

Major Misinformation

By Venance Konan

What happened in Ivory Coast on the night of 19 to 20 August 2006? We recall that at that time we were in the midst of a so-called politico-military crisis, that the country had been split in two since September 2002, with the north occupied by an armed rebellion which was given the name "Forces Nouvelles" (New Forces) and the south occupied by the legal power of Mr. Laurent Gbagbo, President of the Republic, supported by those referred to as "Jeunes Patriotes" (Young Patriots). In March 2004, there was a bloody repression of a demonstration by the opposition, in November of the same year, a bomb dropped by a plane of the regular army that was attempting to free the town of Bouaké, fell by mistake on a French army camp, which led to reprisals by France and subsequently the repatriation of thousands of French nationals living in Ivory Coast. In 2005, a new Prime Minister was appointed, Mr. Charles Konan Banny, who was the governor of the Central Bank of the West African States (BECEAO). During that period, each day brought its surprises, its unexpected events. What happened in Ivory Coast on the night of 19 to 20 August 2006? Nothing at political or military level.

What history has retained is that on the night of 19 to 20 August 2006, a ship called Probo Koala, chartered by the company Trafigura, came and offloaded 528 m³ of strong-smelling chemical waste in several places in the town. This caused 10 deaths, 69 people admitted to hospital and 108 000 medical consultations. During the days that followed, we heard the worst predictions for the fate of Abidjan's inhabitants. People, presented as scientists, followed one after the other on the television and in newspapers announcing that the water table that provided the town with water would soon be poisoned, that this would lead to a lot of deaths, births of malformed babies and, worse still for men of Africa, sexual impotence. This led to panic throughout the country.

I personally was out of the country at the time of these events. Upon my return I found the country driven into hysteria. My wife also complained of having been indisposed by these toxic products and she was among the 108 000 people who consulted a doctor free of charge. Part of the toxic waste had been offloaded not far from our home, in a pond a few yards from the house of Poro Dagnogo, a photographer for *Fraternité matin*, the newspaper for which I was an employee at the time and for which I am currently the director. Poro and his family had been indisposed during the whole night by a smell of rotten eggs and the next morning they found their dog dead in the pond. Poro had left his windows open the day before because a TV announcement had explained that there would be an aerial mosquito control operation, that is to say insecticide was to be sprayed over the town from a plane to kill mosquitoes. Poro thought that the bad smell was that of the insecticide. Without further ado, he relocated a few days later when there was mention of toxic waste, until the odour disappeared. But he had to come back, since the house belonged to him and there was no way that he could just abandon it.

As for me, I found it risky for the head of government to announce that medical consultations would be free of charge. Who, in a country poor like ours, where health care is always too expensive for the average citizen, who, I repeat, would not jump on such an opportunity to be treated free of charge? In addition, everyone knew that that there was a possibility of being paid damages. Consequently, everyone rushed to the hospitals. And soon everything going wrong in

the country was the fault of the toxic waste. One evening when I was with friends in scrubland in the 220 Logements district, where no waste had been deposited, someone mentioned a little girl who had just died in the district due to the effects of the toxic waste. I spontaneously asked whether there had been an autopsy, and when I was asked why I was asking such a question, I said that I was simply wondering how a link was made between this death and toxic waste, since, before this waste, people were dying in our districts every day from various illnesses. My friends poured insults on me and asked what game I was playing by asking such a question. No discussion was possible.

It was in this atmosphere that, on 10 September, I saw in the front page article of my newspaper a photo showing the French Minister of Cooperation, Ms Girardin, the Ivory Coast Prime Minister and the French Ambassador on the Akouédo landfill, where the largest amount of waste had been deposited. The Prime Minister and the French Minister were wearing gas masks, but the French ambassador was not wearing one. Strange! The French were not concerned that their ambassador would die? A few days later I met this ambassador with whom I was on good terms and I asked him why he had not worn a gas mask too. And he replied that he knew that there was no risk. "It stinks but it is not dangerous", he told me. From then on I would stand back and take stock, especially when large sums of money were involved. Billions of CFA Fr. were mentioned and compensation for victims. Whoever dared to express any doubts as to the toxicity of this notorious waste really ran the risk of being beaten up. We will remember that Ivory Coast was, at that time, split in two, bled dry and impoverished. The little wealth that there was in the country was blundered in the south by the "Jeunes Patriotes" and in the North by the "Forces nouvelles". The rest of the population did what they could to survive. Then everyone's eyes started to shine when people started to talk about compensation for the victims. But who was a victim and who was not? It was said that 108 000 people had consulted a doctor at the beginning and had been registered. Those who were not registered were kicking themselves and trying to find a way of correcting this error. Those who had not consulted at the start of the affair too. But Ivory Coast is a country where a solution is found for all problems. One of our favourite sayings is "there's nothing to fear, it's just a man who is frightened". Associations of toxic waste victims were created to help the victims obtain compensation. It is not very difficult to be a victim. You just need to pay a certain sum and get yourself recorded on a list. I know people who were living hundreds of kilometres from Abidjan at the time of the events who become victims of the toxic waste. It is in this way too that certain people became suddenly very rich. You know what happened next. The company Trafigura gave 100 billion CFA Frs. to the Ivory Coast government that promised to build hospitals. Nothing at all was built. There was question of decontaminating the places where the toxic waste had been dumped. A company came from France, collected polluted earth and put it in bags. And it was left there. And life continued as usual. The question that worried us the most was that of the compensation for victims, and, above all, how to become a victim. Political life also continued as usual. We changed Prime Minister, we finally arrived at a presidential election, we waged war to know who had won, and the effects of the toxic waste faded away. From time to time newspapers announced that victims would be shortly compensated, new associations were created, and new victims, who were going to pay to be registered, appeared out of nowhere.

In 2012, that is to say six years after the events, I noticed that the bags that contained the toxic waste were still in the same place. And no one seemed to be worried. Neither the State nor those living nearby. But we had been told that this waste could contaminate the water table which provides water for the town of Abidjan with more than 4 million inhabitants, that our wives would be giving birth to monsters, and that it would make us impotent. I then asked in an article

whether our Government was irresponsible or an assassin to leave such products in the open air, and if this also applied to bodies such as the WHO or the UN. I also asked myself whether, finally, we had not been treated as idiots, and whether this waste really was toxic at all. The next day, the members of an association for the toxic waste victims, led by their chairman, came to demonstrate in front of my newspaper's office, demanding my dismissal. I understood that I had hit a raw nerve, what we call in Ivory Coast the "mangement" of the chairman of this association, that is to say his livelihood.

I was not dismissed. The associations for the toxic waste victims still exist. The newspaper that I direct even has one and holds meetings from time to time during which they convince each other that they will soon receive a lot of money; I read from time to time other articles announcing compensation for the victims in the near future, but I believe that these victims themselves believe this less and less. I conclude by informing you that Poro Dagnogo, the *Fraternité Matin* photographer whose dog was found dead in the pond of toxic waste, is still alive and still working at *Fraternité matin*, his family and neighbours are in good health, just as Ambassador Janier, who did not wear a gas mask when visiting the Akouédo toxic waste. The bags that contained the polluted earth have finally been removed, but I am unable to tell you what has been done with them.