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Côte d'Ivoire

Côte d'Ivoire is a leading economy in West Africa and an increasingly important U.S. security partner amid Islamist insurgencies, military takeovers, and growing Russian activity in the region. President Alassane Ouattara, in office since 2011, has overseen an influx of foreign investment and strong economic growth. In 2020, however, Ouattara's decision to seek a third term despite term limits sparked clashes and recalled a conflict that divided the country from 2002-2011. Côte d'Ivoire also has faced a mounting threat of extremist spillover from Burkina Faso and Mali (see Fig. 1). Militants have staged nearly two dozen attacks in Côte d'Ivoire's north since 2020. The Biden Administration has named Côte d'Ivoire as a partner under the Global Fragility Act of 2019 (Title V, Div. J, P.L. 116-94), as part of the Coastal West Africa sub-region. Funding and oversight of GFA engagement are emergent issues for Congress.

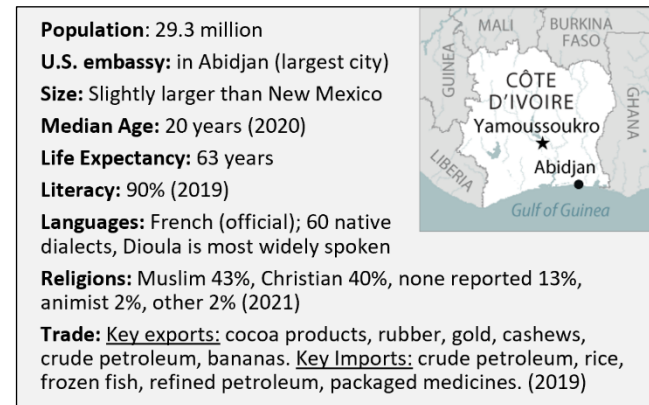
Politics

Côte d'Ivoire experienced decades of stability and relative prosperity after independence from France in 1960. In the 1990s, tensions mounted over identity and socioeconomic power, drawing on predominately Christian southerners' resentment at perceived displacement by mainly Muslim northerners and foreign migrants, and northerners' anger at alleged marginalization by southerners and the state. Conflict broke out in 2002, and a rebel coalition took control of the north. U.N. peacekeepers and French troops deployed to monitor a ceasefire, and a regionally-brokered peace accord followed in 2007. In 2010 elections, Ouattara, a northerner and ex-prime minister, defeated incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo, a proponent of anti-northern rhetoric. The United States recognized the result. Gbagbo refused to concede, and pro-Ouattara rebels moved southward, leading to a brief war that killed some 3,000 people. In early 2011, rebel forces, backed by French and U.N. troops, arrested Gbagbo, and Ouattara took office. Gbagbo was transferred to the International Criminal Court on charges related to the war; he was acquitted in 2019.

Ouattara's administration brought greater stability, buoyed by robust economic growth, but his decision to seek a third term in 2020 triggered unrest. With top opposition figures boycotting or barred from the race, Ouattara won easily. Political clashes killed a reported 85 people. Ouattara has since moved to reduce tensions. A political dialogue paved the way for peaceful National Assembly elections in 2021, in which Ouattara's party took 58% of seats. Ouattara later allowed Gbagbo to return to Côte d'Ivoire after his ICC acquittal. In 2022, he met Gbagbo and Henri Konan Bédié, another former president, turned leader of the largest opposition party, in a reconciliation effort. Côte d'Ivoire's outlook is likely to hinge, in part, on how parties manage a transfer of authority to the next generation as Ouattara (age

81), Gbagbo (78), and Bédié (died in 2023, at 89) exit the scene. The next presidential election is slated for 2025.

Figure 1. Côte d'Ivoire at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Information from CIA World Factbook except figures on religious demography, which are drawn from Ivoirian Ministry of Planning and Development, General Census 2021.

Foreign Affairs. Côte d'Ivoire maintains close ties with France, which has faced diplomatic strains and growing anti-French sentiment in the neighboring Sahel region. The two countries have longstanding trade and investment ties, and hundreds of French soldiers are deployed to Côte d'Ivoire to support regional operations. In 2021, Ivoirian and French officials inaugurated a counterterrorism training facility, the International Academy for the Fight Against Terrorism (AILCT), near Abidjan, the commercial capital.

China is among Côte d'Ivoire's top trading partners, and has financed power, transportation, and other infrastructure projects in the country. Ties with Russia are more limited. Uncommon among African countries, Côte d'Ivoire voted with the United States on all six U.N. General Assembly resolutions related to the Russia-Ukraine war. Surveys have indicated high approval ratings of Russia among Ivoirians however, and Russian-backed social media propaganda operations reportedly have targeted Côte d'Ivoire.

Security Conditions

Côte d'Ivoire recorded its first Islamist attack in 2016, when Al Qaeda-affiliated militants killed 19 in a siege on a resort near Abidjan. It experienced its next attack in 2020, when assailants raided a military post along the northeastern border with Burkina Faso, killing 14 security personnel. Ivoirian authorities linked the 2020 attack to the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (JNIM), an Al Qaeda affiliate active in Mali and Burkina Faso. Côte d'Ivoire recorded around 20 attacks in 2020-2021, most on military posts and personnel near the Burkina Faso border.

