

HRW: Côte d'Ivoire: Security Force Extortion, Serious Consequences for Health, Livelihoods in Country's West

July 1, 2013



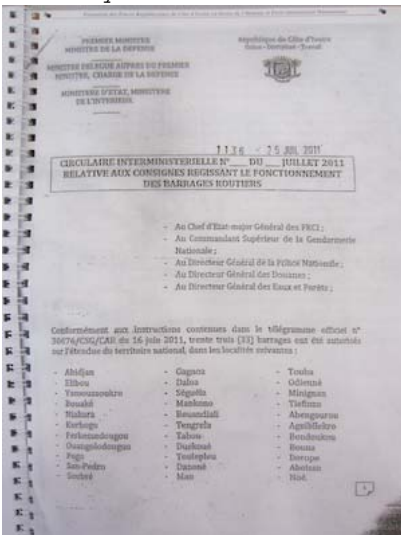
Members of the Ivorian military, the Republican Forces, patrol near a village along the Ivorian-Liberian border on June 17, 2012. © 2012 Reuters



Soldiers have been racketing small businesses for months in the village of Kaade, forcing them to pay for "security". Here is a weekly receipt signed and dated by a soldier in March 2013, shown to Human Rights Watch by the maquis owner. © 2013 Matt Wells/Human Rights Watch



Beginning in late May, soldiers began extorting 1,000 CFA from each maquis (small restaurant) and boutique (small shop) in Kaade. This is a receipt shown to Human Rights Watch by a boutique owner in early June. © 2013 Matt Wells/Human Rights Watch



Inter-ministerial decree establishing 33 official checkpoints in Côte d'Ivoire. In the region researched by Human Rights Watch, this only includes Duékoué, Toulepleu, and Danané, making the dozens of other checkpoints unauthorized.

Members of the security forces are shamelessly enriching themselves off of the backs of people in western Côte d'Ivoire. Despite the Ouattara government's early promises to crack down on extortion at checkpoints, it continues in full force in that part of the country.

Matt Wells, Côte d'Ivoire researcher

(Paris) - Security forces routinely and openly extort money at roadblocks in the western part of Côte d'Ivoire. The roadblocks, ostensibly in place to address insecurity in the face of cross-border

incursions and banditry, have become a lucrative, criminal venture for soldiers and gendarmes, whose abuse threatens economic livelihoods and food prices in a region already devastated by the 2010-2011 post-election crisis.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 82 victims of and witnesses to the extortion in western Côte d'Ivoire. They said that women traveling to and from markets, immigrants from neighboring countries, and motorbike and public transport drivers are particularly singled out for this form of harassment. Even people seeking medical care have been targeted. In one case, the delay may have contributed to the death of a 3-year-old child. Members of the security forces at times threaten, unlawfully detain, or even beat people who refuse or fail to pay.

"Members of the security forces are shamelessly enriching themselves off of the backs of people in western Côte d'Ivoire," said Matt Wells, Côte d'Ivoire researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Despite the Ouattara government's early promises to crack down on extortion at checkpoints, it continues in full force in that part of the country."

Most drivers and other residents of western Côte d'Ivoire felt that things have improved on the major roads between cities under the Ouattara government. They described fewer checkpoints on these roads as compared to when former President Gbagbo was in power and fewer cases of arbitrary detention and beatings - previously a common practice against northern Ivorians and West African immigrants. However, many of the same people expressed that the practice of checkpoint extortion on secondary, unpaved roads was perhaps worse than ever.

The Ivorian government should investigate and prosecute members of the security forces involved in extortion, Human Rights Watch said. The government should place units of its anti-racket brigade in major cities around the country, and extend the reach of its anti-racket hotline throughout the country so that people can quickly and anonymously report abuses. The anti-extortion efforts are based in Abidjan and not easily accessible in the West.

Western Côte d'Ivoire has been the recurrent site of cross-border attacks from Liberia, most recently on March 13 and 23 in the villages of Zilebly and Petit Guiglo, respectively. While this may justify a heavier security presence in the region, including checkpoints, that is no excuse for extortion, Human Rights Watch said.

