

Cote d'Ivoire – The foe on the frontier

Snapshot Briefing

June 15, 2021

- **Three soldiers were killed on 12 June, when suspected Islamist extremists detonated a roadside bomb along a highway near the Zanzan district town of Tehini.**
- **The attack was the latest in a spate of violence in the Zanzan and Savanes districts, which is probably being perpetrated by militants.**
- **The government is expected to maintain a militaristic response to the violence; this will render the country – including Abidjan – at risk of reprisal attacks.**

At least three soldiers were killed, and four others wounded, when an improvised explosive device detonated along a roadway in the Zanzan district town of Tehini on 12 June. The explosion targeted a military patrol vehicle as it passed along a section of the Tehini-Togolokaye highway near the Burkina Faso border.

Incursions on the increase

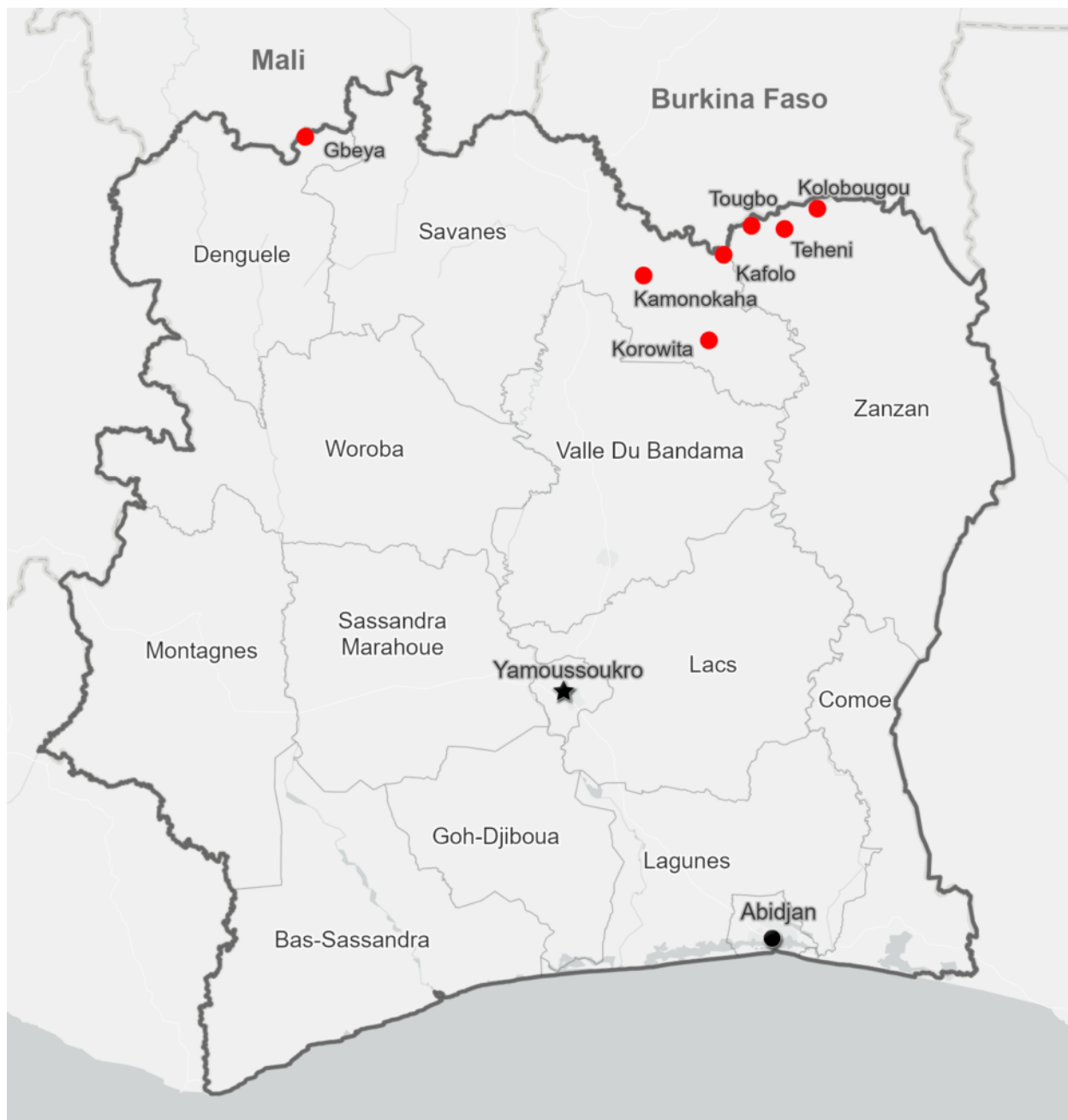
The incident was the latest in a spate of attacks along the country's northern borders with Burkina Faso and Mali, which have been attributed to Islamist extremists.

