

Ivory Coast attacked from Liberia

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By Joe Bavier -Reuters



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File picture: Ivorian refugees wait to be processed in Toe Town, Liberia, on their way back to their homes in neighbouring Ivory Coast.

Abidjan - Liberia's government has failed to stop mercenaries and militias based on its soil from recruiting child soldiers and launching a series of deadly raids on villages across the border in Ivory Coast, Human Rights Watch said on Wednesday.

Thousands of Liberian gunmen fought alongside Ivorian fighters in a four-month post-election conflict in Ivory Coast last year, most on behalf of former President Laurent Gbagbo, and withdrew back to Liberia following Gbagbo's capture in April 2011.

Those combatants, accused of massacring civilians during the war, have conducted four cross-border attacks on villages in western Ivory Coast since July that killed 40 people, a report published by the New York-based rights campaigner said.

Fighters were quoted as saying they were receiving funding from Ghana and from mining operations in Liberia to mount future attacks. And while Liberia had made dozens of arrests of suspected mercenaries since the end of the Ivory Coast war, nearly all had since been released, the report said.

"For well over a year, the Liberian government has had its head in the sand," said Matt Wells, West Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"Rather than uphold its responsibility to prosecute or extradite those involved in international crimes, Liberian authorities have stood by as many of these same people recruit child soldiers and carry out deadly cross-border attacks."

A Liberian government spokesman said he could not immediately comment because he had not yet seen the report.

Investigations by the United Nations and rights groups have implicated Liberian mercenaries and pro-Gbagbo militias in civilian massacres in the commercial capital Abidjan and in the country's volatile west.

Gbagbo was charged with criminal responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in the violence. He is awaiting trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

U.N. officials and diplomats do not believe the fighters have the capacity to destabilise the government of new President Alassane Ouattara. However some fear they could inflame long-running land disputes in Ivory Coast's cocoa-producing west.

Several fighters quoted in the HRW report said the group had received regular financing from abroad, including from Ghana and from gold mining in eastern Liberia.

A number of high-ranking military and political figures close to Gbagbo are living in exile in Ghana. Ivory Coast has issued international arrest warrants for several individuals, but Accra has yet to act them.

A Ghana official declined to comment.

"We have guns ... and other support that will help facilitate this process - businesses are established and the supply line is stronger than ever before," said one interviewed fighter, who said his unit was preparing new, larger attacks.

"Let no one fool you that the war is over in Ivory Coast."

Human Rights Watch identified between 100 and 150 combatants who had either participated in cross-border raids or were organising for future attacks, though the report said the total number of combatants could be much higher.

It said Liberian authorities had arrested dozens of suspected fighters since pro-Gbagbo forces collapsed at the end of the conflict, though none had yet been successfully prosecuted or extradited for crimes committed in Ivory Coast.

Of 88 suspected fighters detained in Liberia in April 2011, all but five were released, a U.N. report said in March. A group of 76 Ivorians and Liberians were stopped as they attempted to cross into Ivory Coast in January, HRW said, but they too were later freed.

HRW said police and border officials had also released a number of well-known Liberian fighters, either on bail or due to a lack of evidence, after initially charging them with serving as mercenaries, which is a crime under Liberian law.

Among those released were Isaac "Bob Marley" Chegbo, who commanded a unit accused by U.N. investigators of massacring more than 100 people in Ivory Coast, and Augustine "Bush Dog" Vleyee, believed to be recruiting child soldiers for raids.

"There are some guys in our community who have started recruiting small boys," said one resident in eastern Liberia, quoted in the HRW report. "We have been complaining to the security, but they are always saying they don't have evidence to prove it." - Reuters