In February and June 2013, Human Rights Watch visited some 50 villages between Duékoué and Toulepleu and between Danané and Zouan-Hounien, interviewing dozens of drivers, women who trade at markets, owners of small shops and restaurants, and immigrants, who all described the persistent and open practice of checkpoint extortion and associated criminal behavior by security forces manning them.

Human Rights Watch interviewed drivers of motorbikes, taxis, mini-buses, and even bicycles who all described being regularly forced to pay to pass checkpoints. People on bicycles generally pay 200 CFA (US\$0.40) at each checkpoint, while drivers of vehicles often pay 1,000 to 2,000 CFA (\$2-4). A driver of a 20-seat Gbaka (mini-bus) based in Guiglo told Human Rights Watch that drivers are charged the same amount at every checkpoint on each of the major routes from Guiglo, even when all of their paperwork is in order.

The extortion is carried out openly. Human Rights Watch repeatedly saw vehicles held up at checkpoints. In February, near the village of Kahen, a Human Rights Watch researcher watched as a soldier complained about having to find change for a driver who did not have the exact amount. Checkpoints on secondary roads are often particularly abusive.

On the main roads between towns, all of the security forces - including

the military, the gendarmerie, the customs unit, and the waters and forests unit - are often at checkpoints and involved in extortion. "They're all the same," was a common refrain from drivers. On the secondary, unpaved roads, soldiers from the country's military, the Republican Forces (or FRCI), primarily oversee checkpoints and are the main culprits, victims and other witnesses said.

Drivers of motorbikes and transport vehicles described the extortion as organized, suggesting the practice was systematic. They said they generally pay only once a day at each checkpoint, with members of the security forces writing down the driver's name or car number when he passes through the first time. A driver in Guiglo said, "You hear a [soldier] yell to his friend, 'Has car number 322 come through yet today? No? Okay, you have to pay 1,000 CFA.' They don't hide their racketing. They do it as if it's their right, as if they're authorized." Human Rights Watch documented three cases in which members of the security forces beat people for refusing to pay, including a young man whose arm was fractured and spent three days in a hospital. In several other cases, the security forces forced people to remain at the checkpoint for hours, even overnight, until the driver could get someone to bring the money to pay them.

Human Rights Watch documented four cases in which soldiers manning checkpoints blocked people seeking emergency health care for a family member. A father trying to take his gravely ill 3-year-old to a hospital described how soldiers demanded 3,000 CFA (\$6). The father did not have the money and begged to be let go, but the soldiers refused - forcing the man to walk to the nearest village to borrow money. More than an hour after arriving at the checkpoint, the father paid the money and was able to leave with his son. The child died before reaching the regional hospital where he could access the care he needed.

"Some soldiers at checkpoints are so relentless in their quest for money from each passerby that they are willing to impede even people seeking emergency medical care," Wells said. "Such disgusting behavior will only fuel the distrust many people in western Côte d'Ivoire have for the security forces."

In some areas of western Côte d'Ivoire, the number of checkpoints and sums demanded increase on market days, taking advantage of people traveling to buy and sell. Human Rights Watch documented how members of the security forces at some checkpoints extort money from women buying and selling goods at the market. Several sellers said they had to raise prices of the food they sell to cover the payments. Extortion is so extreme around the village of Kaade that several residents expressed concern about whether its Sunday market would survive.

Human Rights Watch also found that immigrants from Burkina Faso are targeted for particular abuse in the region around Bloléquin. Even when traveling as passengers, the security forces often confiscate their identity papers at checkpoints and demand 1,000 CFA before returning them, asserting that the papers are illegal because obtained in another region of Côte d'Ivoire. A government official told Human Rights Watch that such identity papers are valid throughout the country.

Human Rights Watch presented its findings to officials in the Ivorian presidency, the Prime Minister's Office, and the military. The officials promised to investigate promptly and that "there would be no pity" for security forces engaged in extortion. One official provided documents showing the military's efforts to improve its human rights performance, including at checkpoints. The strategy involves human rights training, including a session on behavior at checkpoints; and sanctions for those who commit human rights violations. The official said the military

prosecutor has brought cases against some soldiers engaged in extortion and racketeering.

