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U.S. Department of State

Cote D'Ivoire Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 26, 1999.

COTE D'IVOIRE

Cote D'Ivoire is a centralized republic dominated by a strong presidency. Members of a single political party, the Democratic Party of Cote D'Ivoire (PDCI) have occupied both the presidency and a majority of seats in the national legislature since independence in 1960, although other parties have been legal since 1990. Upon the death in 1993 of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, who had been President since independence, National Assembly President Henri Konan Bedie became President by constitutional succession and served out the remainder of Houphouet's term. Due to concerns about 1994 changes to the candidacy requirements of the electoral code that excluded a leading opposition rival to Bedie, and about irregularities in voter registration, the major opposition parties staged an "active boycott" of the 1995 presidential election, both declining to participate and trying to interfere with the voting process; however, President Bedie won 96 percent of the vote. The opposition parties and Bedie then reached an accord that allowed for full party participation in legislative elections later in 1995. These elections were marred by irregularities in voter registration; they were suspended in 3 of the 175 districts due to interethnic violence, and results in another 3 districts were invalidated, but make-up

elections in 1996 were orderly and transparent. The PDCI continued to control more than the 80 percent of National Assembly votes needed to amend the Constitution. In June the National Assembly enacted amendments to the Constitution that further increased the already preponderant power of the presidency and were criticized widely. However, in December, after negotiations with a major opposition party, the President signed any agreement obliging him to rescind some of these powers in a second round of constitutional amendments. The judiciary is subject to executive branch and other outside influence.

Security forces include the army, navy, and air force, all under the Ministry of Defense; the Republican Guard, a well-funded 1,200-man presidential security force; the national police (Surete); and the Gendarmerie, a branch of the armed forces with responsibility for general law enforcement, maintenance of public order, and internal security, including suppression of violent crime. A National Security Council, formed in August 1996 and chaired by the former commandant of the gendarmerie, coordinates security policy, both internal and external. A Security Staff (L'Etat Major de la Securite) collects and distributes information about crime and coordinates the activities of the security forces in times of crisis. The Special Anticrime Police Brigade (SAVAC) continued its operations. The armed forces traditionally have accepted the primacy of civilian authority. Seven of the 18 members of the military forces accused of plotting a coup in 1995 were dismissed from the military forces, then released from detention in 1996. Four other officers who had been suspended were reinstated in April. Security forces, including the SAVAC, committed numerous human rights abuses.

The economy is largely market-based but heavily dependent on the agricultural sector. Most of the rural population remains dependent on smallholder cash crop production. Principal exports are cocoa, coffee, and wood. Fewer than half of adults are literate. Recorded Gross National Product per capita in 1997 was about \$680 on a money basis. Economic growth has resumed since a large currency devaluation in 1994, although it has been unevenly distributed. The Government increased the always large but previously diminishing share of its operating expenditures devoted to basic health services and education. However, economic growth continued to be impeded by widespread corruption rooted in a lack of transparent and accountable governance. The Government continued to receive substantial assistance from international financial institutions.

The Government's human rights record was characterized by serious problems and abuses in a number of areas. The Government enacted constitutional amendments that further restricted citizens' right to change their government, only some of which the President subsequently agreed to rescind. Members of the security forces committed extrajudicial killings, and the security forces beat and abused detainees and used force to disperse protestors. The Government also used arbitrary arrest and detention and often failed to bring perpetrators of these abuses to justice. Prison conditions remained harsh and life threatening, although they improved in some respects, and international humanitarian organizations recently reported better access to the prison system. Prolonged detention was a problem. The judiciary did not ensure due process and was subject to executive branch influence, particularly in political cases; however, in December the Government released all known political prisoners and detainees. Security forces infringed on citizens' privacy rights. The Government restricted freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and movement; however, it did not substantially restrict freedom of assembly during the second half of the year. Despite some formal restrictions on freedom of association, the Government generally permitted it in practice. Between one-fifth and one-third of the country's adult population, including many lifelong residents of the country, remained politically disenfranchised noncitizens. Discrimination and violence against women, abuse of children, and female genital mutilation (FGM) remained problems, although a new law made FGM a crime. The minority Baoule ethnic group's longstanding domination of the ruling party and the State, which has exacerbated sometimes violent ethnic tensions, continued. Societal discrimination based on ethnicity remained a problem. Child labor and forced child labor are problems.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no reports of politically motivated killings by government forces. However, as violent civil

