

'Water is life': Ivory Coast city struggles with crippling drought

June 6 2018, by Patrick Fort



An Ivorian woman carries a heavy load after a distribution of safe drinking water in Bouake in early June

"All that comes out of the tap right now is cockroaches," said Honorine Babalou, a 20-year-old textile worker.

In Bouake, Ivory Coast's second city, the regular [water](#) supply trickled to a halt three months ago—a shortage that officials blame on a drought inflicted by global warming.

Like many other Bouake residents, Babalou balanced on her head a giant basin of fresh water drawn from a tanker truck which had trundled down sun-scorched clay tracks to make a delivery in a poor part of town.

The city of about 800,000 people, as estimated by the mayor, has long depended on the nearby Loka dam for around three-quarters of its water supply.

But the lake behind the dam has shrivelled to almost nothing. Hundreds of metres (yards) behind a sign that sternly declares "Fishing and Bathing Forbidden" lies a sad, muddy puddle.

"This is [climate change](#). It rains a lot less often, the sun has been stronger for several years," states Yeboue Ouffoue, 85, chief of the small village of Angoua-Yaokro, near the site where the dam was built in the late 1970s.

"Here we live off agriculture, but with the water shortage we can no longer plant the way we want. Income has dropped, that's for sure," Ouffoue said, expressing concern for some 300 villagers in his charge. "Times are hard."

"We've entered a time of water rationing in Bouake," said Mayor Nicolas Djibo, who also blames climate change, along with people who diverted waterways to exploit sand quarries in the region.



Young Ivorian women carrying precious water in the city where the taps have run dry

'Greeted like the Messiah'

Located in the centre of Ivory Coast, Bouake is known as a centre for "white gold," referring to the once lucrative cotton industry, and now "grey gold", the thriving cashew nut business.

The city formerly served as headquarters for rebels who helped bring President Alassane Ouattara to power in 2011 after a disputed election and a violent political crisis.

Today, faced with an existential threat, the city is looking at a scheme to

pipe in supplies from Lake Kossou, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) away.

This operation would take two years and cost an estimated 45 million euros (\$53 million), said Djibo, who hopes the World Bank will help finance it.

At the Alassane Ouattara 2 University in Bouake, the lack of water has forced many students to leave their rooms on campus to return home, some geography students told AFP.

Tanker trucks now provide emergency supplies, after attempts to drill into groundwater faltered. In a bid to ease the shortage, authorities sank wells in several parts of Bouake, but the water pumped fell far short of basic requirements.

"We're greeted like the Messiah, or something like that," joked driver Mohamed Lamine Diakite, whose truck carries 10,000 litres (2,500 gallons) of water. He announces his arrival in a district by pumping his horn to bring local residents running.



A supplier distributes water from a tanker truck to residents of Bouake at the start of July 2018

In the Sokoura district, women set out hundreds of basins and buckets on the ground, waiting for the water distribution under a broiling sun. There are few men around. Women carry away the heavy load for the family.

'Water is like treasure'

"We cannot live like this," said Mariam Kone, a trading woman with three children who also cares for her sick mother.

"You can go two or three days without washing yourself. Before this, we

drank water straight from the tap. Today, we adults hold back but the children don't understand. We have to pay for mineral water. The price has risen by 400 (CFA francs) to 800 (1.20 euros, \$1.40). We're spending more and more—we'll go broke," Kone said.

People in the 2 Bodjo district make similar protests. "This is too hard. This doesn't suit us. We have no water to wash or to drink. When the truck doesn't come, we have to take water from the well or swamps," said Chigata Soro, 30, who sells hot food at the roadside. "We need water. It's not too much to ask."

Others are angry at officialdom, accusing it of mismanaging both the problem and the solution.

"They tell us 'It's emergency measures' or 'Wait a couple of years' but the dam didn't go dry from one day to the next. The government, the authorities, the (water distribution company) SODECI—somebody handled this really badly," one resident said.

Awaiting her turn in line, Sabine Kone yelled at a neighbour: "Hands off my water!"

Explaining her sharp words, the young student said: "Water is like treasure now. And what's more, she wanted to fill her dirty flask from my bowl. This water we get is drinking water. She was going to make it dirty. Water is life!"

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