Extortion is illegal under Ivorian law and violates people's right to liberty of movement under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and people's right to property under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. In cases where checkpoint extortion impedes access to health care or harms food security, the government has also violated people's rights to health and food under the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. "The Ouattara government has put improving the economy at the heart of its political program, but the relentless extortion by security forces in western Côte d'Ivoire is having a devastating impact on people's livelihoods," Wells said. "Ivorian authorities need to quickly stamp out security force abuse of the very people they are supposed to protect."

A History of Abuse at Checkpoints

Checkpoint extortion predates the Ouattara government. In the October 2010 report "Afraid and Forgotten," Human Rights Watch documented widespread extortion and racketeering that then plagued the western part of the country. Security forces in the West's southern half, then controlled by the Gbagbo government, routinely targeted northern Ivorians and West African immigrants for extortion - at times arbitrarily detaining and beating people who would not immediately pay. In the northern half of the country - then controlled by the Forces Nouvelles rebel army - soldiers reaped enormous profits from extorting businesses and at roadblocks.

After assuming office following the 2010-2011 post-election crisis, President Alassane Ouattara said that security force extortion would no longer be tolerated and that those responsible would be prosecuted and dismissed. Human Rights Watch released a press statement at the time commending the Ivorian government for the steps taken and for progress in reducing extortion along main roads throughout Côte d'Ivoire. The government created a special anti-racket unit - consisting of members of the police, gendarmerie, customs, and the waters and forests unit - to tackle extortion. However, it largely operates in and around Abidjan.

Open Extortion against Drivers

On both primary and secondary roads in western Côte d'Ivoire, members of the security forces openly extort money from drivers of motorbikes, taxis, Gbaka (a minibus), and even bicycles passing through. Drivers and residents from villages in the departments of Guiglo, Bloléquin, and Danané have complained to local authorities, including the prefect, sous-prefect, and local gendarme and military commanders. They said there has been no change.

Drivers described how when they arrive at a checkpoint, the security forces - generally a Republican Forces (FRCI) soldier, even if a gendarme is also present - demand the papers for their vehicle. If the papers are in order, the person must pay to get them back. If the papers are not in order, the security forces often demand much greater sums. The extortion is generally well-organized. A Gbaka driver between Guiglo and Duékoué said that the checkpoint officials write down the vehicle number in a notebook, so that drivers pay once a day at a given checkpoint. A motorbike driver in a village between Danané and Zouan-Hounien said that soldiers along that axis write down the driver's name for the same purpose. On smaller, secondary roads where there is less traffic, sometimes the practice is just by facial recognition. However, a new day brings a new demand for payment.

At checkpoints on the main road between towns in western Côte d'Ivoire, 1,000 CFA (\$2) is the standard sum extorted from drivers. Drivers say

that all of the security forces are involved, including the military, police, gendarmes, customs, and waters and forests unit. On the secondary roads, soldiers in military uniforms almost exclusively operate the checkpoints. Their demands range from 1,000 CFA to 5,000 CFA, drivers who use these roads said.

Residents report, and Human Rights Watch's own observations confirm, that some soldiers at checkpoints on secondary roads still wear old military uniforms that the government replaced in early 2012. Some of these men were probably part of the supplementary, volunteer fighters who fought alongside the Republican Forces during the post-election crisis. These checkpoints exist openly, and residents said they have reported many of them to local authorities, though no action has been taken. That indicates at least a tacit acceptance of the continued role of these fighters in security functions, even though they are not part of the military.

A taxi driver who drives a route between Guiglo and Bloléquin told Human Rights Watch that he is forced to cram six passengers into the four seats in his car in order to offset the costs from extortion. A driver of a 20-seat minibussimilarly said that he is obligated to "overfill" his car with 22 to 24 people, so that he can still make money despite the extortion.

When people refuse to pay, the security forces do not allow the car to continue - whether by holding the driver's papers or by refusing to move the barricade. Moreover, Human Rights Watch documented three cases in which members of the security forces had beaten drivers for failing to pay. A motorbike driver described what happened to him in mid-May:

I arrived at a checkpoint on a bush road just outside [a village between Guiglo and Bloléquin]. My wife was coming back from the hospital in Guiglo, so I was trying to just get to the paved road, where she was, to then take her back to our campement [a small village near where people tend their crops]. There were four of them at the checkpoint, three FRCI and a gendarme. They stopped me and asked for my papers. I hadn't brought them because I was just going to be on a bush road...

