

Summary

The government of Côte d'Ivoire has demonstrated a sustained and partisan failure to investigate, prosecute, or punish criminal offenses allegedly perpetrated by members of a student group called the Student Federation of Côte d'Ivoire (*Fédération Estudiantine et Scolaire de Côte d'Ivoire*, FESCI). Most FESCI members are staunch partisans of President Laurent Gbagbo, once a university professor, and his ruling Popular Ivorian Front party (*Front Populaire Ivoirien*, FPI). Today, FESCI is alternatively described by journalists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and even Ivorian government officials as a violent “pro-government militia” or a “mafia.”

Since at least 2002, FESCI has been responsible for politically and criminally motivated violence, including assault, extortion, and rape, often targeting perceived opponents of the ruling party. In the last several years, members of FESCI have been implicated in attacks on opposition ministers, magistrates, journalists, and human rights organizations, among others. Students considered associated with the northern-based rebellion or the political opposition have been murdered, raped, and severely beaten. In addition, FESCI is routinely associated with “mafia” type criminal behavior including extortion and protection rackets involving merchants working in and around university and high school facilities. In tandem with other pro-government youth groups such as the Young Patriots, FESCI’s members have been repeatedly mobilized since 2002 to stymie Côte d'Ivoire’s peace process at key junctures to the benefit of the FPI party.

In principle, FESCI is a non-partisan student union established to represent the entirety of the student body and to seek improvement in the conditions experienced by students attending university and high school. It began as a pro-democracy student group in early 1990 intent on pressing for reform of one-party rule. Branded as subversive by the government at the time, the organization was formally banned and forced underground soon after its creation, with many of its leaders hunted and jailed, only to re-emerge in 1997.

The story of FESCI's transformation from activists for multiparty democracy to political partisans, and from victims of government persecution to perpetrators of violent crimes with government protection, closely follows the tumultuous history of Côte d'Ivoire in the last two decades.

Since 2000, Côte d'Ivoire has been racked by a social, political, and military crisis that has accelerated economic decline, deepened political and ethnic divisions, and led to a scale of human rights abuses previously unseen in the nation's post-independence history. The crisis has in many ways been a story of the frustrations and alienation of Ivorian youth. During the past eight years, members of youth groups have both helped to foment armed rebellion resulting in an unsuccessful 2002 coup attempt—dividing the country between a rebel-controlled north and government-controlled south—and joined pro-government militias to fight against it. Youth groups have served as both pawns in a proxy war between rival political and military forces as well as leading protagonists in the unfolding drama and crisis that has engulfed the nation. FESCI is the cradle in which most of these youth movements were nurtured.

This report describes FESCI's roots and actions, together with the government's complacency, and at times complicity, in the violence and crimes perpetrated by FESCI members.

Since at least 2002, particularly in Abidjan's university system, FESCI has controlled many aspects of campus life, from who can live in a dorm room to which merchants are allowed to sell food to students. Some students, particularly those from a rival student organization perceived by FESCI to have sympathy for the rebels, fear to set foot on campus due to previous FESCI-led attacks on their members. Together, FESCI's actions, both on and off campus, have a chilling effect on the freedoms of expression and association for fellow students and professors. The fear FESCI generates casts a shadow over the openness of debates and public meetings, and forces rival student organizations to drastically curtail public activities.

FESCI-perpetrated attacks of the kind described in this report have been carried out with near-total impunity, often under the passive eye of government security forces,

including the police and gendarmes. On a few occasions, security forces have directly participated in human rights violations with FESCI members. This impunity has served to embolden FESCI members, who appear to feel themselves untouchable, and has resulted in the quasi institutionalization of violence in the university environment.

Many of the acts of violence involving FESCI members described in this report have been well publicized in the Ivorian press and were well known to police, judges, and other government officials interviewed by Human Rights Watch. Several of FESCI's victims have filed formal complaints with the appropriate authorities. However, in very few instances has a member of FESCI been investigated, much less tried and convicted. Those interviewed—from students and professors to policemen and judges—maintain that FESCI benefits from near total impunity due to its staunch support of President Gbagbo and his ruling FPI party.

FESCI has become a training ground for emerging Ivorian leadership. Guillaume Soro, the head of the New Forces rebels, and current prime minister in a unity government, led FESCI from 1995 to 1998. Charles Blé Goudé, head of Côte d'Ivoire's Young Patriots ultranationalist pro-government group, led FESCI from 1999 to 2001. The youth wings of several major political parties are or have been headed by former FESCI leaders.

Côte d'Ivoire's higher-educational system appears to be producing a generation of leaders who have cut their political teeth in a climate of intimidation, violence, and impunity, an environment in which dissent and difference of opinion are violently repressed. Such a system is not "the best school" for Ivorian democracy—and the government of Côte d'Ivoire should take immediate, concerted action to change it.