Since 2020, the government has expanded its military deployment in the north and deepened security cooperation with its neighbors. Military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso have complicated such collaboration. Ties with Mali soured in 2022 after the Malian junta imprisoned nearly 50 Ivorian peacekeepers for several months amid a fallout between the junta and U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali, which is due to withdraw by January 2024. Military indiscipline also has been a problem. After the 2010-2011 crisis, thousands of rebels were integrated into the armed forces; analysts contend that some ex-rebel leaders retain influence over their former militants. In 2017, soldiers staged a series of mutinies demanding better pay. The troops returned to the barracks after reaching an agreement with the government.

As part of its counterinsurgency strategy, the government also has increased social and infrastructural investment in the north, which is generally less developed than the south. Attacks have slowed since 2021, but analysts warn that northern Côte d'Ivoire remains at risk of violence. Local fears of a spillover of conflict from the Sahel have reportedly eroded social cohesion, including by stoking suspicion and hostility toward the Fulani, a predominately Muslim group present in many West African countries that extremist groups in the Sahel have targeted for recruitment. Considered by many Ivorians to be foreigners regardless of (at times) generational residency in the country, Fulani individuals face social and legal barriers to citizenship and employment. Analysts warn that extremists could leverage grievances over such conditions to gain support.

The Economy

Côte d'Ivoire's economy is the third largest in West Africa, behind Nigeria and on par with neighboring Ghana. The agriculture sector accounts for roughly one-fifth of annual gross domestic product and employs nearly half the labor force, per the World Bank. Côte d'Ivoire is the world's top cocoa exporter, producing around 40% of global supply. Other commodity exports include cashews, bananas, palm oil, rubber, and cotton; the country also produces gold and manganese, used in iron and steel. Abidjan is a financial hub in West Africa, and hosts the West African Economic and Monetary Union regional stock exchange along with the African Development Bank (of which the United States is a top shareholder). Offshore oil and natural gas finds in 2021-2022 have raised interest in Côte d'Ivoire's energy sector. Eni, an Italian firm, has a 90% stake in the blocks containing the country's largest field, Baleine, holding an estimated 2.5 billion barrels of oil and 3.3 trillion cubic feet of gas. Eni expects Baleine to start production in 2023.

Migrants, particularly from Burkina Faso, have historically played an important role in the economy. According to a 2021 population census, non-Ivorians comprise 22% of the population, although the State Department reports that official estimates of the foreign population include second- and third-generation residents. Migrant labor, concentrated in the agriculture and service sectors, has supported robust economic growth, but disputes between local and "foreign" populations over land and economic opportunity remain a source of discrimination and intermittent violence.

Child Labor in the Cocoa Industry

Child labor is widespread in the Ivorian and Ghanaian cocoa sectors, primarily involving employment of children on family-owned farms, often under hazardous conditions. Forced child labor, or child slavery, also occurs, but is reportedly more limited. Under the Harkin-Engel Protocol (named after the two Members of Congress), a voluntary public-private agreement signed in 2001, major chocolate and cocoa companies pledged efforts to end the "worst forms" of child labor, including hazardous and forced labor, in their supply chains. Parties repeatedly missed targets, and in 2020, when the last deadline lapsed, researchers assessed that 1.56 million children were working in the countries' cocoa sectors, nearly all exposed to hazardous work. The U.S. Department of Labor administers aid to reduce child labor and improve child welfare in cocoa-growing areas.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

U.S. engagement with Côte d'Ivoire has expanded as U.S. concern grows over Islamist insurgencies, military coups, and Russian engagement in West Africa. The country hosted Flintlock, U.S. Africa Command's premier special operations exercise, in 2022, and co-hosted Flintlock with Ghana in 2023. Section 5599A of the James M. Inhofe FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 117-263) required the Secretary of State to conduct a feasibility study on possible U.S. support for the AILCT. In 2018, the United States and Côte d'Ivoire signed a memorandum of understanding on expanding commercial relations; cocoa is by far the largest U.S. import from the country.

U.S. Assistance. U.S. bilateral aid for Côte d'Ivoire in FY2022 totaled \$149 million, of which 97% was for health programs. HIV/AIDS assistance under the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief comprised the largest share, at \$97 million. Other health aid seeks to combat malaria, support maternal and child health, and build health system capacity. Governance assistance (\$4 million) and International Military Education and Training (\$344,000) aid made up the balance. The Administration has requested \$146 million for Côte d'Ivoire for FY2024. The country has received other U.S. aid via global and regional programs, including State Department-managed security assistance to help Ivorian security forces combat maritime insecurity, counter terrorism, and take part in peacekeeping operations.

Global Fragility Act (GFA). In 2022, the Administration designated Côte d'Ivoire as a partner country under the GFA, as part of a coastal West Africa regional grouping that also includes Benin, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo. The Administration's strategy for engagement in coastal West Africa identifies building social cohesion, improving state responsiveness and accountability, and improving the effectiveness of state security forces as top objectives.

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The MCC is implementing a six-year, \$537 million Compact aimed at improving road infrastructure in Abidjan and expanding job training. The Compact came into force in 2019. The MCC also has selected Côte d'Ivoire to develop a concurrent multi-country Compact. In its FY2024 budget justification, the MCC stated that it is "exploring investment in power sector reform, infrastructure, and capacity building in Côte

d'Ivoire to solidify its role as an anchor power exporter,” and plans to seek Board approval in March 2024.

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