

France deploys 1,700 troops in Ivory Coast

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France is sending a further 500 crack troops into Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), in addition to the 1,200 already present. Made up of Foreign Legionnaires, paratroopers and marines, the occupying force is the largest sent by France into Africa since the 1980s.

The military conflict that began three months ago when a rebel group of soldiers seized northern cities in Ivory Coast has now extended, resembling the wars that have plagued neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia over the last decade. Two additional rebel groups have emerged in the west of the country, vowing to avenge the death of General Robert Guei, the former military ruler who was killed by government forces at the beginning of the rebellion.

French soldiers were initially said to be protecting the many thousands of French citizens and ex-patriots who live in this former colony. Then their presence was supposed to be monitoring a cease-fire between the rebels and government forces. Now their orders are to shoot anyone violating the cease-fire.

France is mounting a neo-colonial occupation to defend its economic interests in what was until recently the wealthiest country in West Africa, and the main cocoa producer in the world. The government forces of President Laurent Gbagbo were unable to take back the northern part of the country seized by the rebels and France's attempts to organise a negotiated settlement have collapsed.

Whilst recognising Gbagbo's government, France refused to back it openly against the rebel forces because of its record of ethnic suppression. Having backed the ruling elite that carried out the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, France has become wary of such involvement. But France has made hardly any public criticism of Gbagbo. According to *Africa Confidential* magazine, French diplomats have said they will not follow the approach Britain has taken against President Robert Mugabe in its former colony Zimbabwe. Such a

confrontational stance has encouraged Mugabe to take an even more aggressive line they say, and they do not wish to see the same happening with Gbagbo. The main pro-Western opposition politician in Ivory Coast, Alassane Ouattara, whose base is in the north of the country and against whom Gbagbo and other leaders directed their anti-foreigner campaign, has been shipped out by France to Gabon after hiding out for 10 weeks in the French embassy in Abidjan.

Gbagbo is capable, like Mugabe, of using "anti-imperialist" rhetoric, having already instigated anti-French demonstrations in Abidjan. In an interview with *Le Monde* he said: "It's a problem of culture that goes beyond Côte d'Ivoire. Look at Zimbabwe: the whole of the West is in league against Robert Mugabe, while all of African public opinion supports him."

Human Rights Watch has accused the Ivory Coast government of killings and arbitrary arrests of individuals solely on the basis of their ethnicity, religion or support for opposition parties. They say that raids have taken place in which northerners and non-Ivorians were arbitrarily arrested and their homes razed. It seems that Gbagbo has responded to the rebellions by stepping up repression in the areas still under government control. There are several reports that the government side is recruiting hundreds of mercenaries. These are said to include a group of white South Africans, many from the company Executive Outcomes that previously fought in Angola.

Last week the gruesome discovery of a shallow grave full of more than 120 bodies was announced. Survivors are accusing government troops of killing unarmed civilians in the village of Monoko-Zohi in central Ivory Coast. Soldiers are said to have gone from house to house, killing all males. The local population is mainly immigrant workers and merchants from neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali who work the cocoa plantations in this region. Government forces apparently killed the

civilians for allegedly supporting the rebels.

The northern rebel group, the Ivory Coast Patriotic Movement (MPCI), have accused France of complicity in the massacre. A demonstration of tens of thousands of people marched on the French army headquarters in the rebel-controlled city of Bouake, demanding that France pull out of the country. French troops fired over their heads to disperse them.

Reports suggest that the rebel forces have received popular support and financial backing in the northern region. They are said to be disciplined and well armed. Initially comprising about 700 disaffected soldiers, they were said to be soldiers originally recruited by General Guei after he seized power in the coup of December 1999. They rebelled when Gbagbo, who came to power in rigged elections 10 months later, tried to sack them from the army. Guei was said to be close to President Charles Taylor of Liberia, and the rebel soldiers were initially accused of having such connections. Then Gbagbo accused Burkina Faso of backing them, as many northern Muslims have ties with this neighbouring country. The rebels are said to have recruited more military support, including from traditional hunters called Dozos.

It may well be the case that France is tacitly allowing Gbagbo to step up his assaults on the northern regions as attempts by French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin to broker a peace deal in Lomé Togo between the government and the rebels have collapsed. The rebels have refused to accept government demands that they disarm and Gbagbo has opposed rebel demands for new elections.

Attempts to replace the French troops by a 2,000-strong peacekeeping force from West Africa appear to have been dropped. Nigeria, which would be expected to lead such an operation, has refused to take part. Presumably the United States, whose support would be necessary since it views Nigeria as the main regional power and is engaged in training its army, is prepared to leave the problem to France, especially as the Ivory Coast is not an oil producer.

There have now emerged two more rebel groups in the west of the country, close to the Liberian border. These groups, called the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) and the Ivorian Popular Movement for the Great West (MPIGO), are reportedly more like the rebel outfits that emerged in Liberia and Sierra Leone,

and may contain individuals from those countries. They are said to be high on drugs and to engage in looting the local population. Recent reports say they have taken the towns of Danane and Man in the cocoa growing belt, although government forces are said to have recaptured Man. It is possible that they are receiving support from Liberia.

The latest deployment of French troops will be in the Western region. Their spokesman said they would “open fire on anyone committing abuses,” presumably directed against the rebel groups.

Since coming to power the Raffarin government has said it will take on a higher profile role in Africa. The deepening civil war in the Ivory Coast will give it the opportunity to follow Britain’s lead in neighbouring Sierra Leone to use humanitarian and peacekeeping rhetoric to impose its military control.



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