They demanded 5,000 CFA and my keys. I said please, let me go into the village, find my wife and get some money, and I will come back. I started to walk toward town, [leaving the motorbike parked at the checkpoint], when they yelled at me to give them my keys.

They grabbed me hard and [yanked] my hands behind my back, starting to beat me with their fists. [I covered up my head] as they just hit me over and over. I don't know whether it was the strikes or the way they grabbed me, but they fractured my arm. I spent three days in the hospital. I still can't work in the field. It's not easy. We're not happy with this. Every time you pass, whether you have your papers or not, you have to pay - 1,000 CFA, 2,000 CFA, sometimes even 5,000 CFA. The man was particularly reluctant to hand over his keys because, in another case documented by Human Rights Watch, a soldier had gone for a joyride on a motorbike held at a checkpoint and wrecked it.

In October 2011, the Ivorian government created an anti-racket unit, tasked with stopping checkpoint extortion and arresting those involved. Several drivers in Guiglo told Human Rights Watch that officials of the unit came to the area in May and even spoke with some drivers. One driver said they quickly lost faith in the unit's commitment to fighting the problem, however, as the extortion went back to its ubiquitous norm the day after the officials left town.

A Baoulé community leader in a village between Guiglo and Bloléquin described his frustration: "Every day people come and complain to me about the extortion. We've had enough. People are going to revolt soon."

Someone is going to strike one of the FRCI, and he's going to open fire and kill the person. And then everyone will say, 'Oh, there's the West again, blowing up.'"

Under a July 2011 inter-ministerial order, there are 33 authorized checkpoints around the country. The dozens of additional unauthorized checkpoints, including the vast majority of checkpoints in the West, violate people's right to liberty of movement under article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Even at checkpoints authorized by law, extortion violates freedom of movement by making it more difficult for people to move around. Several drivers said that their earnings have been affected both because of the extortion they pay and because some people avoid traveling because of the checkpoint abuses.

Reduced Access to Health Care

Checkpoint extortion at times has serious consequences for people's ability to access health care. The soldiers at some checkpoints, particularly on secondary roads, block people trying to reach clinics and hospitals in nearby villages and towns in order to extort 1,000 to 3,000 CFA (\$2-\$6).

Human Rights Watch interviewed a Burkinabé who lives in a campement outside Kaade, around 30 kilometers from the town of Guiglo toward Bloléquin, who believes that the delay caused by soldiers' relentless demands at a checkpoint contributed to the death of his 3-year-old son: My child fell very sick in February. I took him from the campement on a motorbike, arriving at the checkpoint [in Kaade village, on the secondary road]. The FRCI there demanded 3,000 francs [CFA]. I told them that my child was very sick and asked them to take pity, but they refused and continued demanding the 3,000 [francs]. I didn't have that much money on me, [I'd taken the boy in a rush], so I begged and I begged, but they refused... I had to leave my boy and the motorbike at the checkpoint and come into the village to ask for money [from people here]... [After collecting the money], I went and paid the FRCI and they let us go... It all took more than an hour.

I rushed my boy to the hospital in Guinkin [one kilometer away], but they said he needed to be taken to the hospital in Guiglo [the capital of the department]. [The soldiers on the main road between Guinkin and Guiglo did not demand bribes when they saw the sick child.] When we got to Guiglo, they said that given the urgency he needed to go to Daloa. While getting ready to go to Daloa, the boy died...

Because of the delay at the checkpoint, my child lost his life... When I [returned home], I told the FRCI at the checkpoint that my child had died because of them. One of them looked at me and said, "I don't give a damn."

While it is unclear whether the boy would have survived had the soldiers not engaged in extortion, the hour-long delay had a negative impact on the ability to obtain potentially life-saving treatment. The consequences in this case were particularly severe, but Human Rights Watch documented similar abuses by soldiers against other people seeking emergency medical care.

In the village of Petit Guiglo, Human Rights Watch interviewed a person who had to intervene in April when soldiers stopped a woman at a checkpoint as she was trying to get her sick child to a clinic in Tinhou, 20 kilometers away. The soldiers demanded 1,000 CFA (\$2) to let the woman pass on a motorbike. She begged the soldiers to let her through, saying she was unable to pay, but they refused. The witness heard the woman's pleas and paid the 1,000 CFA. He told Human Rights Watch: "Even if the child dies in front of them, it's not their problem."