crime remained widespread, the security forces frequently resorted to lethal force and committed numerous extrajudicial killings. Credible media reports indicate that the Special Anticrime Police Brigade continued its shoot-to-kill policy when pursuing criminal suspects. According to estimates in a government-owned daily newspaper, about 78 persons were killed in the first quarter of 1997 alone. The Government did not prosecute SAVAC or police personnel for these killings.

On May 14, police shot and killed Ellele Sombo Mages, a 17-year-old schoolboy, during a protest at a high school in Anyama over the expulsion of a student for failure to pay what the student union and the Ministry of Education said were unauthorized fees (see Section 1.c). Following widespread student protests about this killing, police sergeant Kouakou Souassi was charged with Sombo's death. In October a military tribunal sentenced the sergeant to 10 years' imprisonment.

Police reportedly killed three taxi or truck drivers and seriously injured four such drivers during the year.

On September 10, a policeman killed Assane Sanogo, a taxi driver, in Abidjan, allegedly during a petty extortion attempt. On September 18, following a five-day general strike by taxi and bus drivers to protest the killing, police officer Firmin Adou was arrested and charged with Sangono's murder. The Government also acceded to the drivers' other demands, including a compensation payment to Sangono's widow and son.

At an unknown time and place, Police lieutenant Diaby Mamadou and officers Fofana and Korahi allegedly beat and killed Zeze Patrice, a man whom they suspected of having embezzled the proceeds of a vehicle sale. The police reportedly tried to beat the truth out of him. Zeze Patrice was paralyzed after the beating and later died. On October 12, the three police officers were arrested and jailed at Abidjan military prison.

On October 15, another taxi driver, Kassim Oumare, died in police custody. Police authorities announced that he had hanged himself in his cell by his shoelaces. According to press reports, Kassim had been in detention since the night of October 12, when his vehicle injured Coulibaly Yacouba, an officer of the Riot Police Brigade (BAE). Coulibaly Yacouba died after being shot four times by police sergeant Gohoun Gnapia, who mistook him for a thief. Kassim Oumare's death came 2 days after an incident in which BAE personnel beat several taxi drivers and damaged nine taxis in the Toit-Rouge quarter of Abidjan in retaliation for Yacouba's death (see Section 1.c.). Gohoun Gnapia was arrested. At year's end, no arrests had been made in Kassim Oumare's death. However, Dignite, the independent trade union that represents most taxi and truck drivers, filed a civil suit against the Minister of Security and the Prefect of Police in connection with Oumare's death.

On December 15, gendarmes arrested Camara Yaya and several others at a roadblock for possessing a small amount of cocaine and took them to the gendarmerie school. The gendarmes forced the detainees to run laps around the courtyard. Camara complained of poor health and stopped running, whereupon the gendarmes reportedly beat and killed him. Camara's family published an open letter to President Bedie demanding the arrest and punishment of the gendarmes responsible, but they were not known to have been arrested at year's end.

On December 23, police took Jean Claude Lama, a 16-year-old street child, from a roadblock to the first police precinct in Plateau district. The following morning the police commissioner announced that Lama had hanged himself in his cell. Friends of Lama said that he was looking forward to celebrating Christmas with them, and accused police of beating Lama on the night of his death. At year's end, no arrests had been made in the case, which authorities called a suicide.

At least four other prisoners are known to have died in custody, three in Toumodi and one in Bouake, as a direct result of harsh prison conditions; credible reports indicate that more than 700 persons died in prison in 1997 from all causes (see Section 1.c.).