The first and arguably most notable of these incursions occurred overnight on 10/11 June 2020, when as many as 14 Ivorian soldiers were killed when their outpost came under attack by unidentified assailants near the Savanes district town of Kafolo. Within hours, another suspected militant attack was recorded on the Gbeya military outpost, near the Malian border in Cote d'Ivoire's north-west Denguele district, on the morning of 12 June.

Between then and the most recent attacks in Zanzan, several other acts of violence occurred along Cote d'Ivoire's northern border:

- **28 March 2021:** Several people were killed during two armed incursions. In the most significant attack, as many as 60 suspected Islamist extremists attacked the border town of Kafolo in Savanes district. In the second attack, a group of assailants targeted a gendarmerie post in Kolobougou, Zanzan district.
- **12 April 2021:** An explosive device was detonated along the Petit Nassian-Kafolo road in Savanes district. The explosion took place as a national gendarmerie vehicle was passing, suggesting that it was deliberately timed to target the vehicle.
- **20 May 2021:** Unidentified assailants launched an attack on two customs posts overnight in the northern Savanes district settlements of Kamonokaha and Korowita.
- **07 June 2021:** One Ivorian soldier was killed in an armed attack in the Zanzan district settlement of Tougbo.

Map: Suspected militant attacks in Cote d'Ivoire (10 June 2020 – 12 June 2021)



Militant motivations

While no responsibility was claimed for any of the aforementioned attacks, Ivorian authorities have largely attributed the violence to militants associated with the al-Qaeda-aligned [Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin \(JNIM\)](#) jihadist coalition, which is the group most active in areas of Burkina Faso and Mali that border Cote d'Ivoire.

Indeed, prior to the June 2020 attacks in Savanes and Denguele, the al-Qaeda transnational network issued a direct threat to the [Ivorian government of President Alassane Ouattara](#) in retaliation for what it deemed to be Cote d'Ivoire's imperialist actions in the Sahel, where the government has emerged as a key partner in France's regional Operation Barkhane counter-terrorism initiative.

At the time of al-Qaeda's May 2020 communique, the forces of Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso had launched joint operations along the mutual border. The most notable of these occurred in mid-May. In the first operation in Alidoukou – located 10 kilometres from the Kafolo outpost in Burkina Faso's Cascades region – a militant camp was dismantled, and several militants arrested.

A day later, a similar initiative was launched on the Ivorian side of the border in the Savanes district

settlement of Sangopari; the operation was described as unsuccessful, as the militants had reportedly abandoned the camp in question.

The target of both initiatives was a cell of around 50 Islamist militants believed to be members of the JNIM constituent movement through their affiliation with the [Macina Liberation Front \(MLF\)](#) – a principally Fulani-dominated extremist group which has emerged as one of the deadliest and most expansive of the extremist collective's membership. The 50-member cell was reported to be operating in an area straddling the Cote d'Ivoire-Burkinabe border, specifically between the Ivorian city of Ferkessedougou and south of the town of Banfora in neighbouring Burkina Faso.