You have to pay 1,000 CFA."

Human Rights Watch also interviewed a father of twins born in early May. After one of the twins died and the second fell sick, the father hired a motorbike driver to rush them to the closest hospital. A soldier at a checkpoint demanded 1,000 CFA (\$2). The father was able to bargain and pay 500 CFA then, with a promise to pay the other 500 CFA on his return. They reached the hospital, and the infant recovered.

In late May, at the same checkpoint near Kaade where the father of the 3-year-old was stopped, soldiers refused to let a husband pass with his wife, who was hours from giving birth, until he paid 2,000 CFA (\$4). The husband told Human Rights Watch:

My wife was having trouble with the labor, so I decided to take her from the campement to the hospital in Guinkin so she could give birth in good conditions... I hired a motorbike driver to take her, and I followed on a bicycle. When I arrived at the checkpoint, the motorbike driver and my wife were there. Three FRCI had stopped them, demanding 2,000 CFA. This was around 7 p.m. We asked them to have pity, please, my wife is about to give birth. But they refused. We were there for more than 30 minutes asking them to have pity, but they said we had to give money before moving. Eventually I gave 1,000 [francs CFA] and the driver gave 1,000, and we got to the hospital.

My wife gave birth [less than five hours later], around midnight the same day. We slept at the hospital. The next day, in the morning, we went back to the campement with my wife and newborn child. It was the same FRCI from the night before, and they again demanded 2,000 francs [CFA]. We again begged them to have pity, but they said without giving 2,000 francs, we couldn't leave. So we gave the 2,000 [francs CFA]. Under article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, state parties like Côte d'Ivoire have, at a minimum, an obligation not to negatively impact people's right to health, including their access to health care. Through its failure to address the relentless extortion at checkpoints that delays access to urgent health care, the government is in breach of these obligations.

Targeting of People from Burkina Faso

During the Gbagbo presidency, security forces routinely targeted immigrants from neighboring countries - particularly Burkina Faso and Mali - for extortion and related abuses, as described in Human Rights Watch's report "Afraid and Forgotten". The Gbagbo government perceived these immigrant populations as aligned with the opposition and also stoked land tensions between the typically pro-Gbagbo ethnic groups native to the region and the West African immigrants who have long worked on cocoa and rubber plantations there. The anti-immigrant sentiment that pervaded the Gbagbo government appeared to filter down to the security forces, who often treated Burkinabés and Malians with open hostility.

Based on interviews with several dozen immigrants from Burkina Faso in western Côte d'Ivoire, the problem of targeted extortion still exists in the region around Bloléquin, though not with the prior animus. Several Burkinabés interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that, when extorting money, members of the security forces at times make comments about how the Burkinabés - perceived as successful planters in the area - can afford to pay.

Except on market days, the security forces generally demand money from drivers, but not from passengers. Burkinabé passengers traveling in and around Bloléquin are often the exception, though, forced to pay even when their identity papers are in order. This difference in treatment amounts to discrimination impinging upon economic and social rights as

well as the right to freedom of movement within a country under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

Upon arriving at one of the checkpoints in the department of Bloléquin - whether on motorbike, taxi, a 20-seat Gbaka, or sometimes even a bicycle - the security forces generally demand the identity papers of those on board. Burkinabés in and around Bloléquin told Human Rights Watch that the security forces generally demand that they show a consular card (carte consulaire) and a residency certificate (certificat de résidence). A Burkinabé from the village of Diouya-Dokin, just outside Bloléquin, said that the security forces often take the papers of immigrants and then summon each person to their shelter to demand payment. He said, "It happens every day."

When immigrants from neighboring countries travel without their identity papers, members of the security forces extort between 1,000 and 5,000 CFA to pass a checkpoint. Human Rights Watch interviewed a Burkinabé man who lives in the village of Petit Guiglo and whose papers were burned when his house was set on fire during a March 23 cross-border attack from Liberia. During a June 3 trip from Bloléquin to Petit Guiglo - a 55-kilometer stretch with five checkpoints - he was forced to pay a total of 8,500 CFA (\$17). He tried at each checkpoint to explain that his papers had been burned, but to no avail.