There were no developments in the case of six detainees who died in prison in 1996. They had been held since the "active boycott" of the 1995 presidential election. Another active boycott prisoner, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment, died in prison in Bouake on August 16. However, in December the National Assembly voted unanimously to grant amnesty to all 28 persons still in prison for infractions related to the active boycott, of whom 18 had been tried, convicted, and sentenced, and 10 were still awaiting trial. (See Section 1.d.)

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The country acceded to the Convention Against Torture in 1995, but has enacted no implementing legislation. Although the Penal Code contains general strictures against violence against persons, neither the Constitution nor the Penal Code is known to provide specific protection for persons in custody against torture or other mistreatment, and police sometimes beat detainees or prisoners as punishment, or to extract confessions, according to local human rights groups. There were no public reports of government officials being tried for these abuses.

Jurists' union officials reported that police continue to beat suspects to obtain confessions and that suspects are afraid to press charges against the police officers involved. Press photographs regularly show criminal detainees with swollen or bruised faces and bodies. Several persons detained in Abidjan in April complained that police beat them (see Section 1.d.).

Police frequently used violence to restrain demonstrators. Riot police used tear gas and truncheons against protesting students on several occasions during the first half of the year. On at least one occasion police used lethal force against student protesters (see Sections 1.a. and 2.b.). Police used tear gas to quell a protest in May.

In two cases, military personnel were disciplined for physically abusing civilians. In June four soldiers were jailed for 30 days for beating an imam (Muslim religious leader) in a mosque during an attempt to arrest a thief. In August three members of the Republican Guard were tried for beating a man in an off-duty nightclub incident.

On October 12, following the death of a Riot Police officer who had been injured by a taxi (see Section 1.a.), members of the Riot Police Brigade damaged nine taxis and beat several taxi drivers in the Toitrouge quarter of Abidjan. BAE officers involved were arrested, and the Minister of Security promised to have the damaged taxis repaired. Whether that promise was kept, and whether the BAE officers were punished, are not known.

Police routinely harassed and abused noncitizen Africans (see Section 5).

In December the Government enacted legislation allowing lawyers to assist their clients at the stage of preliminary police hearings, that is, during the early stages of detention when torture and abuse may be most likely.

Prison conditions are harsh and life threatening. Problems include overcrowding, malnutrition, a high incidence of infectious disease, and lack of treatment facilities and medications. These conditions are responsible in part for a high prisoner death rate throughout the prison population. HIV/AIDS reportedly is also a significant mortality factor. It was credibly reported that more than 700 prisoners died in 1997. Comparably complete information for 1998 was not yet available at year's end, but at least 60 prisoners are known to have died during the year. Several journalists released from prison in 1996 reported that white-collar prisoners are afforded special treatment. The Government has offered access to prisons to nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) that seek to provide food and medical care to prisoners.

According to the Ivorian Human Rights League (LIDHO), conditions at the main prison of Abidjan have been especially hazardous for women, who were housed together with violent and nonviolent male criminals, as well as with minors. However, during the year the prison began to separate female and male prisoners and to maintain female guards for female prisoners and male guards for male prisoners. There continued to be occasional credible reports of childbirth in prison. However, during the year, unlike past years, there were no reports that guards raped female prisoners. Nevertheless, there were still reports that female prisoners engaged in sexual relations with their wardens in exchange for food and more privileges. There are still no health facilities for women, and reportedly a number of women have given birth at the prison without medical attention.

Unlike previous years, humanitarian NGO's did not report difficulty in gaining access to prisons. Several humanitarian NGO's, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, Prisonniers Sans Frontieres, and Medecins Sans Frontieres, had access to the prisons and visited them during the year to provide food and medical care to prisoners. However, none of these NGO's was specifically monitoring human rights conditions in the prisons. The LIDHO, which does monitor human rights conditions in prisons, did not visit prisons during the year because it remained unable to do so without giving advance notice; the LIDHO has applied for authorization to visit prisons at any time without advance notice, but has not received it.

d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The Government arbitrarily arrests and detains citizens. Under the Code of Penal Procedure, a public prosecutor may order the detention of a suspect for only 48 hours without bringing charges. A magistrate may order detention for up to 4 months but also must provide the Minister of Justice with a written justification for continued detention on a monthly basis. However, the law often is violated. Police have held persons for more than 48 hours without bringing charges. According to a member of a jurists' union, this practice is common, and magistrates often are not able to verify that those not charged are released.