The government of Côte d'Ivoire has obligations under international human rights law to respect the right to life, right to bodily integrity, right to liberty and security of the person, and the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly—including by acting to prevent and prosecute private actors who are responsible for the infringement of these rights. Yet FESCI members have been able to commit crimes with near-total impunity.

The sense shared by many Ivorians that pro-government groups like FESCI are effectively “above the law” due to their allegiance to the ruling party erodes respect for bedrock institutions essential to building the rule of law such as impartial and independent courts and rights-respecting police, and undermines long-term prospects for the creation of a peaceful society.

Putting an end to the violence that has become synonymous with university life in Côte d’Ivoire will require sustained commitment by the government, especially the Ministries of Higher Education, Interior, and Justice. An important first step would be the establishment of a joint task force that meets regularly to monitor violence and other criminal activity in and around schools, and coordinates appropriate action in response.

Ending the impunity that allows violent activity to continue undeterred will require political will from the highest levels of the state, as well as the leaders of Côte d’Ivoire’s leading political parties, who must commit to supporting investigation and prosecution of crimes by youth groups such as FESCI both on and off campus. In addition, in upcoming presidential elections, political parties must help initiate a national dialogue on the subject of violence in schools and universities by articulating a platform for its mitigation. This will be critical to stem possible violence during the upcoming presidential elections, currently scheduled for late November.

Recommendations

To the Presidency

- Publicly denounce student violence, particularly by student organizations, and call upon student leaders to ensure that their organizations and members abide by the law and school regulations.
- Publicly commit to supporting the investigation and prosecution of human rights abuses and criminal activity carried out by pro-government groups such as FESCI.
- Establish a joint task force with members drawn from the Ministries of Higher Education, Interior, and Justice to meet regularly to monitor the violence in and around schools and coordinate appropriate action in response to criminal activity and threats to academic freedom.

To the Ministry of Justice

- Investigate and prosecute FESCI members implicated in violent crimes including murder, assault, rape, and other mafia-like practices, such as extortion and protection rackets, in and around universities and high schools.

To the Ministry of Interior

- Issue clear public orders to the police and other security forces to ensure that FESCI and other student groups, regardless of their political affiliations, are brought within the scope of the law and cannot act with impunity.
- Establish a dedicated police unit with special authority and responsibility to patrol and maintain law and order on university campuses and residences.

To the Ministry of Higher Education

- In collaboration with civil society (including student organizations, teachers' organizations, and human rights organizations), revise and expand the student code of conduct to emphasize, in particular, the importance of

respect for human rights in the educational context, and to set forth clear disciplinary measures to be taken in the event of code-of-conduct violations.

- Engage in awareness-raising activities on campus to promote the revised student code of conduct.
- Take appropriate disciplinary action (including suspension from campus and/or referral for police investigation, where appropriate) against those implicated in campus violence and criminality.
- Work closely with university authorities to develop measures to end improper control over university facilities, including dormitories, by FESCI and other student organizations. Institute disciplinary action and seek, where appropriate, criminal prosecutions of students and groups engaged in such activities.

To all Political Parties

- Publicly dissociate from any student organization that repeatedly engages in unlawful activity.
- Commit to referring for police investigation alleged criminal activity carried out by student and other youth groups.
- In upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, help initiate a national dialogue on the subject of violence in schools and universities by presenting a platform for its mitigation.

To the National Bureau of FESCI

- Take action to discourage and prevent crime by FESCI members, including by publicly denouncing past unlawful practices, instituting internal control mechanisms and education programs, and creating and enforcing organizational rules of conduct. Expel members involved in criminal activity.
- In collaboration with government ministries and members of civil society (including other student organizations, teachers' organizations, and human rights organizations), participate in the drafting of a revised student code of conduct; publicly pledge to abide by its requirements; and cooperate with university officials in enforcing the code against FESCI members.

- Cooperate with police investigations into alleged crimes committed by members of FESCI, including recent attacks on human rights organizations.
- Publicly endorse and participate in the activities of University Rights and Freedoms Watch (*Observatoire des droits et des libertés en milieu universitaire*, ODELMU), a center for civic and non-violence education on the university campus run by the Ivorian League for Human Rights (LIDHO).

To Local Human Rights and other Civil Society Organizations

- Continue to implement and expand a sensitization campaign in schools and universities regarding human rights and non-violent methods of social change.
- Help to promote greater national dialogue on the problem of violence in schools and universities by raising the issue in local media and public forums, and with political parties.

To the United States, France, the European Union, and other International Donors

- Call publicly and privately on the Ivorian government to investigate, and where applicable punish in accordance with international standards, those members of pro-government groups responsible for crimes, including murder, rape, assault, and extortion.
- Provide support to government and civil society programs that promote campus reconciliation, non-violent methods of social change, and human rights sensitization.