

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING Côte d'Ivoire Briefing June 2017

Côte d'Ivoire Summary 19 June 2017

Defence minister Alain Richard Donwahi announces the discovery of an arms cache at the residence of Souleymane Kamaraté Koné (aka SoultoSoul) in Bouaké. Kamaraté is director of protocol for parliamentary president and former Forces Nouvelles (FN) leader, Guillaume Soro. Sources allege that President Alassane Dramane Ouattara's (2011-present) Rassemblement des Républicains (RDR) party hopes to tarnish Soro's reputation by linking him to the arms cache. Soro denies knowledge of the arms cache and claims he is the target of a witch-hunt. Soro deflects questions of a possible presidential bid in 2020, while former President Henri Konan Bédié (1993-1999) claims that Soro will not run.

Donwahi announces arms cache discovery at residence of Soro's head of protocol

Defence minister **Alain Richard Donwahi** on 16 May announced the discovery of an 'arms cache' (or stockpile) – described in the press as “dozens of crates of weapons and ammunition”¹ – at the residence of **Souleymane Kamaraté Koné** (aka **SoultoSoul**) in **Bouaké (Vallée du Bandama District)**.² Kamaraté is director of protocol for parliamentary president and former **Forces Nouvelles (FN)** leader **Guillaume Soro**.³ Kamaraté is also a childhood friend of Soro: they were classmates at high school in Bouaké and at university in the economic capital, **Abidjan**, where they were both active members of the **Fédération Estudiantine et Scolaire de Côte d'Ivoire (FESCI)** (Ivorian student federation).⁴ Bouaké was the headquarters of the FN rebellion during the politico-military crisis of 2002-2007.

Donwahi confirmed that the government would begin an inquiry into the origin and ownership of the arms.⁵ Donwahi said that soldiers have seized the majority of the arms, while the government would seek to repossess more arms that are suspected to be missing.⁶ However, before the official discovery of the arms cache, certain battalions of the armed forces reportedly grabbed some of the arms secretly and without permission, including mint condition Kalashnikovs and heavy artillery.⁷ The military also discovered burned vehicles, which Donwahi believes shows that their owners sought to eliminate evidence.⁸

Donwahi's announcement came a few days after former FN soldiers, some reintegrated into the civil service and armed forces (mutineers), and others demobilised rebels, caused a flare-up in security tensions across **Côte d'Ivoire** (see *ARC Briefing Côte d'Ivoire 2017*). However, the arms cache discovery could have significant political implications for Soro, whom many analysts allege was the hidden instigator of the former rebel uprisings in January and May (see *ARC Briefing Côte d'Ivoire January 2017 & May 2017*).⁹ Commentators speculate that this may not be the only weapons stockpile,

“This weapons cache is not the only one. This is just the visible part of the iceberg. Soro holds over 60% of the military arms of the country. He unofficially holds 30% and officially holds 30% with

¹ Reuters, 8 Jun 2017.

² Connection Ivoirienne, 16 May 2017.

³ Connection Ivoirienne, 16 May 2017.

⁴ Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

⁵ Connection Ivoirienne, 16 May 2017.

⁶ Connection Ivoirienne, 16 May 2017.

⁷ RFI, 22 May 2017.

⁸ RFI, 22 May 2017.

⁹ Source, journalist, Abidjan

his allies within the army. Everyone knows that these weapons were not a recent acquisition: they were not destined for the mutineers or the demobilised rebels. They were for 2020.”¹⁰

Mutineers in Bouaké had received a tip on 14 May from an anonymous caller that they would be able to find weapons at Kamaraté’s residence, whilst they sought to stave off a government forces counter-attack.¹¹ The mutineers, at the time under attack from elite special forces operatives, were reportedly in a weak position, and were able to bolster their military power with the contents of the cache.¹² The government forces reportedly returned to Abidjan without the firepower to contest the mutineers.¹³ Furthermore, there was reportedly a gap in the chain of command of the armed forces, whereby certain soldiers refused to carry out chief of staff **Sékou Touré’s** orders to attack the mutineers.¹⁴ Mutineer sources quoted in the press stated that the government would not have met their requests were it not for the weapons cache (see *ARC Briefing Côte d’Ivoire May 2017*).¹⁵

