The following report is based on open-source reporting.

March 15, 2016

Summary

On March 13 at approximately 1:30 pm, at least three gunmen attacked the Grand-Bassam beach resort area, located 25 miles east of Côte d'Ivoire's largest city, Abidjan. The gunmen stormed Bassam beach and fired at guests at several beachfront hotels popular with Westerners and expatriates. At least 15 civilians and three members of the security forces were killed. According to media reports, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for the attack. The incident follows similar recent attacks staged by AQIM militants against hotels popular with foreign nationals in Bamako, Mali, and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

Attack Details

The gunmen attacked civilians at one of the country's top destinations for both Ivoirians and foreigners. According to media reports, the gunmen used assault rifles and grenades while roaming the beach before targeting the L'Etoile du Sud hotel as well as two other nearby hotels (Nouvelle Paillote Hotel and Koral Beach Hotel).

According to government officials, the 18 dead included 15 civilians -- including foreigners from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, France (4), Germany, and Mali -- and three Ivoirian special forces. At least 33 people were wounded. According to the authorities, all three assailants were killed by security forces.

A local media source quoted an eyewitness who said that the attackers approached the beach in a fishing boat, but this information has not been corroborated.

Security Response

The Ivoirian government responded to the assault by deploying military personnel to the resort, and was able to put an end to the attack relatively quickly. According to the government, sites in Grand-Bassam were among more than 100 that had been under heightened surveillance in recent months.

In January, French authorities reportedly had warned security officials in Côte d'Ivoire of possible attacks in major cities. Although reports at that time did not provide details concerning the source or nature of the information, and did not indicate that an attack was imminent, they did imply that militants could attack sites popular with foreigners, including beaches and hotels. These reports also led to the erroneous reporting that the U.S. Government had issued a warning to U.S. citizens of an impending attack in Côte d'Ivoire, which prompted U.S. Embassy Abidjan to issue a Security Message clarifying the issue while reiterating its advice to U.S. citizens to maintain a high level of vigilance given the recent attacks in the region.
Following the March 13 attack, authorities are implementing further security measures. Additional security personnel are reportedly being deployed to public areas, such as government buildings, transport hubs, and schools. A heavy security presence is also likely at other areas popular with Westerners, including hotels, foreign embassies, and diplomatic residencies.

**Significance**

The attack in Grand-Bassam was the first of its kind in Côte d’Ivoire. While officials had been concerned about an attack in the wake of similar assaults by AQIM in neighboring Burkina Faso and Mali, it is unprecedented that AQIM executed an attack this far south and outside of its normal area of operation. The most recent attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso occurred in cities in close proximity to the vast desert areas of the Sahel where there has long been an active militant presence. While Côte d’Ivoire shares a northern border with both countries, the distance between southern Côte d’Ivoire (where Abidjan and Grand-Bassam are located) and the militant stronghold in northern Mali is over 1,000 miles. The attack therefore confirms the intent by al-Qa’ida-aligned terrorists in the region to expand their area of operation.

The attack is also in keeping with AQIM’s goal of attacking countries that contribute forces to the UN mission in Mali. Like Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire participates in the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali and hosts French troops.

The attack in Grand-Bassam was the third major AQIM-claimed attack on a West African hotel in six months. At least 20 people were killed in a siege at the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali’s capital in November, and an assault on a hotel and café in Burkina Faso’s capital in January killed 30 people. By targeting hotels with an international clientele, the terrorists seek to not only kill foreigners but damage the host country’s tourism sector and hamper the attraction of foreign investors.

**Claim of Responsibility**

AQIM issued a short claim of responsibility online, claiming that “Three heroes from the knights of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb were able to break into the tourist resort city of Grand Bassam.” Its message suggested that a larger statement would be released soon. Mauritanian news site Al-Akhbar reported that sources within AQIM told the site that AQIM’s Sahara Emirate and its al-Murabitoun Brigade were behind the attack. Both groups have been responsible for similar hotel attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Al-Murabitoun is led by known terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who is openly loyal to al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al Zawahiri and has denounced the Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS). Belmokhtar has demonstrated an emphasis on coordinating attacks that target Westerners and/or Western institutions. Under his command, some notable attacks have included:

- [French mine attack in Agadez, Niger](https://www.bbc.com/), in 2013;
- [Multi-national gas facility attack in In Amenas, Algeria](https://www.bbc.com/), in 2013;
- [Bamako nightclub attack](https://www.bbc.com/), in March 2015;
- [British mine attack in northern Burkina Faso](https://www.bbc.com/), in April 2015;
- Hotel attack in central Malian town of Sevare in August 2015;
- [Radisson Blu Hotel attack in Bamako](https://www.bbc.com/), in November 2015; and
- [Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino restaurant attack](https://www.bbc.com/), in Ouagadougou in January 2016.
The November 2015 Bamako attack heralded the reintegration of al-Murabitoun into AQIM. Belmokhtar was originally a commander in AQIM but split with the group in 2012 over personal disagreements with Abdelmalek Droukdel, the leader of AQIM. In December 2015, AQIM’s al-Andalus Media released an audio statement from Droukdel announcing the merger of al-Murabitoun into its ranks.

The Sahara Emirate of AQIM is led by Yahya Abu Hammam. The group is based in northern Mali, but has shown that it is capable of striking in far reaching places. The group is believed to have participated in the attack on the Radisson Blu in Mali as well as the kidnapping of an Australian couple in northern Burkina Faso in January 2016.

**Constituent Response**

None of the hotels appear to have any U.S. private-sector nexus, but the Grand-Bassam beachfront is an area frequented by employees of U.S. private-sector organizations operating in Côte d’Ivoire. Several OSAC constituents noted that they had employees in Grand-Bassam during the attack, while others noted that they had employees scheduled to travel there in the coming days and weeks.

During the attack, most constituents instructed their employees in Abidjan and surrounding areas to shelter in place, echoing instructions that came from U.S. Embassy Abidjan. Following the attacks, a number of organizations have reported suspending upcoming travel to Côte d’Ivoire until further notice.

**For Further Information**

Please direct any questions regarding this report or the general security situation in Côte d’Ivoire to OSAC’s [Regional Analyst for West and Central Africa](mailto:regional-analyst-west-central-africa@osac.gov).