

# Ivory Coast turns to brute force to save forests

July 12 2013, by Christophe Koffi

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A woman looks at the ruins of Baleko-Niegre village that was completely razed during a military operation to save the protected Niegre forest, on June 22, 2013. The Ivorian government sent troops and bulldozers to reclaim the forest in southwestern Ivory Coast, leaving thousands of farmers, who had been illegally exploiting the land for years, without work and without homes.

It was a brutal end to a long-term problem. Faced with the dilemma of trying to save a protected forest, which had become home to thousands of people, the Ivory Coast government turned to force.

Soldiers, some armed with rocket launchers, and bulldozers were sent in to reclaim the southwestern [forest](#) of Niegre.

In a swift operation last month, the army completely razed the small town of Baleko-Niegre, tucked away in the tropical forest of the Sassandra region, about 360 kilometres (225 miles) west of the commercial capital Abidjan.

Little was spared: brick houses and clay huts were flattened, and the local school, church and marketplace were demolished. Camps deeper into the forest were also destroyed.

The government says the operation was to preserve Ivory Coast's woodland from illegal exploitation by people, often [farmers](#), who squat the land.

"The government has decided to take back control of its protected forests, which slipped away from it for 10 years," Minister of Water and Forestry Mathieu Babaud Darret said.

The June evacuation is believed to have left at least 20,000 people who had been living on the land for years bereft of homes and employment.

"We had occupied the protected forest in search of food," local farmer Raymond N'Dri Kouadio told AFP.

Those who had moved to the forest had done so to grow [cocoa](#), of which Ivory Coast is the world's leading producer.

Leon Koffi N'Goran, a man in his 80s who lived in the Niegre forest for 28 years, acknowledged that the villagers were engaged in "clandestine" activity.

But the evacuation was "brutal and surprising", he said.

Many of those who were forced to flee complain of more sinister abuses.



A placard reading 'Preserve Niagre forest's fauna and flora,' seen on June 23, 2013. The Ivorian government sent troops and bulldozers to reclaim the forest in southwestern Ivory Coast, leaving thousands of farmers, who had been illegally exploiting the land for years, without work and without homes after they razed Baleko-Niegre village.

The soldiers "even raped girls and they took away from me two motorbikes, 800,000 CFA francs (1,200 euros, \$1,600 dollars)", one resident said.

The claims of rape have been denied by authorities in the west African

state.

The government says it acted as part of a policy to regain control of protected woodland, exploited illegally during a decade of rebellion and warfare culminating in post-electoral violence in 2010-11 that claimed 3,000 lives.

During the years of troubles, many people began living in the forests, ignoring the government ban covering tracts of land rich in plant and animal life.

Sometimes, local warlords would "privatise" entire zones to exploit their resources.

Darret is convinced that it is time to act to prevent "the abusive and illegal exploitation" of some three million hectares (7.4 billion acres) of remaining forest in Ivory Coast.

Forest cover has dropped drastically since the 1960s, when it stood at 16 million hectares. Deforestation is blamed largely on the timber trade and the growth of the cocoa sector.

The desire of the Ivorian government to protect its forests appears to have support in Europe.

"The illegal exploitation of forests is a priority issue for Ivory Coast," said Thierry de Saint Maurice, the head of the European Union delegation in the country.

He added that [forestry](#) management poses considerable challenges in matters of "governance" and pleaded for "more regulations and more respect for rules".



Farmers leave Baleko-Niegre village after it was razed during a military operation to save the protected Niegre forest, on June 22, 2013. The Ivorian government sent troops and bulldozers to reclaim the forest in southwestern Ivory Coast, leaving thousands of farmers, who had been illegally exploiting the land for years, without work and without homes.

Conservation experts say the exploitation of forestry has been aided by corruption at government level.

"Corruption spreads like gangrene among officials from the water and forestry" ministry said Paul N'Goran, who works for the NGO Action for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Ivory Coast.

N'Goran claims that many departmental workers "have sold, without being troubled, hundreds of hectares, even whole domains of the forest" to politicians and bosses in the timber industry.

Authorities have said they may provide for the people of Niegre who lost their homes, though it is unclear how.

Many of the villagers have since sought refuge in other settlements, often with relatives.

Now people occupying other protected forests also fear for their future.

At Moussadougou, another big village built in the forest of Monogaga, west of Sassandra, residents dread that the bulldozers will come for them next.

"If we are chased out, there's only one thing left for me: to await my death," said 70-year-old Moussa Diaby.

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