The government began questioning senior military officers close to Soro – head of security, Lieutenant-Colonel **Youssouf Ouattara**, and deputy head of security, Lieutenant-Colonel **Adama Yeo** – on 31 May.¹⁶ Police forces and prosecutors questioned Kamaraté on several occasions between 26 and 30 May, after the discovery of the cache.¹⁷ Government spokesperson **Bruno Nabagné Koné** has confirmed that **United Nations (UN)** experts have since begun assisting the government inquiry.¹⁸ However, a UN peacekeeping mission spokesperson reportedly denied knowledge of UN assistance in the inquiry.¹⁹ Anonymous sources close to Soro claimed that no arms had been found at Kamaraté’s residence, perhaps evidence that soldiers had taken the arms without permission.²⁰ Kamaraté himself denied that the arms were in his possession, and denied knowing how they appeared at his Bouaké residence.²¹

Allegations of Soro’s continued military and security influence in Côte d’Ivoire are not without substance. According to a UN **Group of Experts on Côte d’Ivoire** report published in April 2016, Soro allegedly acquired 300 tonnes of arms after the 2010-2011 post-election crisis, and organised for their transport to major northern cities (formerly under rebel control) such as Bouaké and **Korhogo (Savanes District)**.²² The alleged acquisition of these arms violated the former UN **Security Council** arms embargo²³ in place from 2004 to April 2016.²⁴ After the post-electoral crisis, some of these arms reportedly came under the control of the new government of President **Alassane Dramane Ouattara’s** (2011-present) military arsenal, representing approximately 30% of the total in 2016.²⁵ However, some of the allegedly illegally acquired weapons stayed under the control of former FN rebels.²⁶ A **Burkina Faso** court issued an international arrest warrant against Soro in January 2016, after discovering 300 bulletproof vests and several grenades at his own private residence in **Ouagadougou** (see *ARC Briefing Côte d’Ivoire 2016*). Burkina Faso was a rear base for the FN rebellion during former President **Laurent Gbagbo’s** (2000-2011) regime.²⁷ Soro has, however, denied all

¹⁰ Source, political observer, Abidjan

¹¹ Reuters, 25 May 2017.

¹² Reuters, 25 May 2017.

¹³ Reuters, 25 May 2017.

¹⁴ Reuters, 25 May 2017.

¹⁵ Reuters, 25 May 2017.

¹⁶ Reuters, 31 May 2017.

¹⁷ Reuters, 31 May 2017.

¹⁸ Reuters, 8 Jun 2017.

¹⁹ Reuters, 8 Jun 2017.

²⁰ Jeune Afrique, 30 May 2017.

²¹ Jeune Afrique, 30 May 2017.

²² www.un.org

²³ There were three separate arms embargo UN Security Council resolutions – 1572, 2153 and 2219 – between 2004 and 2016, with varying revisions and range of severity.

²⁴ Multiple sources: RFI, 28 Apr 2016; www.sipri.org

²⁵ RFI, 28 Apr 2016.

²⁶ RFI, 28 Apr 2016.

²⁷ Source, journalist, Abidjan

involvement in these alleged events, while Ouattara reportedly found an ‘amicable’ agreement with Burkina Faso’s president, **Roch Marc Christian Kaboré** (2015-present).²⁸

... as Soro responds to allegations

Although Soro initially remained quiet in the press during the first few weeks of the revelations into the arms cache, on 7 June he agreed to an exclusive press interview²⁹ in order to counter reports he considered misinformed.³⁰ The press had claimed that Soro has a bad relationship with Ouattara, while the prime minister, **Amadou Gon Coulibaly**, is allegedly looking to “set [Soro] aside”³¹ from a possible presidential bid in 2020.³² Supporters of Soro in Bouaké claim the government is using the weapons cache to divert attention from its handling of the mutiny, and to tarnish Soro’s reputation.³³ A local Ivorian source alleges the inquiry is politically motivated,