Even when Burkinabés travel with proper papers, the security forces at checkpoints in and around Bloléquin often engage in extortion. In the aftermath of the post-election crisis, hundreds of Burkinabés who had lived in other parts of Côte d'Ivoire have moved to the region around Bloléquin, in search of new land to produce cocoa or rubber.

Human Rights Watch interviewed seven Burkinabés who had recently moved from other regions. They said security forces often say the Burkinabés' identity papers are not valid because they were not issued in Bloléquin and then extort 1,000 CFA at each checkpoint to let the person pass. A resident of Oulaïtaibly village told Human Rights Watch on June 6 that he had paid a total of 4,000 CFA (\$8) across four checkpoints to travel to Bloléquin the previous week.

A government official in western Côte d'Ivoire told Human Rights Watch that identity papers issued in one region of the country are valid throughout, and that the demands for papers issued locally are not legal. Indeed, a Burkinabé who recently traveled from Bloléquin to Abidjan told Human Rights Watch that once he left the region of Bloléquin, the security forces rarely asked for his identity papers at checkpoints and never forced him to pay for having papers issued in another region.

Burkinabés who fail to pay the sums demanded by security forces appear also to be more frequently subjected to physical abuse and arbitrary arrest. A youth from Petit Guiglo described running out of money while paying extorted sums between Bloléquin and Tinhou. Unable to pay at the checkpoint at the exit to Tinhou, he was arbitrarily detained there overnight. A Burkinabé from Dedjéan village said:

I didn't have money to pay the FRCI at the Diboké checkpoint, so they put me to the side [while the transport vehicle continued]. You don't move without paying, you don't get your papers back. They forcibly searched me to see if I had any money, to see if I was lying, but I wasn't... I stayed there until someone came to pay the 1,000 [CFA].

A Burkinabé community leader in Bloléquin told Human Rights Watch that he frequently has to intervene in cases involving extortion-related abuses. In early June, he said that the security forces beat a Burkinabé youth and forced him to spend the night at the checkpoint because he had

refused to pay the 1,000 CFA demanded because his residency certificate had been issued in another region. The Burkinabé leader intervened to free the youth the next morning.

Many of the Burkinabés interviewed by Human Rights Watch described checkpoint extortion as the "biggest problem" the community faces in the region. The community leader in Bloléquin said that the extortion on secondary roads, where people travel to their campements, has particularly pernicious consequences: "Imagine having to pay 1,000 francs each time you're going to your rice or corn fields. How do you survive? You spend more than you make."

Several Burkinabé community leaders told Human Rights Watch that, over the last year, they have repeatedly discussed the targeted extortion against Burkinabés with regional authorities, including the prefect, sous-prefect, and leaders of the security forces. They said that authorities promise that things will change, but the targeted extortion continues unabated. Human Rights Watch documented cases that occurred through early June.

Extortion on Market Days and from Local Businesses

Extortion appears to be particularly acute on market days, when people from surrounding villages and campements travel to villages to buy and sell food, clothes, household supplies, and other goods. Soldiers and gendarmes establish additional makeshift checkpoints for these days only, often demand greater sums from drivers passing through, and at times target women coming to buy or sell goods. Several people said the extortion has led to higher food prices in a region where the post-election crisis already devastated food harvests.

In a village near Zouan-Hounien, residents told Human Rights Watch that every market day they encounter two additional checkpoints on the roads leading to their village. In several villages in the departments of Guiglo and Bloléquin, motorbike drivers said the normal 1,000 CFA extortion increases, sometimes significantly. A Burkinabé man told Human Rights Watch that three soldiers and a gendarme at one checkpoint demanded 6,000 CFA (\$12) as he traveled to a market on June 2. When he refused because he did not have enough money, they took his motorbike keys by force. He had to walk into the village to borrow money from a cousin, then pay the 6,000 CFA to get his motorbike back.

