

France goes on the offensive in Ivory Coast

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French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin concluded his visit to the former French colony of Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) at the weekend, following two days of talks with the government and the northern rebel group, the Ivory Coast Patriotic Movement (MPCI), who are involved in an increasingly bloody civil war.

Villepin said that France was mobilising to end what he described as “a dangerous spiral”. His visit was yet a further attempt to impose a cease-fire in the four-month-old conflict. He has called on the government, political parties and the MPCI to attend a summit meeting in Paris later this month.

Villepin's visit was in response to Ivory Coast's President Laurent Gbagbo sending in a helicopter, manned by mercenaries, to attack the fishing village of Menakro, 40 miles west of the city of Bouake, the MPCI's stronghold. French army spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Angel-Antoine Leccia said the helicopter raid, in which 12 civilians were killed, was “inadmissible and intolerable”. French troops reported that the villagers were shot down “like rabbits”.

The French foreign minister reportedly instructed Gbagbo to expel foreign mercenaries and stop aerial bombings and in a separate meeting with the MPCI sought to persuade them not to retaliate. By carrying out the massacre behind the rebel's lines, Gbagbo not only breached the previous cease-fire but was attempting to provoke the MPCI to march through the cease-fire line manned by French troops southward towards the government's base in Abidjan.

Villepin's talks did not include the two newly formed rebel groups in the west of Ivory Coast, the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) and the Ivorian Popular Movement for the Great West (MPIGO). Their leaders have apparently indicated they are willing to attend the Paris summit. They were not a party to the previous cease-fire and are presently involved in skirmishes with

well-armed French troops.

In the last weeks France has moved towards an open military occupation of the country. On December 28 French troop reinforcements and military hardware landed in Abidjan after a 10-day voyage from France, unloading trucks, jeeps and more than 30 light armoured vehicles. France now has about 2,500 military personnel in Ivory Coast in “Operation Unicorn”.

Though at first saying they were present only to defend French civilians, and then to impose a cease-fire, it is increasingly obvious that without their presence the rebel forces would sweep the country and probably defeat Gbagbo, who depends heavily on mercenary forces from South Africa, Croatia and France. The rebels already control over half the country, including the coffee growing areas that are the source of Ivory Coast's wealth.

Since France is not willing to hand over its most important dependent economy in West Africa to the rebels—the MPCI are a group of dissident soldiers said to be backed by northern businessmen and the MJP and MPIGO may well be backed by Liberia—Villepin's commitment to get “everyone around the table” at the Paris summit will be a means by which France imposes a more direct form of rule.

France has in the area of \$3 billion in investments in the Ivory Coast and most of the lucrative sell-offs of public utilities, under the Structural Adjustment Programme, have ended up in the hands of French international companies. Ivory Coast is the world's largest cocoa producer and cocoa prices have reached their highest point in 11 weeks, with growing anxiety about disruptions to supplies. The country is also the economic hub and sea access for a number of surrounding African countries. Although it has no oil of its own, the US has taken a greater interest in the area since large deposits of oil have been discovered on the

west coast of Africa.

In addition to committing some of its own troops, France has also attempted to cobble together a peacekeeping force from West African countries to intervene in the Ivory Coast. Such a force would give some “international” credibility to France’s intervention, but there has been a marked reluctance on the part of African regimes to get involved in the unstable situation. On January 3 the first West African troops arrived—an advance party of a mere 49 peacekeepers from four West African nations. Senegal’s President Abdoulaye Wade told the BBC that the rest of the Senegalese peacekeepers would only deploy once the sides had reached a political accord.

The US seems prepared to allow France, its economic rival in the region, to impose some stability in the Ivory Coast. It is apparently not prepared to support peacekeeping forces, however, and Nigeria in particular has refused to take part.

In France there is clearly some nervousness in ruling circles about the military involvement. Under a headline “France caught in a trap”, the *Liberation* newspaper drew parallels with the US war in Vietnam and accused the French government of imprudence.

There is clearly some distaste for France’s involvement with Gbagbo, although the turn of the Abidjan elite to ethnic chauvinism and attacks on opponents began under previous leaders who were also supported by France—Conan Bedie and General Gue. *Le Monde*’s correspondent commented: “Operation Unicorn is thus likely to appear as a safety curtain where war criminals can shelter and as the guard for the current regime’s treasury, since the charges levied on the export of cocoa constitute the main resource for Laurent Gbagbo’s power and which enable him to go on paying his civil servants’ salaries and to buy arms.”

How well the present cease-fire will hold, especially in the western region, is open to doubt. Over the last week the MJP and MPIGO opened a new front south of the cease-fire line, apparently coming in over the Liberian border. They are now about 120 miles from the key port of San Pedro on the south coast. French troops have been deployed at the strategically important crossroads of Duékoué to stop the rebels advancing on San Pedro, important for cocoa exports and home to 20,000 French citizens.

France will be keen to assemble some kind of

multinational coalition to maintain control over the Ivory Coast as events of the past weeks have underlined widespread hostility towards the former colonial power. When Villepin arrived in Abidjan he was held up for an hour by a crowd of several hundred wearing nationalist T-shirts chanting slogans accusing the French minister of supporting the rebels. In the northern region support for the rebels has been bolstered as it became clear French troops were being used to protect government forces.



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