“The discovery of the arms cache at [Kamaraté’s] residence foreshadows dangers regarding the upcoming presidential elections. Soro wants power in 2020. Everyone knows this – he will be a candidate... Conscious of the fact that the [Rassemblement des Républicains] RDR no longer wants him, he is preparing from the backstage... He knows how power operates. Recent Ivorian history teaches him that without arms and men, it is not easy to obtain power. Soro believes that after Ouattara it will be him. But he must manoeuvre militarily as well as politically.”³⁴

Other former members of the army claim that “Ouattara no longer believes [Soro] is as indispensable as before”³⁵ and that support for Soro’s former FN rebels is waning.³⁶ Soro refused to answer questions concerning the discovery of arms at Kamaraté’s residence, but confirmed that he is used to such allegations,

“Truthfully told, I expected it a little. Remember, when I left the prime minister’s office³⁷, the same people that are mobilising the gossip that you are mentioning had said that I had fallen out of favour with the president, and that I had been put away. They did not know that the president and I had thought about this at length. They ended up realising that, far from being sent to the garage, I was thriving in parliament... I am used to this sort of witch hunt. The essential thing for me is to have the confidence that exists between the head of state and me.”³⁸

Soro, rather than give credence to the possibility of his involvement, claims that the government has repeatedly ignored the mutineers’ demands,

“What have we done since the first mutiny in 2014 to find a solution to these soldiers’ demands? What have we done to give us enough operational military capacity to avoid a new mutiny attempt? Between January and May 2017, we have had four months to anticipate the crisis that finally broke out. For which result?”³⁹

... and Bédié claims Soro will not run for the presidency in 2020

Despite reputational obstacles, in recent months rumours have increased that Soro is already preparing a presidential bid, for example, by buying support of a young electorate, formerly loyal to Ouattara’s RDR party.⁴⁰ It is unclear how large national support for Soro is at present. However, Soro

²⁸ RFI, 22 May 2017.

²⁹ Soro is well known to be averse to press interviews, adding to the myth of his persona.

³⁰ Jeune Afrique, 7 Jun 2017.

³¹ Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

³² Jeune Afrique, 7 Jun 2017.

³³ Source, investigator, Abidjan

³⁴ Source, political observer, Abidjan

³⁵ Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

³⁶ Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

³⁷ Soro was prime minister from 2007 to 2012.

³⁸ Jeune Afrique, 7 Jun 2017.

³⁹ Jeune Afrique, 7 Jun 2017.

⁴⁰ Source, investigator, Abidjan

is reportedly developing political relationships abroad, to garner support for a possible bid, in **France, Morocco and Egypt**.⁴¹ Soro already has close personal relationships with **Togo's** President **Faure Gnassingbé** (2005-present) and **Republic of Congo's** President **Denis Sassou N'Guesso** (1997-present), although he has a bad relationship with Burkina Faso's President Kaboré, partly due to the criminal case against Soro in January 2016 (see above), in contrast to his relationship with former President **Blaise Compaoré** (1987-2014).⁴² Some analysts believe that Soro, despite his strategic nature and political qualities, will have difficulty in shaking off his reputation as an FN rebel.⁴³

Domestically, Soro has a conciliatory profile in religious and ethnic terms, crucial to political success in the complex Ivorian demographic environment. Soro is a Catholic of **Senufo**⁴⁴ ethnicity from northern border town **Ferkessedougou** (Savanes District), and married to **Sylvie Tagro**, a **Bété**.⁴⁵ Sylvie Tagro is the niece of **Désiré Tagro**, former interior minister and chief of staff under Gbagbo, allegedly assassinated in April 2011.⁴⁶ Soro neither confirms nor refutes the speculation surrounding his presidential bid, stating that he "*will do what is best for the people*".⁴⁷ However, amid tensions within the ruling **Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP)** ahead of the 2020 presidential elections, an external bid from someone of Soro's background represents the most significant threat to the dominance of the RDR and the **Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI)**. Sources claim that Soro is seeking to send a message to Ouattara,