Radicalisation and recruitment

While the initial wave of violence in northern Cote d'Ivoire was most likely perpetrated by militants undertaking cross-border incursions from positions in Burkina Faso, incidents recorded in recent weeks may well be being perpetrated by cells embedded within Ivorian territory.

Supporting this hypothesis was a recent study undertaken by Ivorian researcher Lassina Diarra. In a report entitled "Radicalization and perception of the terrorist threat in the far north of Cote d'Ivoire", Diarra – who conducted a study on the expansion of Islamist extremism within Cote d'Ivoire – claims that Burkina Faso- and Malia-based militants have settled in the Comoe forest in Cote d'Ivoire's Bounkani region (Zanzan district), where they are engaging in activities that include illegal trafficking, extortion and kidnapping.

Diarra claims that these militants have not only been responsible for the spate of recent attacks in Zanzan and Savanes, but are actively expanding their ranks by recruiting among local communities in these areas. According to Diarra, militants are offering potential recruits monetary payments and access to motorcycles; this has enticed a number of local residents to join the ranks of the militant groups.

The Signal

Militants appear to have established a more extensive operational presence in Cote d'Ivoire's northern Zanzan district in particular. This is supported by the usage of roadside explosives in the district; the purpose of such attacks may be to both neutralise Ivorian security patrols in the region and isolate territory in which militant cells can exert a degree of control. The use of this attack vector also indicates that militants with bomb-making expertise are now present within Ivorian territory, which could portend an evolution of their operational tactics to include suicide bombers or vehicle-borne explosive devices. Armed attacks in Savanes and Denguele are similarly expected to occur on an occasional basis.

The primary target of militant attacks in Zanzan, Savanes and Denguele will remain state-aligned interests, particularly security outposts and customs facilities; however, violence may extend to foreign (and civilian) interests. Among the more notable concerns is kidnapping for the purposes of ransom and extortion. It is for this reason that the United States Embassy has maintained its June 2020 travel advisory for northern Cote d'Ivoire, which prohibits its staff members from travelling to the country's northern and north-eastern regions.

Although extremist violence will remain most acute in these areas, militants may attempt acts of violence against urban centres elsewhere. In this regard, interests such as military barracks, Western-branded hotels, shopping centres, foreign diplomatic facilities and other establishments symbolic of Cote d'Ivoire's political and economic institutions may be targeted. [Abidjan will remain a particular area of focus for militants](#), given that the city hosts several of the aforementioned facilities, and on account of its centrality to Cote d'Ivoire's political and economic trajectories. Indeed, in June 2019, security authorities claimed to have arrested several Malian and Burkinabe nationals who were planning to launch an attack on the city's Camp Gallieni military headquarters and the Novotel hotel. Another potential target for acts of extremism is the International Counterterrorism Academy (AICT), which was inaugurated on 10 June in the Lagunes district town of Jacquleville, located 40 kilometres west of Abidjan. The purpose of the French-sponsored AICT is to train Ivorian and regional militaries in counter-terrorism initiatives aimed at mitigating the militant threat posed by JNIM and its constituents.

President Alassane Ouattara's response to the extremist threat in Cote d'Ivoire will take the form of strengthening bilateral defence relations with France and other stakeholders. Reinforcing this assessment, Commander of the Special Operations Command of the United States Army for Africa (SOCAF), Dagvin Anderson, held a meeting with Ivorian counterpart Alexandre Toure Apalo on 22 May in Abidjan. The pair discussed enhanced counter-terrorism cooperation between the United States and Cote

d'Ivoire in the northern regions of the latter country. The meeting came mere days after Ivorian authorities held meetings with Burkinabe forces regarding synergising counter-terrorism initiatives along the shared border area. Although specific details on the nature of these bilateral defence agreements were not disclosed, they will likely take the form of logistical support, joint counter-terrorism operations, training, and intelligence gathering and sharing. Again, these initiatives will put Cote d'Ivoire at a heightened threat of retaliatory violence by Islamist extremists.

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