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Ivory Coast Army Admits Role in a Mass Killing

By REUTERS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Dec. 11 — The army acknowledged today that scores of people in a mass grave in the west of the country were killed by government troops, but said they were rebels who died in fighting rather than civilians.

"These are rebels who were killed during mopping-up operations," said Jules Yao Yao, an army spokesman. "Normally we would clear the area and collect bodies. But in that particular case we did not have time. We were dealing with several fronts."

The rebel Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast has said the grave which was discovered last week in Monoko-Zohi, 45 miles northwest of the loyalist-held cocoa town Daloa, contained the bodies of 120 civilians — mostly foreign immigrants — killed by Ivoirian troops after a raid in the rebel-held area.

Foreign news media have quoted residents of the village as supporting the rebels' version.

But Mr. Yao Yao said the rebels had set up the mass grave to tarnish the government's image.

The Ivoirian government has previously denied any responsibility for the killings and said it was ready for an international inquiry.

Government officials initially said loyalist troops had not been to Monoko-Zohi, near an area where a helicopter bombarded rebel positions on Nov. 27 after President Laurent Gbagbo's forces accused them of breaking a cease-fire.

The patriotic movement, the main rebel faction, which started the war with a failed coup on Sept. 19, has threatened to pull out of peace talks if West African mediators do not condemn the killings in strong enough terms.

The rebel group said in a statement today that it had information about another mass grave in a cemetery in the capital, Yamoussoukro. It did not give any more details.

The government has accused the rebels of summary executions and says there is a mass grave in the rebel-held stronghold of Bouaké, Ivory Coast's second biggest city, containing Ivoirian gendarmes killed by the dissidents.