*"[Soro's show of force with the mutiny] is a trial balloon and a message from Soro to the RDR and PDCI. This was a message in January when the PDCI and RDR wanted him out. On the eve of Soro's re-election as parliamentary president, Soro made his men speak. This was also a message in May to show that he still holds Bouaké, contrary to what people think. It is a way for [Soro] to tell them that his time has come and that 2020 is for him. The stability of the country will depend on him."*⁴⁸

After the RDR obtained an absolute majority of 50.1% in the **Assemblée Nationale** (parliament) in April, analysts believe that the RHDP coalition will not survive until the elections, despite repeated efforts from Ouattara and PDCI leader and former president, **Henri Konan Bédié** (1993-1999) to shore up the coalition (see *ARC Briefing Côte d'Ivoire April 2017*). Bédié, however, in a press interview on 17 June, claimed that Soro "*is not interested in 2020*" while confirming that leadership struggles within the PDCI will soon end.⁴⁹ Part of the RHDP coalition's agreement in supporting Ouattara's re-election candidacy in 2015 in **Daoukro**⁵⁰ was that the RHDP would put forward a PDCI candidate in 2020. Commentators believe that Ouattara will not respect this commitment. Bédié denies this is the case,

*"The PDCI will have a candidate. This will be the sole RHDP candidate... Reciprocity, it's what the call of Daoukro says... Ouattara and I we must meet so that this reciprocity takes place."*⁵¹

The RDR reportedly betrayed Soro,

"The RDR people betrayed him. Not only do they not want the alternation that the PDCI wants, they know the serious candidate is Soro. In their plan, they are going to betray the PDCI in 2020."

⁴¹ Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

⁴² Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

⁴³ Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

⁴⁴ Present in northern Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and southern **Mali**, roughly 10% of the national population.

⁴⁵ Predominantly present in cocoa producing western regions of Côte d'Ivoire, comprising roughly 18% of the national population.

⁴⁶ *Afriquesur7*, 20 Oct 2015.

⁴⁷ Jeune Afrique, 7 Jun 2017.

⁴⁸ Source, political commentator, Abidjan

⁴⁹ Jeune Afrique, 17 Jun 2017.

⁵⁰ Daoukro is Bédié's historic electoral stronghold. It is where Bédié made the famed "appel de Daoukro" (call of Daoukro) in September 2014, announcing his withdrawal and his support for Ouattara's presidential re-election.

⁵¹ Jeune Afrique, 17 Jun 2017.

*They have succeeded in dividing the **Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI)**⁵² which won't have resolved its internal tensions before being ready for 2020 elections. In front of them is Soro... who scares them like a scarecrow. They are afraid of him... They know of his influence among the RDR youths and within the army. So they are taking advantage of this situation to vilify [Soro]. That's why they have called on the UN experts to come help the inquiry. But the truth will be known. ”⁵³*

Soro maintains a persona of an enigmatic strategist. Long-serving diplomats in Abidjan continue to deem Soro “*very intelligent, impressive even*”.⁵⁴ The divergence between government communication and press speculation surrounding Soro's involvement in the weapons cache scandal is too significant to ignore. His discreet influence in military and political affairs in Côte d'Ivoire has persisted since the end of the crisis in 2011. However, the extent of the change of Soro's influence since then is difficult to assess. Analysts continue to follow his actions, indirect or not, very closely, anticipating a surge in tension ahead of the 2020 presidential elections. Soro appears to be factionalising supporters of the RDR, while Bédié continues to insist Ouattara will respect the call of Daoukro. The largest threat from Soro in the longer term appears to be political, while in the immediate term it seems Soro will flex his military weight in order to mitigate any government attempts to suppress him.

⁵² Gbagbo's party, now significantly weakened, with only three seats in parliament, since the trial against Gbagbo at the **International Criminal Court (ICC)**.

⁵³ Source, Soro ally, Abidjan

⁵⁴ Jeune Afrique, 12 Jun 2017.

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