Defendants do not have the right to a judicial determination of the legality of their detention. A judge may release pretrial detainees on provisional liberty, if the judge believes that the suspect is not likely to flee. The Attorney General in 1996 referred in public to the long detention periods suffered by prisoners awaiting trial in the country's principal prison, the MACA, listing a total prisoner population of 4,600, of whom 1,741 were detainees who had yet to be tried. Of the detainees, 470 had been detained for more than 2 years, 60 for at least 4 years, and 39 others between 5 and 12 years. Based on these figures, pretrial detainees at that time made up about 35 percent of the prison population. However, a law enacted in December limits pretrial detention to 10 months in civil cases and 22 months in criminal cases; if these limits are exceeded, the prisoner must be released on provisional liberty with no bail, and if the responsible judge takes no action, the prison director must act to free the suspect or face sanctions.

Ten persons arrested in connection with the active boycott of the 1995 presidential campaign were still in prison and awaiting trial, and more than 100 more were on provisional liberty but awaiting trial on

charges related to the active boycott, when, in December, the Government enacted a law granting amnesty to all persons convicted or charged in connection with that incident (see Section 3). An estimated 450 such persons originally were arrested. None was known to remain in custody at year's end.

Favide Innocent, a Beninese car importer arrested in 1994 pursuant to an extradition request by the Government of Togo, remained in detention in the MACA although various courts had ordered his release on several occasions, most recently in April. In November Innocent staged a hunger strike to protest his continued detention. However, he remained detained at year's end.

Although it is prohibited by law, police restrict access to some prisoners. Despite the frequency of arbitrary arrest, there is no accurate total of suspects held. In April police held over 800 unemployed persons and vagrants in investigative detention in Abidjan, after arresting many persons in an effort to identify criminals. Several persons reported that police beat them.

The military personnel arrested on charges of coup plotting in 1995 and released 14 months later remained at liberty, and four were reinstated. No additional members of the military services were detained without charges.

The Government does not use forced exile as a means of political control.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, in practice the judiciary is subject to executive branch and other outside influences. Although the judiciary is independent in ordinary criminal cases, it follows the lead of the executive in national security or politically sensitive cases. Judges serve at the pleasure of the executive and reports that they submit to political pressure are credible. One jurist claims that he was transferred out of Abidjan because of his public appeals for a more independent judiciary.

The formal judicial system is headed by a Supreme Court and includes the Court of Appeals and lower courts.

Military courts do not try civilians. Although there are no appellate courts within the military court system, persons convicted by a military tribunal may petition the Supreme Court to set aside the tribunal's verdict and order a retrial.

In rural areas, traditional institutions often administer justice at the village level, handling domestic disputes and minor land questions in accordance with customary law. Dispute resolution is by extended debate, with no known instance of resort to physical punishment. The formal court system increasingly is superseding these traditional mechanisms. In 1996 a Grand Mediator was appointed to settle disputes that cannot be resolved by traditional means. This office appears designed to bridge traditional and modern methods of dispute resolution. During the year, 149 disputes including land rights disputes were submitted to it.

The law provides for the right to public trial, although key evidence sometimes is given secretly. The presumption of innocence and the right of defendants to be present at their trials often are not observed. Those convicted have the right of appeal, although higher courts rarely overturn verdicts. Defendants accused of felonies or capital crimes have the right to legal counsel, and the judicial system provides for court-appointed attorneys; however, no free legal assistance is available. In practice many defendants

cannot afford private counsel, and court-appointed attorneys are not readily available.

