

February 11, 2003

Ivory Coast Leaders Start Task of Making Room for Rebels

By REUTERS

YAMOOUSSOUKRO, Ivory Coast, Feb. 10 — The country's new prime minister met with President Laurent Gbagbo today and began the delicate task of forming a government that would include former rebels, in line with a French-brokered peace deal.

Prime Minister Seydou Diarra, a former diplomat who held the same post under a military junta in 2000, presented a provisional list of nominees at a summit meeting of regional leaders and will now pursue consultations with all parties involved, mediators said. The United Nations special envoy to West Africa, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, met with the group.

"I'm getting down to work immediately," Mr. Diarra said, speaking here in the capital before returning to the country's main city, Abidjan.

Mr. Gbagbo has given a lukewarm endorsement to the agreement reached in Paris, which calls for a coalition government, including rebels, to end the conflict. Officials say the fighting has killed thousands of people and displaced more than one million since it began five months ago.

The president's supporters say the accord gives far too much to the rebels, who control the north. Anti-French riots broke out in Abidjan after news that rebels would receive cabinet posts.

More than 3,000 French soldiers are in Ivory Coast, a former French colony and the world's top cocoa producer, to protect French citizens and other foreigners and to police a shaky cease-fire. The troops have been camped between tense government soldiers and defiant rebels.

Ivory Coast's war began after a failed coup last September, fracturing the country along ethnic lines. Three rebel groups now hold the northern half and parts of the cocoa-rich west.

The main rebel group refused to attend the meeting today, which was in government territory, 60 miles south of their stronghold, Bouaké, and they repeated their threat that unless Mr. Gbagbo carries out the accord soon they will march on Abidjan.

Guillaume Soro of the main faction, the Patriotic Movement for Ivory Coast, said today that the promise of two ministerial positions for his group was "nonnegotiable" and that the rebels expected seven government positions in all.

"There won't be peace and there won't be territorial integrity as long as the accords are not applied and the reconciliation government is not formed," he said.

A plan for Mr. Diarra to go to Bouaké to meet the rebels today failed. When Mr. Diarra was asked if he could still visit the rebel headquarters, he said he was prepared to go wherever necessary.

Mr. Diarra is from the mainly Muslim north and is not liked by some hard-line supporters of Mr. Gbagbo, who is from the mostly Christian and animist south. When Mr. Diarra tried to return to Ivory Coast last month, angry mobs prevented his plane from landing.