

# Casamance

## Principal protagonists

Government of Senegal.

Casamance (Diola) people; *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance* (MDFC).

## Nature of conflict

Local autonomy/independence conflict, further fuelled by factional disputes in Guinea-Bissau. Widespread fighting between Senegalese/Bissauan forces and MDFC factions.

☠ 3,500+.

👤 17,000 IDP (2005); over 15,000, Gambia, August 2006

## Population/ethnic composition

220,000. Majority from Diola people, who form 3.7% of Senegalese population.

## Territorial extent

Casamance region of Senegal: 65,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

## Timeline

- 1880s: Senegal becomes part of French colonial empire. Unrest in Casamance continues until 1943.
- 20 Aug 1960: Senegal achieves independence from France.
- 1982: Arrest of local leaders sparks unrest in Casamance.
- 1990s: Conflict escalates with MDFC attacks on Senegalese military installations. Several ceasefires agreed but all fail.
- 1998-9: Senegal becomes embroiled in civil war in Guinea-Bissau.
- Mar 2001: Peace agreement fails to halt fighting, but exacerbates tensions between political and military wings of MDFC.
- 30 Dec 2004: Ceasefire agreed.
- Mar 2006: Fighting resumes between Southern Front faction of MDFC and Guinea-Bissau/Senegalese forces.

## Current status

Unstable. Repeated failures of ceasefires and factionalism within the MDFC continue to bedevil chances for lasting settlement.



Rarely reaching the international headlines, the Casamance dispute is nevertheless one of the longest-running in Africa. It has resulted in over 3,500 civilian deaths and significant international regional tensions from 1982 to the present. Up to 4,500 Senegalese regular forces have at times been tied down in the conflict. It is a classic case of a post-colonial conflict involving a disadvantaged and geographically remote ethnic minority whose population straddles international (i.e., colonial era) borders.

Casamance is a fertile region of southern Senegal lying between Gambia (which effectively splits it off from the rest of Senegal) and Guinea-Bissau. The main ethnic group, the Diola (Jola), comprise only a small minority of the Senegalese population as a whole. Diola populations also live in Gambia and Guinea-Bissau.

The region is named for the Casamance River, which like Gambia to the north, divides the eponymous territory north-south. Formally, Casamance comprises two regions, Basse Casamance in the west and the larger Haute Casamance to the east. Senegalese regions are officially named after their capitals; Basse Casamance and Haute Casamance being, respectively, Ziguinchor and Kolda. Ziguinchor, with its population of 130,000, is the largest settlement, and as such is considered the capital of Casamance as a whole. It rose to prominence as a slaving centre during the 16th century and retains a

Portuguese linguistic influence. (The name of the town is purportedly a corruption of the Portuguese *'cheguei e choram'* – 'I came and they cry' – an allusion to the slave trade.)

The Diola, an independently-minded people, have a long history of resistance to central authority. During the French colonial period, French administrators generally governed Senegal through local chiefs. The Diola, however, did not have such a formal hierarchical system of government, and attempts by the French to impose Mandinka chiefs to administer Casamance proved massively unpopular and counter-productive. Civil unrest flared repeatedly throughout the region. In 1943 a full scale uprising, led by a traditional priestess, Aline Sitoe Diatta, was suppressed. The imprisonment and subsequent death of Sitoe in a Timbuktu gaol created a national myth that "Casamance's Joan of Arc" would one day return to lead her people.

The current conflict dates from 1982, when a pro-independence demonstration in Ziguinchor by the *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de la Casamance* (MFDC) was violently suppressed and its leaders imprisoned. Sporadic tit-for-tat violence continued throughout the 1980s, and in 1990 the MFDC escalated the conflict with attacks on Senegalese military bases. The Senegalese Army responded with counter-attacks on MFDC camps in southern Casamance and Guinea-Bissau as well as with generally stricter civil security measures.

Throughout the Casamance conflict, Dakar has periodically accused Guinea-Bissau of giving formal support to the rebels. Despite Bissauan denials, there is no doubt that MFDC bases were frequently (according to Dakar, exclusively) located among their fellow Diola in Guinea-Bissau from where they could mount hit-and-run attacks on Senegalese targets. MFDC fighters were also involved (against a Senegalese supported faction) in Guinea-Bissau's civil war of 1998-9. Guinea-Bissauan soldiers displaced by their country's civil war have, in turn, fought alongside the MFDC in Casamance. Gambia has also, on occasion, become embroiled in the dispute, both as potential mediator and, allegedly, as harbourer of MFDC rebels. Both Guinea-Bissau and Gambia have received civilian refugees during the course of the conflict.

Intermittent attempts at peacemaking, including several ceasefires signed during the 1990s, failed to resolve the conflict. In March 2000, however, Abdoulaye Wade succeeded Abdou Diouf as President of Senegal, in part on a platform of ending the fighting, and concerted efforts were made to bring an end to the dispute. Wade's initial efforts – against a background of increased violence in Casamance and tangled factionalism in Guinea-Bissau – focused on Bissauan involvement in Casamance. These efforts were fuelled by the discovery of a dead Bissauan soldier and Bissauan equipment following a substantial cross-border MDFC attack in April 2000, but were, however, largely unsuccessful in moving the peace process forward.

Faced with the failure of his initiative, Wade opened direct negotiations with the MDFC and its veteran leader, the Catholic priest Father Augustin Diamacoune Senghor. (Unlike the rest of Senegal, which is predominantly Muslim, Casamance has a strong Catholic influence.) The two leaders signed a peace agreement in March 2001, which, while it allowed for humanitarian relief, minefield clearance and mutual prisoner exchanges, did not commit Dakar to autonomy for Casamance. This 'betrayal' heightened tensions between the military and political wings of the MDFC, and low intensity fighting (including between MDFC factions) continued.

Wade and Senghor signed a further peace agreement, with considerable ceremony, in Ziguinchor in December 2004, but further talks became stalled as it became apparent that the more moderate Ziguinchor-based MDFC lead-

ers were unable to reign in the militants. In March 2006, however, with an anti-MDFC government once again in power in Bissau, the Guinea-Bissauan army attempted to eliminate the Southern Front (the more militant wing of the MDFC) who were based in northern Guinea-Bissau. After fierce fighting, the Southern Front fought their way into Casamance itself, re-igniting conflict throughout the region and driving thousands of refugees into Gambia. Further fierce fighting took place in September and October 2006.

Talks later resumed between Dakar and the MDFC, but in December 2007 the government's main envoy was assassinated by an unknown assailant. In view of the factionalism within the MDFC and the repeated failure of ceasefires to hold, the prospects for lasting peace in the region remain low.