

Ivory Coast peace deal flounders

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30 January 2003

France's attempt to impose a settlement that would end the four-month-old civil war in the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) appears to be coming apart already. The peace deal signed by both the government and rebels at the weekend after nine days of talks is supposed to set up a power sharing government.

Talks involved seven Ivory Coast political parties, including the government and the three rebel groups. Also present were leaders from several African countries, including President Mbeki from South Africa, as well as United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan and European Commission President Romano Prodi.

The deal agreed the disarmament of the rebel forces and the government army, the granting of an amnesty, and the reform of the army to include both government supporters and rebels. Mercenaries, who have played a major role on the government side and carried out massacres of defenceless civilians, are to be sent home.

Leaders of the Patriotic Movement of the Ivory Coast (MPCI), the largest rebel group led by dissident soldiers who control the northern, predominantly Muslim part of the country, would apparently be given the defence and interior ministries in exchange for agreeing to disarm. The other rebel groups in the west of the country also accepted the deal.

President Laurent Gbagbo is to stay in office—though a key demand of the rebels was for his removal. However, a new prime minister, Seydou Elimane Diarra, has been appointed and is to take over some of Gbagbo's powers. Diarra, a cocoa businessman who served briefly as prime minister under the military rule of General Guei in 2000, was head of a national reconciliation forum that attempted, under pressure from France, to bring together the country's opposing factions before the decent into civil war.

Gbagbo did not take part in the talks and only agreed to the deal after a separate meeting with French

President Jacques Chirac where he was clearly told he had no alternative.

However, reports since the weekend are of continuous rioting in Abidjan, the main commercial capital of Ivory Coast, by Gbagbo supporters opposed to the deal. They made clear they would not accept a government containing the northern rebels, whom they accuse of being backed by neighbouring Burkina Faso.

Tens of thousands took part in anti-French demonstrations, attacking the French consulate and French property. The Burkinian embassy was set on fire. Mobs armed with machetes and clubs attacked foreigners and anyone suspected of being French. According to Reuters, some of the crowd chanted, "We are xenophobes and so what," referring to the anti-Muslim and anti-foreigner hatred whipped up by Gbagbo and much of the Abidjan political elite over the last period.

Shantytowns around Abidjan, where refugees and immigrants from Burkina Faso, Mali and Liberia live, have been attacked by pro-government gangs since the civil war began and have escalated. There are reports that paramilitary police went into one immigrant district at the weekend, breaking down doors, dragging people from their beds and whipping them with ropes, accusing them of supporting the rebels. At least six people were killed in the town of Agboville, 80 kilometres from Abidjan, in ethnic clashes between supporters of Gbagbo and Muslim immigrants from the north.

The organisation of "Young Patriots", which leads the pro-Gbagbo mobs, is reported to have approached the United States embassy, asking "to help our endangered country, put on its knees by France".

Gbagbo's response to the protests was to plead for calm, but then announcing to his cheering supporters that the deal he had signed up to was only "proposals" and that "I am not ready to betray you." Gbagbo said

he would now consult parliamentarians and the army, retreating from the weekend agreement.

In an open letter to Gbagbo, army leaders made clear this week that they would not accept the deal: “The defence and security forces are in favour of a national reconciliation government, but energetically refuse the presence of rebels within a future government and the regrouping, breaking up and disarmament of the national army.”

In an interview with *Le Monde* before the peace talks, Gbagbo made clear that he felt the insistence on “Ivoirité” that he and other political leaders had used to exclude northern Muslim opposition leader Alassane Outtara from presidential elections three years ago—a key event in the descent into civil war—was perfectly justified. He correctly made the point that it was part of the country’s legal code inherited from the French colonialists. Throughout Francophone Africa, “nowhere do the conditions differ from those in Côte D’Ivoire if not more strict.” In other words, religious and ethnic divisions are a product of French colonialism and, as in Rwanda, can be whipped up into horrific violence by current regimes if their position is threatened.

Gbagbo has also been encouraged by sections of the French establishment, particularly the Socialist Party (SP), to which his own organisation is affiliated. His delegation at the peace talks was warmly welcomed at SP offices. “He’s one of us” commented French SP leader Michel Rocard, while Charles Josselin, former Minister for Africa under the Jospin government, said that “Gbagbo is the victim of aggression.” Josselin appreciated in Gbagbo “the warmth and intelligence of a comrade”.

The problem for both President Chirac and Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, who have both expressed their desire to reassert France’s interests in Africa, is how to gain their control over this country in which many French businesses have investments. De Villepin has had to claim that he is opposed to neo-colonialism, with concern raised in the media that French troops could be pulled into a “Vietnam-type” situation.

But having already committed 2,500 troops to the country, it seems likely that France will step up its intervention. De Villepin has announced increased security provision for French people living in Ivory

Coast and his readiness to evacuate all 16,000 French citizens at any time.

A significant feature of the Ivory Coast developments is that France has been prevented from following its preferred choice of deploying a relatively small number of its own troops supplemented by UN peacekeepers, as Britain has done in Sierra Leone. Earlier this month the US refused to back such a UN force, reflecting the increasingly open hostility of the Bush administration towards France and the assertion of its own interests in oil-rich West Africa. France has also been unable to assemble more than a token peacekeeping force from the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas), particularly when its main member, Nigeria, refused to take part, presumably under US pressure.



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