In December the Government granted amnesty for all offenses committed by all persons in connection with the active boycott of the 1995 election. As a result, 33 persons arrested during the 1995 active boycott disturbances, who were serving terms ranging from 3 years' to life imprisonment, were released on December 24. There were no other reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference With Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Code of Penal Procedure specifies that a police official or investigative magistrate may conduct searches of homes without a judicial warrant if there is reason to believe that there is evidence on the premises concerning a crime. The official must have the prosecutor's agreement to retain any evidence seized in the search and is required to have witnesses to the search, which may not take place between 9:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m. In practice police sometimes use a general search warrant without a name or address. On occasion police have entered homes of non-Ivorian Africans (or apprehended them at large), taken them to local police stations, and extorted small amounts of money for alleged minor offenses.

Security forces reportedly monitored some private telephone conversations, but the extent of the practice is unknown. Government authorities monitored letters and parcels at the post office for potential criminal activity, and are widely believed to monitor private correspondence, although no evidence of this has been produced. The Government used students as informers at the University of Abidjan (see Section 2.a.).

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

Although the Constitution provides for freedom of expression, and private newspapers frequently criticize government policies, the Government imposes significant restrictions. The two government-owned daily newspapers, *Fraternite Matin* and *Ivoir' Soir*, offer little criticism of government policy, while government-owned radio and television offer none at all. While private newspapers (8 daily, 19 weekly), opposition leaders, and student groups voice their disapproval of government or presidential actions frequently and sometimes loudly, the Government does not tolerate what it considers insults or attacks on the honor of the country's highest officials. A law enacted in 1991, soon after the Government first allowed substantial numbers of private newspapers to operate, authorizes the State to initiate criminal libel prosecutions against persons who insult the President, the Prime Minister, foreign chiefs of state or government or their diplomatic representatives, or defame institutions of the State, or undermine the reputation of the nation. In addition, the State may criminalize a civil libel suit at its discretion and at the request of the plaintiff. Criminal libel is punishable by 3 months to 2 years in prison. Journalists exercise considerable self-censorship.

In October, a former minister filed a libel suit against staff of a private Abidjan-based daily newspaper, *Le Jour*, which had reported allegations of his involvement in a pedophilia scandal (see Section 5). In the same month, the Government announced that it would henceforth initiate criminal libel prosecutions only on behalf of the President, and would punish criminal libel convictions by fines rather than imprisonment except in cases of libel against the President. The preponderance of state-initiated criminal libel prosecutions of journalists since 1991 have alleged libel against the President.

In June government prosecutors briefly detained and initiated criminal libel charges against Guy Badieto and Jean-Louis Pehe, two journalists of the Abidjan-based weekly newspaper *L'Argument*. In May that

newspaper had reported that President Bedie's wife had accepted a bribe to induce officials to free a businessman being prosecuted for swindling the Government (see Section 3). In November, when the case came to trial, the judge dismissed the charges on the grounds that the President's wife had not filed charges herself and is not among the officials on behalf of whom the State can bring criminal libel charges. By year's end, the Government had not appealed the dismissal, and the President's wife had not filed a libel suit.

In an August letter to the publisher of Notre Voie, a private Abidjan-based daily newspaper affiliated with a major opposition party, the Minister of Communications cautioned that a series of articles on domestic political repression by the security forces that the newspaper had announced it would soon publish "might harm national security" and violate provisions of the 1991 press law that forbid the publication of national defense secrets.

On the night of October 11, the Abidjan offices of Notre Voie and an affiliated daily, Actuel, were entered forcibly and burglarized by three armed and hooded persons who stripped and beat the night guard and removed files on corruption involving senior government officials and ethnic discrimination in the armed forces, but left telephones, computers, and facsimile machines untouched. In 1995 the offices of Notre Voie, then called La Voie, had been burned by persons unknown. No arrest warrants have been issued in either case.

