimes against humanity during the unrest.

As the Ivorian economy rapidly rebounded from the crisis in 2012, "the political and economic networks linked to former Forces Nouvelles combatants strengthened, with former zone commanders having a notorious record of violations of international humanitarian law" taken into the national army.

The report named Martin Kouakou Fofie, who has been on a UN sanctions list since 2006, Ouattara Issiaka, Herve Toure, Kone Zakaria and Cherif Ousmane as all being in "strategic command posts" with significant amounts of weapons.

Ivory Coast is under an international arms embargo, but the report said the experts "cannot exclude the prospect that these commanders remain actively interested in acquiring weapons and related materiel."

The experts said they had information that weapons had moved from Ivory Coast to neighboring Mali and Niger.

Their report also said that while Forces Nouvelles dominates the military, Liberian mercenaries and Gbagbo activists in Ghana still "remain a security threat".

Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) boycotted recent local elections. It is demanding that the ICC's charges against him be dropped.

"The pro-Gbagbo radical wing is a political and military structure that receives financial support from former representatives of the Gbagbo regime and whose objective is to change the government through violent acts in order to regain the power and influence" lost in 2011, said the UN report.

The experts said they were investigating "connections between supporters of the previous regime and the financing of insurgent activity using profits from sales of diamonds and gold."

They called on the Ivory Coast government to "take all measures necessary to curb the large-scale smuggling of cocoa, cashew nuts, cotton, timber, gold and all commodities illegally exiting or entering the country, in particular across the borders with Ghana."

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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