People from one village in the Guiglo region told Human Rights Watch that the checkpoint extortion was so severe on Sunday, their market day, that people from surrounding campements had already switched to other markets with fewer checkpoints, even if further away. Residents said that up to 2,000 people come for the market day. But at checkpoints near the village, members of the security forces now demand 200 CFA from each bicycle that comes through and between 1,000 and 5,000 CFA for each motorbike, depending on the people and the goods on board as well as the whim of the soldiers. People from the village feared that the market day, essential to the livelihood of many who live there, might collapse as a result.

A Malinké woman in Bloléquin described how when traveling to and from the market in Tinhou, she has to pay at checkpoints according to the goods she has with her - saying that it is generally 1,000 CFA at each checkpoint, most run by soldiers but one also operated by the waters and forests unit:

You're going to laugh when I say this, but it's worse now than during the Gbagbo years. Before I could make 5,000 [to] 8,000 CFA [from buying in Tinhou and reselling in Bloléquin], but now I make almost nothing.

A woman from a village between Danané and Zouan-Hounien who sells fish at markets told Human Rights Watch that at the checkpoint leaving Danané

she has to pay the security forces 1,000 CFA per container of fish. She said that to make up for the extortion, she has had to double the prices she charges for the fish.

In the village of Kaade, residents said soldiers also extort money from local businesses, particularly small restaurants (known as maquis) and shops. Through mid-May, the FRCI charged each of the 20 to 30 stores in the village 500 CFA a week. Beginning in late May, the soldiers doubled the price. The soldiers are so confident in their impunity that they give weekly receipts to each store. Human Rights Watch took pictures of receipts that read "Tax on the markets," with the amount, the date, and a signature from the security force member. A woman who runs a maquis said:

Each week on Sunday, two of them come around to all of the maquis and shops. They are now taking 1,000 CFA, saying it is "their right" in return for providing security. It's not good what they're doing, it's affecting how much money I make. They're only here to run a racket, nothing more.

Western Côte d'Ivoire already suffers from food insecurity as a result of the devastating consequences of the post-election crisis and more recent attacks along the Liberian border. Many residents fled to neighboring Liberia and have only recently returned. Many said they were not able to plant food or cash crops last year, leading to concerns about finding sufficient food this year. Checkpoint extortion, with resultant effects on local markets, the movement of goods, and the prices of foodstuffs, threatens to further undermine their already precarious situation.

Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights provides for the right to food and an adequate standard of living. As with the right to health, the general obligations on a country are to progressively realize these rights. However, at all times they have a minimum obligation to not negatively impact people's right to food and an adequate standard of living. The extortion by soldiers at checkpoints, maquis, and shops in western Côte d'Ivoire arguably puts the Ivorian government in breach of these obligations. In addition, through the arbitrary seizure of money and other property, checkpoint extortion violates people's right to property under article 14 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

General Seizure of Property at Checkpoints

In several cases documented by Human Rights Watch, security forces at checkpoints engaged in outright seizure of property, without any pretense of a security concern or a lack of proper papers. An elderly man from a village near Bloléquin said:

On April 18, I was coming back from my campement on foot. I had a wooden knapsack on my back with personal belongings and five snails that I'd caught. On a secondary road getting to the village, an FRCI in his military uniform had set up his own checkpoint and demanded to see what was inside my knapsack... He was sitting so that you couldn't see him, but then as soon as I started to pass him he stopped me and said, "Checkpoint."... He looked inside and took three of the snails I'd found. I told him please, this is going to serve as my food. He responded, "I also have to eat."... I had to hand them over, you have no choice.

Recommendations

To the Minister of Interior and the Delegated Minister of Defense: Establish contingents of the anti-racket unit in major cities throughout the country, rather than basing the unit in Abidjan with occasional missions elsewhere; Order the anti-racket unit to undertake regular patrols and to investigate fully and punish - including through

dismissal and handing over for prosecution - members of the security forces who engage in extortion or racketeering; Ensure that information about the anti-racket hotline is well-publicized throughout the country and that reported cases are investigated swiftly. Consider posting information about the hotline at the authorized checkpoints around the country, to remind security forces of the consequences of extortion; and Explain publicly that residency papers obtained by immigrants in one part of the country are valid throughout the country. Establish regular contact with leaders of communities from neighboring countries to determine where there are problems with discriminatory targeting for extortion and investigate these concerns promptly.

© Copyright 2013, Human Rights Watch