Both because literacy is far from universal, and because newspapers and television are relatively expensive, radio is the most important medium of mass communication. The Government-owned broadcast media company, Radiodiffusion Television Ivoirienne (RTI), owns two major radio stations; only the primary government radio station is broadcast nationwide. There are also four major private domestic radio stations: Radio France Internationale (RFI), British Broadcasting Company (BBC), Africa Number One and Radio Nostalgie. They broadcast on FM in Abidjan only, except for RFI, which in November signed an agreement with RTI to allow it to broadcast via relay antennas to the north and center of the country. The RFI and BBC stations broadcast only internationally produced programming. The Africa Number One station, which is 51 percent domestically owned, broadcasts 6 hours a day of domestically produced programming; the rest of the time it broadcasts programming from Africa Number One's headquarters in Libreville, Gabon. Radio Nostalgie is 51 percent owned by Radio Nostalgie France. The RFI, BBC, and Africa Number One stations all broadcast news and political commentary about Cote d'Ivoire. The private stations have complete control over their editorial content. However, no major private domestic radio station is known to be commonly critical of the Government in its editorials, and no journalist of any such station is known to have been prosecuted for libel, cautioned or harassed by the Government or members of the security forces.

Radio station license applications are adjudicated by a commission under the Ministry of Information, which has accepted applications and awarded licenses only once, in 1993. On that occasion, the commission denied 7 of 12 applications on a variety of grounds, including, in one case, affiliation with a major opposition political party.

During the year, the Government also authorized 43 community radio stations with very limited broadcast strength. Catholic church groups began to operate four community radio stations: Radio Espoir in Abidjan, Radio Paix Sanwi in Aboisso, Radio Notre Dame in Yamoussoukro, and Radio Dix-Huit Montagnes in Man. No Muslim station is yet broadcasting because the Government required that all major Muslim associations agree to share a single frequency; however, a Muslim association closely associated with the ruling party dissented (see Section 5).

There are two television stations that broadcast domestically produced programs. Both are owned and operated by the Government. Only one is broadcast nationwide. The only private television station,

Canal Horizon, is foreign-owned and broadcasts no domestically produced programs. The Government has not accepted any applications to establish a privately owned domestic television station.

The National Council of Audiovisual Communication, established in 1991 and formally organized in 1995, is responsible for regulating media access during the 2-week formal political campaign period and for resolving complaints about unfair media access. However, members of the ruling PDCI make up the majority of the membership of the council.

The Government does not restrict access to or distribution of electronic media. There are three domestic Internet service providers, which have begun operations since 1996. All three are private. The licensing requirements imposed by the government telecommunications regulatory body, ATCI, reportedly are not unduly restrictive.

The Government continues to exercise considerable influence over the official media's program content, news coverage, and other matters, using these media to promote government policies. Much of the news programming was devoted to the activities of the President, the Government, the PDCI, and pro-Bedie groups.

The case of 13 employees of the government broadcast media company, RTI, who had participated in April 1997 in a strike that reportedly caused an interruption of RTI broadcasting, came to trial in November. The RTI employees were tried on charges, filed in May 1997, of disturbing public order, willful destruction of public property, and interfering with public services (see Section 6.a.). The judge had not announced a verdict by year's end.

There were numerous student protests during the year (see Section 5.).

There is no known law specifically concerning academic freedom, although academics have cited laws of French origin concerning the operations of universities to support their claims of academic freedom. In practice the Government tolerates much academic freedom, but also inhibits political expression through its proprietary control of most educational facilities, even at the postsecondary level. Many prominent scholars active in opposition politics have retained their positions at state educational facilities. However, some teachers and professors suggest that they have been transferred or fear that they may be transferred to less desirable positions because of their political activities. According to student union statements, government security forces continued to use students as informers to monitor political activities at the University of Abidjan.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of assembly; however, in practice, the Government sometimes restricted this right during the first half of the year.

Groups that wish to hold demonstrations or rallies are required by law to submit a notice of their intent to do so to the Ministry of Security or the Ministry of Interior 48 hours before the proposed event. No law expressly authorizes the Government to ban public meetings or events for which advance notice has been given in the required manner. Nevertheless, the Government has sometimes denied the opposition permission to meet in public outdoor venues. In January the Government prohibited a February march planned by strikers belonging to Dignite, an independent federation of trade unions. However, the Government banned no other public events or meetings during the year. In September opposition parties held large public demonstrations against recent government-sponsored constitutional changes (see Section 3). Although the Government warned of dire consequences in the event of violence, it did not

ban the demonstrations, and no violence occurred.

