



General Conclusions on the Cote d'Ivoire Identification and Voter Registration Process

**The Carter Center
May 6, 2009**

The credibility of the forthcoming elections is an essential component for the success of the Cote d'Ivoire peace process. Following an invitation from the Ivorian authorities, the Carter Center launched an international election observation mission in November 2008. Coordinated by an office in Abidjan, the Center deployed three teams of observers in two phases: November 7 to December 15, 2008 and February 15 to March 30, 2009.¹ The overall conclusions below are based on these observations and the ongoing assessment of the Abidjan office.

The Cote d'Ivoire peace process has been guided by the Ouagadougou Political Accord (OPA) of March 4, 2007 and its accompanying agreements which place free and transparent elections as an essential step in the peace process. To prepare for the elections, the OPA called for the conduct of a joint population identification and voter registration process. Moreover, this process was to be preceded by two additional operations: mobile courts and the reconstruction of civil registries lost or destroyed during the civil war. These mobile courts issued some 700,000 birth certificates to those who were not registered during the civil war and in May 2008 the reconstruction of civil registries was officially launched though public participation was only enabled after the identification and voter registration was already underway.

The operational framework for the identification and voter registration was adopted May 31, 2008 but several months of political wrangling passed before agreement was reached on fully detailed plans. There were four distinct phases to the operation: population identification, data processing and verification to generate a provisional voter roll, public review of the provisional roll, and distribution of voter cards and identity cards. A private sector firm, SAGEM, was contracted to provide technical services for the population identification process, in collaboration with the National Identification Office (French acronym ONI) and under the supervision of the National Commission for Supervision of Identification (CNSI). For the voter registration component, SAGEM worked with the National Institute of Statistics (INS) under the supervision of the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI). Both operations were complex and onerous

¹ See attached full reports from each deployment phase and a map that illustrates observer deployment.

owing to the complex nature of the technology, challenges related to its application, and the large number of participant institutions.

The identification and registration process was to be effected through the use of 6,000 kits supplied by SAGEM and a similar number of INS computers dispatched to 11,000 collection centers staffed by 30,000 agents. The process was launched September 15, 2008 and planned to last six weeks. In fact, the process lasted 30 weeks until its suspension on March 31, 2009. A catch-up phase was launched April 25 in Abidjan and is to be extended to 1,500 collection centers across the country. During this phase, some 200 centers that never opened will be operational along with overseas centers.

From its inception the operation faced important financial, logistical and organizational difficulties. Insufficient funds were available to enable the simultaneous deployment of 6,000 technical teams, rendering the original schedule of operations untenable. Consequently, teams were deployed in stages, with a maximum of 3,500 teams operational at any one time. The slow disbursement of funds caused frequent work stoppages by technical agents over arrears in salary payment. Logistical problems also disrupted the activities of all of the institutional actors engaged in the operation. An excessive centralization of authority in Abidjan and poor communications between the central structures and regional units also hampered operations. A downward spiral resulted. The financial constraints and logistical problems, compounded by the organizational framework, delayed progress, and once the original schedule was breached, added contract costs with SAGEM required yet more government expenditure.

The process was also delayed by other factors apparently overlooked by the original implementation plan. Ivorians were keen to participate but, upon arrival of the technical teams, especially in rural areas, many people were informed they lacked the required documentation. People were thus pressed to acquire the necessary paperwork in haste, underscoring the need for a stronger public awareness campaign than was the case. The documentation requirements also highlighted the many practical difficulties facing the population. Local government offices were overwhelmed with the demand, were often distantly located, photocopiers were unavailable in rural areas, birth certificates were difficult to trace on the basis of existing identity cards, and applicants faced additional costs if they had to submit a judicial request to receive a birth certificate. The national authorities might have facilitated the identification process if they had communicated the appropriate birth records to local offices or offered free identification documents from the mobile courts. In addition, the public demand for the required documentation could not be met for several months, forcing people in the former rebel zone (CNO) to await the arrival of mobile courts as well as the launch of the process to reconstitute civil registries (the judicial phase of the reconstruction of civil registries is to conclude May 20). Overall, the documentation requirements and practical difficulties of complying with the process may have excluded certain categories of the population, notably the poor.

