

## France Begins Evacuations From Ivory Coast

Thousands of French Expatriates Expected to Leave as Fighting Continues

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast -- France, the United States and other nations launched one of the largest evacuations of Africa's post-independence era Wednesday, requisitioning commercial jets to fly out thousands of foreigners following attacks on civilians and peacekeeping troops.

French soldiers in boats plucked some of their trapped citizens from the banks of Abidjan's lagoons.

Long convoys sent out by the U.S. Embassy and other nations rounded up foreigners from their homes for evacuation as Ivory Coast's state TV alternately appealed for calm and for a mass uprising against the French, the country's former colonial rulers.

By late afternoon, much of Ivory Coast's largest city was quiet -- the first break from violence since Saturday.

French President Jacques Chirac sternly demanded that President Laurent Gbagbo rein in thousands of his hard-line supporters, who brought him to power in 2000 and are now leading the anti-French street violence.

Ivory Coast's "government is pushing to kill white people -- not just the French, all white people," said Marie Noel Mion, rescued in a wooden boat at daybreak, and waiting with hundreds of others at Abidjan's airport, some camped in tents on the floor of the terminal.

"The people here have lost everything -- their houses, their companies, everything," said a Belgian businessman, who was leaving after 23 years and not coming back. "I see a very dark picture for the future of Ivory Coast."

The mayhem, checked only intermittently by Gbagbo's government, has been condemned by African leaders and drawn moves toward U.N. sanctions. It threatens lasting harm to the economy and stability of Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer and once West Africa's most peaceful and prosperous nation.

Violence erupted Saturday when Ivory Coast warplanes killed nine French peacekeepers and an American aid worker in an airstrike on the rebel-held north in three days of government air attacks that violated a more than year-old cease-fire in the country's civil war.

France wiped out the nation's new air force on the tarmac within hours. The retaliation sparked violence by loyalist youths, who took to the streets waving machetes, iron bars and clubs.

Including the airstrike, the turmoil since Saturday has claimed at least 27 lives and wounded more than 900. Presidential spokesman Alain Toussaint only gave a casualty toll for the loyalists, saying 37 had died.

South African President Thabo Mbeki, who was sent in by the African Union, invited representatives of Ivory Coast's warring sides to peace talks this week.

Ivory Coast has been divided between rebel north and loyalist south since civil war broke out in 2002. France and the United Nations have more than 10,000 peacekeepers in the country.

As the evacuation got under way, France's Cabinet approved a decree requisitioning commercial aircraft to carry out French citizens in what was shaping up as one of the largest evacuations since Africa's 1960s independence era.

France expected to fly out between 4,000 to 8,000 citizens -- potentially evacuating most of the 14,000 French still left in Ivory Coast since 1999, when the a coup ended four decades of stability.

Evacuees included some U.N. employees and others among 1,500 expatriates holed up at U.N. offices around the city. More than 1,600 others -- most of them French, but also citizens of 42 other countries -- had taken refuge in a French military camp.

While hundreds of thousands of African immigrants also are at risk in the anti-foreigner attacks, the governments of Ivory Coast's poor neighbors have no means to mount a similar rescue.

As the first convoys left for Abidjan's French-secured airport, state television broadcast more of what the United Nations has called hate messages. They included images of some of the seven people reported killed -- one with a head blown off -- in a clash Tuesday at a French evacuation post.

France says the protesters died when demonstrators opened fire on the French, and Ivory Coast security forces returned fire. Demonstrators say French troops opened fire.

"The French are assassinating our children," one man cried on state TV. "Let us all mobilize."

Convoys shuttled foreigners to the airport, at first passing through "very virulent" crowds of loyalist youths on a route littered with burned vehicles and an abandoned roadblock of burned tires, U.N. spokesman Philippe Moreux said.

"It's a very hostile crowd," he said. "They're chanting slogans and insults, things like, 'All the whites out,' 'Everybody catch a white.'"

The U.S. Embassy and others sent escorts into the city, fetching Americans, Canadians, Spaniards and others.

Spain, Belgium and Italy sent military cargo planes to aid in the evacuations. French officials said three jets with space for about 250 people each would run shuttles to Paris and to Dakar, Senegal, likely for days.

Only a few hundred Americans remain in Ivory Coast, many of them missionaries and aid workers. The first plane with Americans went to Accra, capital of Ghana.

Roscoa Howard of Washington, D.C., who landed with about 20 other Americans on a Canadian-organized flight, said "our lives were in danger" when gunfire broke out Saturday.

Strangers helped Howard reach the airport that day, where he stayed. "It was traumatizing, and I'll continue to pray for that country," said Howard, who was in Abidjan on a church trip.

*Contributing to this report were AP writers Daniel Balint-Kurti in Abuja, Nigeria, and Nafi Diouf in Dakar, Senegal, AP photographer Schalk van Zuydam in Abidjan and Kwasi Kpodo in Accra, Ghana.*

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