

Interview: Kofi Annan says Ivory Coast mediators could draw on Kenya's example

Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who led Kenya's post-election mediation, says lessons learned in 2008 could help resolve the current Ivory Coast standoff.

When Kofi Annan came to [Kenya](#) in January 2008 to help mediate a political crisis that had already killed hundreds of people and displaced tens of thousands from their homes, there was very little outward sign of hope.

Two men had claimed victory in the presidential elections. Their supporters on the streets had taken up weapons, butchered their neighbors, made the country ungovernable, and brought the economy to a standstill. Numerous heads of state flew into Nairobi to mediate talks, only to fly out frustrated.

It was a situation, in short, bearing strong resemblance to the current stalemate in Ivory Coast, where a delegation of African Union presidents led by South African President Jacob Zuma is [now attempting to bring](#) two self-proclaimed presidents to the bargaining table.

In an interview, the former secretary general of the United Nations says mediators in Ivory Coast might look to Kenya for lessons in quelling post-election violence, such as sticking to a single mediation process, bringing opponents together in public, and pressing forward despite outbreaks of violence.

At the same time, however, Mr. Annan says he likely had an easier task negotiating an end to the crisis that struck Kenya after the December 2007 elections. For one thing, Kenya had been a stable democracy leading up to the crisis, with functioning institutions; for another, the election results were so deeply riddled with irregularities – from stuffed ballot boxes to deliberately spoiled ballots – that nobody, not even the electoral commission itself, knew who had really won. Kenya's politicians (unlike those in Ivory Coast) seemed desperate to have an outsider mediate a way out of the stalemate.

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“I think there is a striking difference between Cote D’Ivoire and the situation in Kenya,” says Mr. Annan in a recent phone interview, from his Kofi Annan Foundation in Geneva, Switzerland. “In Kenya, it was extremely difficult to determine who the winner was of the elections. Under these circumstances it was important to come to a mediated settlement, so that we could put an end to the violence.”

What makes Ivory Coast so challenging?

In Ivory Coast, opposition leader Alassane Ouattara was the clear winner and his victory was acknowledged by a number of institutions and election observer teams – from the African Union to the European Union and UN. The country's Independent Election Commission leader declared that Mr. Ouattara had won the election with some 55 percent of the vote, nearly 10 percentage points ahead of the incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo.

This lack of doubt should have made the transition easier, Mr. Annan says, but the fact that Ivory Coast recently emerged from civil war, and because the two dominant parties in this election had been on opposite sides of that civil war, the current impasse has become almost insurmountable. President Gbagbo “doesn’t want to leave,” says Annan, so “you are left with a situation of how you negotiate the departure of Gbagbo. This is where we are.”

As of press time, there has been very little information disclosed from the closed-door meetings of the panel of four African heads of state from South Africa, Mauritania, Tanzania, and Chad (the fifth panel member, from Burkina Faso, stayed away because of threats to his life) other than an suggestion that the two sides form a temporary power-sharing government. Ouattara’s representatives, including designated Prime Minister Guillaume Soro, have rejected this proposal outright.

In the meantime, street violence between activists from both sides has [escalated to full-scale fighting](#) between Gbagbo's loyal Army contingents and Ouattara's supportive Forces Nouvelles, a northern rebel group. Their fighting this week was the first breach in the country's six-year ceasefire. Hundreds of activists have been killed in the past few months, and UN sources have told reporters that perhaps 15 people have been killed this week alone.

Annan offers advice for mediation

In short, it's not an encouraging environment for talks – yet there are things that mediators can do to improve a situation, to reduce the levels of violence, and to provide incentives for the two sides to talk, says Annan.

He says the first step is to establish one, and only one, mediation process. “In these situations, you need one mediation process; you can’t have several mediation teams,” says Annan. “If you have several initiatives, the participants will forum-shop until they get what they want out of the mediation.”

The second step is to demonstrate forward momentum in the talks, and thus put the hard-liners on the backfoot. “What we observed in Kenya is that we needed to get the two leaders together, they had to be seen shaking hands in public and committing themselves to peaceful settlement of the conflict,” says Annan. “We did that in the first 48 hours, which reduced the political temperature and violence and gave us the time and space to negotiate.”

There may be setbacks and periodic outbreaks of violence, as occurred in Kenya, when the violence spread to towns like Naivasha that had once been peaceful, but had become warzones. But even these setbacks can actually improve the mediation process, forcing the two sides to focus their efforts on larger issues, rather than bickering over small ones to stall for time.

“The level of brutality and displacement of people shocked every Kenyan,” says Annan. “And this, ironically, helped pull them back from the brink. Against this horrific background and our persistence in the mediation process, a settlement was achieved in 41 days.”

“The question is why can’t that happen in Cote D’Ivoire?” Annan adds. “They’ve gone through civil war in the past 10 years, and serious efforts at healing and reconciliation have not taken place. The current crisis has deepened those divisions. The next leader will have to work hard to pull the country together.”