Marked by these difficulties, the operation nevertheless unfolded calmly and signaled a strong public interest to participate in a peaceful political process. Moreover, the Center found that technical agents generally sought to apply the appropriate official procedures

regarding identification. In some cases, agents may have been excessively exigent in their questioning of would-be registrants, possibly resulting in unfair rejections and a limited number of irregular registrations were also observed by the Center.

The difficulties described above created the opportunity for local elected officials and political party members to become involved through offers of material support (e.g. money to pay for fuel, food and lodging for technical agents). This assistance tended to favor presumed supporters of the eventual candidate or his political camp, lending a campaign-like atmosphere to the proceedings. On occasion, disputes and sporadic tensions erupted, typically sparked by individual claims of procedural irregularities or alleged foreigners ineligibly seeking registration. Such accusations were frequently found to be baseless, with many of the “accused” eventually being able to register. These instances did illustrate what might be described as spontaneous, informal, local ‘regulation’ or determination of identity and nationality. In addition to these local dynamics, the official identification process had to contend with a national political climate sometimes punctuated by the (unproven) allegations of several Ivorian political party leaders and media outlets that massive fraud was being perpetrated.

The identification and voter registration process includes several procedures to control for potential irregularities such as cross-checking for multiple registration against digital fingerprints and photographic visual comparison and to verify nationality claims against the 2000 electoral list. Although the digital fingerprint check was to have proceeded simultaneously with identification and registration, the necessary coordination centers were never established.

In light of these findings, the Carter Center concludes that the many systematic weaknesses evident in the operation stem from political choices that shaped the procedural and practical elements of implementation which in turn, was further undermined by inadequate planning. And yet, despite these limitations, Ivorians still seized the opportunity to participate and the technical agents and local CEI staff, often working with insufficient means, conducted themselves appropriately. A catch-up phase and registration of Ivorians abroad that is now underway will provide an additional opportunity to include those who have thus far been unable to participate.

President Gbagbo has recently stated tentatively, that based on CEI estimates, the elections could be held in late 2009. Though welcome, this announcement falls short of resolving the lingering uncertainty that hangs over the Ivorian electoral process. Several important questions will have to be addressed to establish a meaningful electoral calendar: How will irregular registrations be handled during the verification process? Which historical records will be used and in what manner to verify the nationality of persons who do not appear on the 2000 electoral list? How will authorities treat persons whose nationality may still be in question following the verification process? The CEI and other actors involved in these decisions must quickly establish clear and realistic means to manage these issues during the data processing and verification period.

The Carter Center also encourages the CEI to publish a detailed electoral calendar based on a realistic plan for the many election preparations yet to take place, including the printing and posting of the provisional voter roll, the final voter register, the distribution of voter cards, printing of ballot papers, logistical arrangements for the delivery of election materials, recruitment and training of election workers, establishment of voting, counting and tabulation of results procedures, and so on. In light of these elements, the timely announcement of an election date will provide Ivorian political leaders with the clear signal to commit themselves to the electoral process.

Cote d'Ivoire cannot live in a state of permanent transition. The people of Cote d'Ivoire must enjoy their right to choose freely and elect representatives who may then apply themselves to the work of restoring the day-to-day functioning of political institutions and the challenges of socio-economic development. It is therefore the responsibility of the Ouagadougou Political Accord signatories to sustain the momentum towards credible elections. The Carter Center is conscious of the complex requirements of the peace process – legal arrangements, security of the election process, restoration of government authority throughout the country, security sector reform, national reconciliation – but believes that many of these processes are in place or underway. In this spirit, the full implementation of the OPA and its supplementary agreements must progress with the necessary urgency in tandem with electoral preparations.