

# Ivory Coast: Talks to pave way for West African troops

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The Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire) remains poised on the brink of a vicious civil war as talks get under way in nearby Togo with the two sides no closer to agreement.

France and the United States are both very nervous about the potential of the conflict in the Ivory Coast to destabilise the vital oil-producing West African region. France is maintaining its force of about 1,000 men until it can hand over the task of maintaining stability to a contingent from ECOWAS, the regional group of West African states. The West African force is expected to consist of three battalions, incorporating more than 2,000 troops.

Rebel leaders of the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast (MPCI) arrived in Togo for talks with the government. Togolese President Gnassingbe Eyadema is to mediate the first round of talks. Rebel demands are expected to include the resignation of President Laurent Gbagbo, new elections, an end to discrimination against Muslims, and for those dismissed from the army to be reinstated.

Many thousands of homes in the capital, Abidjan, have been razed, as the government incited attacks on so-called foreigners. On October 6, the state-controlled television station blamed the rebellion on Burkinabe immigrants, and said that the key to victory was to expel all 2.3 million Burkinabe immigrants from the country.

Government spokesmen later distanced themselves from these broadcasts, but this is likely to be for external consumption only. France and several West African countries have urged the government to stop its attacks on foreigners.

The emergence of ethnic conflicts in a country that was until recently thought of as one of the most stable in the region is a political symptom of economic

decline of the Ivory Coast. Since 1993 the gross domestic product has declined by more than 20 percent. Following the death of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, the autocratic president who took power after independence from France in 1960, rival factions have come into ever sharper conflict over the control of the country and the division of its declining wealth.

The dominant southern group around Gbagbo have promoted the conception of "Ivoirité" (true Ivory Coast nationality), and labelled as "allogènes" the many immigrants from neighbouring states or other parts of the country. Such racist terms were used in the elections of 2000 to exclude candidates from the Muslim north of the country, such as the former prime minister and main opposition leader, Alassane Dramane Outtara.

The talks follow the government's failure to defeat the rebels militarily. Government troops made an assault on rebel-held Bouaké on October 6-7, but were repulsed. On October 15, government troops dislodged the rebels in Daloa, the capital of the cocoa-growing area of the country. There were reports that Angolan troops and armoured vehicles were involved in the attack, although Angola has denied any involvement.

France has so far refused to increase its military backing for the Gbagbo government. It has agreed to Gbagbo's request to establish a buffer zone between the rebels who control much of the north and the government troops in the rest of the country. But French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin warned Gbagbo that even these troops could be withdrawn if the attacks on foreigners continue.

Even as the cease-fire was signed on October 17, a group of men wearing army uniforms ransacked a radio station owned by Hamed Bakayoko, who is close to opposition leader Alassane Ouattara. Bakayoko also

owns *Le Patriote* newspaper, whose offices were attacked and wrecked the previous day.

Ouattara has sought refuge in the French embassy. On October 22 French soldiers fired teargas and water cannon at thousands of government supporters who attacked the French compound in an attempt to kill him.

Although the French nominally support Gbagbo's government, relations are clearly strained. The BBC report that "the French ambassador continued to read his newspaper and refused to stand as President Laurent Gbagbo entered the room during Wednesday's summit."

In determining France's course of action in the present crisis, maximising French trade and profits from the Ivory Coast will be the first consideration. French companies such as TotalFinaElf have been amongst the main beneficiaries of the privatisations carried out by French-backed governments. Three quarters of the public sector businesses have already been privatised.

The current conflicts have caused severe dislocations in trade, not only for the Ivory Coast itself, but also for the landlocked countries of Burkina Faso and Mali, whose main route for imports and exports has been closed since the military insurrection on September 19. The *Financial Times* reported on October 11 that the fighting has "jolted investors", and that the Côte d'Ivoire's Brady bonds "now trade at just 18 percent of face value".

While government troops are currently in control of the south of the country—in which most of the big Western-backed businesses and the important cocoa sector are located—the proximity of rebel forces to the cocoa town of Daloa is seen as a major threat to stability.

Following the recent French elections in which Chirac and his party were returned to power, Ivory Coast is being seen as a test of whether France will return to its previous policies in Africa—combining the use of bribery with military force. The intention to use military force was signalled by the announcement that France is to increase its spending on military hardware to \$14 billion a year for the next six years, partly in order to catch up with Britain, which has already established itself in West Africa.

French options in the Ivory Coast are complicated by

the increasing domination of West Africa by the US. An ECOMOG force, should one be sent in, will be dominated by troops from Nigeria, trained and partly financed by Washington.

So far the US has allowed France to take a lead in the Ivory Coast because it does not have any direct strategic interests in the country, which has no oil reserves. As the Ivory Coast disintegrates further into factional conflict and its economy declines, it will become ever more difficult to establish and maintain a stable regime. One of the US's main rivals in Africa may thus become bogged down in an unwinnable war in its former colony. It is also possible, however, that if a civil war in Côte d'Ivoire begins to threaten the oil-producing areas of the west coast, the two imperialist powers will come into conflict at least indirectly.



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