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Tensions have eased in most Abidjan neighbourhoods

ABIDJAN, 5 October 2011 (IRIN) - The Ivoirian government is rebranding the national army to change the force's negative image as it undergoes major reforms, which include demobilizing 10,000 soldiers by the end of the year, training up troops, and restructuring existing posts.   
  
The name of the current army - Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI), set up in March by President Alassane Ouattara - will revert back to Forces Armées Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire or (FANCI).   
  
While FRCI was made up mainly of ex-members of rebel group Forces Nouvelles (FN), which previously controlled northern Côte d'Ivoire, and volunteers; FANCI will be made up of 29,000 ex-Forces de Défense et de Sécurité (FDS) troops previously under President Gbagbo, 9,000 ex-FN troops, and 2,000volunteers, according to security experts.   
  
Given the decade-old division of Côte d'Ivoire and the behaviour of some of the FRCI troops in the violence that swept the country earlier this year, mistrust of the FRCI abounds. "There has been a significant evolution over the past two months. At the end of the war, FRCI were associated as much with causing insecurity as with providing security; now that is changing," said Gilles Yabi, WestAfrica head of the International Crisis Group (ICG).   
  
Many residents blame FRCI troops for delinquency and looting during the battle for Abidjan. Up to 30,000 volunteers joined FRCI during the conflict, none of them trained. "Most of the volunteers are not educated and many are just delinquents," house-keeper Yvette N, who lives in Attoban neighbourhood in northern Abidjan, told IRIN. "Even if there is less violence [now], I don't feel reassured when I see them," she told IRIN.   
  
Trust aside, security in Abidjan has improved: far fewer FRCI troops patrol the streets; almost no checkpoints remain; and reports of extortion and looting are way down, according to Guillaume Ngefa, human rights head at UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI). Countrywide, violent incidents are also down.   
  
**Tensions still high**   
  
But some neighbourhoods such as Abobo and Yopougon in Abidjan, remain tense. In mid-September, youths from the Blokosso neighbourhood - traditionally a pro-Gbagbo area -set fire to a FRCI vehicle after a FRCI member accidentally wounded a neighbourhood resident during a scuffle. FRCI fled the area, as a result.   
  
But in parts of the country's interior, especially in the south that used to be controlled by Gbagbo's regime in the past 10 years, "it's like in the first few days after the war... FRCI forces in the streets, and very few policemen or gendarmerie," said an Ivoirian journalist who specializes in security issues, and preferred anonymity.   
  
Insecurity is particularly acute in the west. From mid-July to mid-August 2011, UNOCI reported 26 extrajudicial or arbitrary killings committed by FRCI forces, most of them in the west; as well as reports of FRCI involvement in banditry and racketeering.  
  
"There remains a very tense relationship with civilians in the west, and FRCI resolve many problems by taking the law into their own hands," he said.   
  
**Zone commanders**   
  
One way Ouattara has tried to weaken the power of FRCI commanders has been to relieve them of their roles as zone commanders (who carved up the north and controlled territory), reappointing them into posts such as second-in-command of presidential security - thus divorcing them from their troops.   
  
But many still retain influence over their men. On the night of 23 September two groups of FRCI, under two different ex-zone commanders, came to blows in Yopougon, with one soldier killed.   
  
"We insist that it is no longer possible to work with this or that zone commander. It's finished," said Defence Minister Paul Koffi Koffi when he went to visit the site on 24 September. In a later interview with IRIN he said: "Our work is to re-educate the soldiers, particularly youths, and to make them change their behaviour."   
  
Analysts note that Ouattara has limited room for manoeuvre in drastically restructuring FRCI troops, as they helped bring him to power.   
  
The role of police and gendarmes in the security forces must be re-asserted, say security analysts. Since the conflict, 99 percent of gendarmes and police officers (made up with ex-FDS) are estimated to have returned to the country, as have 85 percent of the army's ground forces, according to the Defence Ministry.   
  
These returns have had an important psychological impact on Ivoirians, according to Ngefa.   
  
According to Koffi Koffi, barracks in the south of Abidjan, which had been occupied by FRCI forces, have now been returned to police and gendarmes.   
  
**Uncomfortable compromises**   
  
In Abidjan, FRCI, police and gendarmes undertake joint patrols, but only FRCI are armed. "It is as if the winners of the battle accepted to work with those they have beaten, but will oversee them every step of the way," said an African diplomat who wished to remain anonymous.   
  
An arms embargo, in place since 2004, has stopped the government from being able to arm the police and gendarmerie, said Koffi Koffi.   
  
Nominating a new head of the security forces to head both the former FDS and FN should create a better power balance, and make the chain of command clearer, said the ICG'sYabi.   
  
For now, policemen need to make some uncomfortable compromises, a police sergeant in Abidjan told IRIN, including being overseen by people who have in many cases undergone far less training than they have. "It was very tense at first, but things are improving gradually.There is still mistrust [between different troops], but I understand they cannot immediately re-arm those who fought against them."   
  
But as the country moves on, Ouattara's credibility - both internationally and nationally- relies on him taking an even-handed approach to accountability for crimes committed during the violence, Yabi said. While 58 ex-FDS forces are being investigated for [war crimes](http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=93307), FRCI forces have as yet remained untouched.   
  
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