

US and French troops help force Côte D'Ivoire cease-fire

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Anti-government forces met Thursday with Côte D'Ivoire/Ivory Coast officials to agree a cease-fire after weeks of fighting that began on September 19.

The cease-fire was drawn up by mediators from neighbouring West African countries, but came after US and French troops were sent to the region. Commentators are still sceptical of the possibility of long-term stability. A BBC correspondent stated that the government is preparing for an offensive at the same time as signing the truce.

About 200 US troops, said to be mainly special forces, were sent from Germany into the West African country of Côte D'Ivoire last week following a coup attempt. France also sent up to 200 soldiers, including paratroopers, on top of the 600 already stationed in the country. A small team of British military experts were also sent in. Deploying armoured vehicles and helicopters, the French troops evacuated over 2,000 people, mainly Europeans and Americans, who were trapped in the northern cities of Bouaké and Korhogo by rebel troops.

Hundreds of dissident soldiers had attempted to take over the commercial capital Abidjan but were repelled by troops loyal to President Laurent Gbagbo. The rebels, most of whom were recently dismissed from the army because of their alleged support for General Robert Guei, took refuge in the two northern cities and surrounding areas.

Guei, who was executed by pro-government paramilitaries when the fighting began in Abidjan, took control of Côte D'Ivoire in a 1999 Christmas Eve coup. Prior to that the country was ruled by the Côte D'Ivoire Democratic Party (PDCI) since independence from France in 1960, and was regarded as one of the most stable in West Africa. General Guei, whose base was mainly in the army, became increasingly unpopular in

the country and was also opposed by France, which retains its dominant financial and political interests in Côte D'Ivoire. He was replaced by Gbagbo after elections—widely seen as flawed—took place in October 2000.

The US forces stationed themselves at the airport in Yamoussoukro, the capital of Côte D'Ivoire. They helped airlift the civilians rescued by the French troops into neighbouring Ghana. Although most of the Westerners living in the northern region have been moved to safety, it seems likely that the American troops will remain. Richard Boucher of the US State Department said that US troops were collaborating with the French “to ensure the safety of as many people as possible.” When asked whether after airlifting US civilians and others out of the country they would then leave, Boucher replied: “I’m not going to talk about where the military may or may not move.”

France has officially stated it will maintain its troops in the country, providing a backup to government forces. It has apparently decided against a larger-scale military commitment, even though the Côte D'Ivoire government attempted to call on a defence pact it has signed with France for military aid in case of an outside invasion. France refused to take seriously the claims made by Gbagbo that the rebel forces are backed by neighbouring Burkina Faso.

The US and France are working directly with the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas), leaders of whose 15 member states held an emergency meeting on September 29 that was also attended by President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa representing the African Union (formerly the Organisation for African Unity). President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal threatened if negotiations were not successful a 4,000-strong force made up of West

African troops in Ecomog, the military wing of Ecomog, would be sent in.

Given the acute economic decline of Côte D'Ivoire—it is still the biggest cocoa producer in the world, but cocoa prices fell throughout the 1990s forcing the country deeply into debt—unemployed soldiers could easily form the basis of rebel armies as they have in neighbouring Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. War still continues in Liberia as the Guinean-backed Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) attempts to overthrow the repressive regime of Charles Taylor. In Sierra Leone a shaky peace agreement between rebel forces and a corrupt regime only continues because of occupying British troops and a large United Nations peacekeeping force.

It is not just Côte D'Ivoire's importance as a cocoa producer that motivates US involvement. Fully 15 percent of US oil supplies now come from West Africa, and the strategic importance of the region will grow if the Middle East is engulfed in war. President George Bush held special meetings outside the UN meeting last week with African leaders from countries either producing oil or where oil exploration is under way. These included Cameroon, Chad, Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville), Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tomé and Príncipe. The latter is a tiny island country where vast undersea oil deposits have been discovered and it is suggested that it will be a new US military base in the Gulf of Guinea.

Potential for conflict within Côte D'Ivoire has increased over the last period as the ruling elite has stoked up ethnic and religious divisions within the country to maintain its grip on power. Opposition to northerners—predominantly Muslim as opposed to the Christian south—has been fuelled by the fact that up to a third of the population are immigrants, mainly from Burkina Faso. Immigrant workers came into the country to work on the cocoa plantations, attracted—until the last few years—by the relative economic prosperity.

Gbagbo, leader of the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI)—allied to the Socialist Party in France—came to power in elections where his main opponent, Alassane Outtara of the Rally of Republicans (RDR), was banned from standing and RDR supporters boycotted the elections. Outtara was deemed not eligible to stand because his family is said to originate in Burkina Faso.

His power base is in the Muslim north, and after taking power Gbagbo's FPI was heavily implicated in pogroms against RDR supporters, mainly northern Muslim immigrants. In 2001 a US State Department report stated that security forces in Côte D'Ivoire were “committing violations with impunity” and that “murder, arbitrary and illegal detention, harassment of refugees, torture and extortion are increasing.”

There have also been widespread accusations from NGOs (non-governmental organisations) that child labour is widely used on the cocoa farms. A survey conducted by the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture found that 284,000 children were working “in hazardous conditions” on cocoa farms in Côte D'Ivoire and other West African countries.

Under pressure from France, towards the end of last year Gbagbo instituted a “Reconciliation Forum” and began to mend fences with the other three main political leaders in the country—Outtara, Guei and Henri Konan Bedie, the PDCI leader who was president before the 1999 coup. This year Gbagbo was able to win support from the International Monetary Fund, which had frozen lending three years ago, and began renegotiating the country's debt with western banks.

Poverty and unemployment are widespread and there are clearly fears that the rebel soldiers could gain popular support against the Gbagbo regime, especially in the north. As well as blaming Burkina Faso for the army revolt, government supporters attacked Outtara's house in Abidjan and he was forced to take refuge in the French embassy.

Whilst many of the rebel soldiers were apparently brought into the army by Guei—the reason for their dismissal—there is no evidence that they are politically connected to either Guei or Outtara. Interviewed by the BBC their spokesman said they were fighting because “the current regime is a dictatorship hiding under the guise of democracy”, that “the army used us for three years and now they want to sack us” and that “we have been used like slaves”.



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