Police repeatedly used violence to break up demonstrations of which the advance notice required by law had not been duly given. During the first half of the year, police forcibly suppressed many student demonstrations (see Section 1.c). Police generally used nonlethal force such as tear gas against demonstrators, and a police officer who killed a student protestor in May was tried and punished (see Section 1.a.).

A 1992 Antivandalism Law holds organizers of a march or demonstration responsible if any of the participants engage in violence. A leading civil rights NGO, the LIDHO, and all major opposition parties condemned the law as unduly vague and as one that imposed punishment on some persons for the crimes of others.

During the second half of the year, the Government neither banned nor broke up any public meetings or demonstrations, and did not invoke the Anti-Vandalism Law.

The Government restricts freedom of association formally, but generally respects it in practice. Opposition parties assert that the Constitution permits private associations to form. The Government rejects this interpretation and requires all organizations to register before commencing activities. In order to obtain registration, political parties must provide information on their founding members and produces internal statutes and political platforms consistent with the Constitution. At year's end, there were approximately 90 legally recognized political parties, of which 3 were represented in the National Assembly. There were no reports in the past 5 years of denial of registration. The law prohibits the formation of political parties along ethnic or religious lines.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and there are no known impediments to religious expression. No faith is favored officially. The Government permits the open practice of religion, and there are no restrictions on religious ceremonies or teaching.

According to a 1988 census, only about 25 percent of citizens were Muslim, about 23 percent were animist, and 31 percent were Christian; 13 percent practiced no religion. However, Muslims make up a substantially larger proportion of the total population including noncitizens. Nevertheless, some Muslims feel that their religious or ethnic affiliation makes them targets of discrimination by the Government with regard to both employment and the renewal of national identity cards (see Section 5). During the year, the Catholic Church began to operate community radio stations, but Muslims' efforts to gain authorization to operate similar stations have been unsuccessful (see Section 2.a.).

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

Although neither the Constitution nor any law provides for freedom of movement, the Government does not generally restrict internal travel; however, uniformed police, gendarmes, and water, forestry and customs officials commonly erect and man roadblocks on major roads where they demand that passing motorists or passengers produce identity and vehicle papers and regularly extort small amounts of money or goods for contrived or minor infractions. The killing of a taxi driver by a policeman in September occurred at such a roadblock during such an extortion attempt (see Section 1.a.).

Citizens normally may travel abroad and emigrate freely and have the right of voluntary repatriation. There are no known cases of revocation of citizenship.

The country is a party to the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, but has not enacted implementing legislation. The only current domestic statute is the 1990 immigration law, which includes refugees without specifying a separate legal status for them. Nevertheless, the Government respects the right to first asylum and does not deny recognition to refugees, either by law or custom. An estimated 124,000 Liberian refugees remain in the country; from 150,000 to 200,000 refugees have returned either under United Nations auspices or independently. There are also several thousand refugees from Sierra Leone and the Great Lakes region, including Rwanda and Burundi. There were no reports of persons who had a valid claim to asylum or refugee status being involuntarily repatriated to a country where they feared persecution.

The Government cooperates with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in health, education, and food distribution programs for refugees.

Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

Although the Constitution provides citizens with the right to change their government peacefully through democratic means, the Government limited this right in practice. Although opposition parties were legalized in 1990, the ruling PDCI party has controlled both the presidency and the national assembly continuously since independence in 1960, and no president has ever left office in consequence of an election. Between one-fifth and one-third of the country's adult population, including many lifelong residents of the country, are politically disenfranchised noncitizens (see Section 5).

In 1994 the Government enacted changes to the Electoral Code that included more restrictive parentage and residency requirements. These changes had the effect of excluding from the 1995 presidential election Alassane Ouattara, a major