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25 August 2003

CIV41868.FE

Côte d'Ivoire: Current situation of members of the Wè ethnic group, including where they live, their characteristics, and how they are treated by government authorities (2002-Aug. 2003)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

According to the Applied Linguistics Institute (Institut de linguistique appliquée, ILA) of the University of Côte d'Ivoire, the Wè, Bété and Dida belong to the Krou family, which inhabits southwestern Côte d'Ivoire (16 Apr. 1997). This source also indicated that the Wè, or Wèniou ("men who forgive easily"), include the Guéré and Wobé, [translation] "whom the colonial administration believed to be two different ethnic groups," but who [translation] "in reality, form a single entity" (Université de Côte d'Ivoire 16 Apr. 1997).

The ILA also indicated that [translation] "the Wè are very unevenly distributed across the territory they occupy; between two densely homelands, the so-called Wobé country in the North (bordering the savanna) and the corridor between the Nuon and Cavally in the West, lies a vast, very sparsely populated territory. However, the villages, which are most often stretched out along the roads, almost always have over 500 inhabitants" (ibid.).

A personal Internet page on the Wè stated that they:

[translation]

are a people from Western Africa who straddle between Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. The colonizers identified those in northern Côte-d'Ivoire as Wobé, those in the south as Guéré, and those in Liberia as Khran. However, these groups claim that they are one and the same people. They call themselves Wègnon, or sometimes Wègnondi, which means "men (gnon) who have mercy (Wè) in their hearts (di)."

In Côte d'Ivoire, the Wè country lies between the Cavally and Sassandra rivers. They number nearly half a million and are distributed among the sub-prefectures of Facobly, Kouibly, Bangolo, Duekoué, Guiglo, Taï, Blolequin and Toulepleu (Wobébli n.d.).

According to another source, the Guéré and Wobé constitute 3.4 and 1.7 per cent respectively of the population of Côte d'Ivoire (Leclerc 2000).

With regard to the war between the rebels and government forces, some sources indicated that, in western Côte d'Ivoire, in addition to the Bété, the ethnic group to which the President belongs, the Guéré, also called "Wè" (ICG 30 Apr. 2003, 22), generally support President Gbagbo and his government (ibid.; United States 21 Feb. 2003; *Libération* 26 May 2003).

A report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) describing the links between the Ivorian and Liberian conflicts stated that President Gbagbo had the support of, among others, Liberians living in Côte d'Ivoire, in particular the members of the Krahn ethnic group, which is described as "cousin" to the Guéré, in return for which the Ivorian president would help them overturn the regime of Charles Taylor in Liberia (30 Apr. 2003, 22). Referring to western Côte d'Ivoire, the report also indicated that, as a result of the alliances between the members of various ethnic groups, "a series of attacks and reprisals involving civilian populations has occurred since rebels lost then retook Man in December 2002" (ICG 30 Apr. 2003, 23). Thus, according to the report, the Ivorian government used Liberian agents to target Ivorian civilians, in particular the Yocouba, their Liberian Gio "cousins," and the Dioula, who are linked to the rebel forces, while the Ivorian Guéré and Liberian Krahn fighters and civilians were also targeted by the rebels, creating a cycle of inter-ethnic violence fuelled by "incendiary reports in press outlets close to Gbagbo" or rebel groups (ibid.).

Referring to the anti-French attitude (that is, opposition to the presence of French legionnaires) prevalent in regions where Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo is popular, an article published in the 26 May 2003 issue of *Libération* stated that [translation] "the anti-French sentiment was also fuelled by abuses committed against the Guéré in rebel-held areas." Quoting military sources, an article in the *Irish Times* published on 13 May 2003 indicated that "more than 100 local Guéré men, women and children had been killed since last Thursday by

immigrants from neighbouring Burkina Faso in attacks between the village of Bangola and the government-held western town of Duekoue."

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

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Africa Confidential

Africa Research Bulletin

IRB Databases

Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent

La Lettre hebdomadaire de la FIDH

Resource Centre country file. Côte d'Ivoire

West Africa

Internet sites, including :

Africetime

Allafrica

Amnesty International

BBC Africa

European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI.net)

Fraternité Matin

HRW

International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH)

Le Patriote

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