

January 12, 2003

Out of Africa? Not Yet. These Are the French.

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

PARIS — Suddenly, France finds itself embroiled in a messy conflict, not of its own making, in what was once a jewel in its colonial crown.

It is a dangerous moment. There are 2,500 French troops in the Ivory Coast, trying to hold back rebels while the French government encourages peace talks. A mix of Foreign Legionnaires, special forces and regular soldiers, it is France's largest deployment in Africa in two decades, and it is testing the longstanding French commitment to the continent.

The expedition, which began as a peacekeeping mission last fall when fighting broke out, has neither rules nor road map. The French relinquished power over their colonies 40 years ago, but by no means cut ties to them. Well into the 1980's, France continued to manage their destinies, propping up or toppling governments, and investing in or exploiting their economies.

Even at the end of the cold war, when democratic movements emerged in Africa that were less connected to France, France could not walk away. Plans for a force of African peacekeepers didn't work out, and if Paris didn't help in a crisis, often no one else would.

So however costly it is to keep its old promises, France is again using force in Africa. Though small, Ivory Coast was once the continent's most spectacular post-colonial success. A world-class exporter of cocoa and coffee, it was West Africa's employer, educator, and commercial and entertainment hub, proud of its industrial base, middle class, electricity and stable, relatively democratic government. More than 20,000 French citizens live there, and 60 percent of private investment is French. A civil war could create millions of refugees and threaten West Africa's stability.

"France accepts its responsibilities," Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin told a television interviewer last month. "This is the country that does so much for Africa, that does so much for the Ivory Coast. I believe it is important that French people understand the vocation of France, the example we set with our action in the Ivory Coast and in Africa."

The words may sound grandiose to ears that are not French, but perhaps that's the idea. Unlike Britain, France stayed engaged in Africa. It signed accords authorizing military intervention if needed, and it arranged a common currency for the former colonies tied to the franc, a boon both to the local economies and to French companies.

But two generations after its formal dominion ended, France does not have the ability or the will to fully control the destinies of its former colonies.

In December 1999, it decided not to intervene when a coup ousted Ivory Coast's unpopular elected government. Mr. Chirac was prepared to order French troops in, but the Socialist prime minister with whom he then shared power, Lionel Jospin, said no.

Three years later, with Mr. Chirac leading a unified French government, the French acted swiftly to evacuate French and other foreigners after a failed coup last September split Ivory Coast into a government-held area in the Christian and animist south and a rebel-held area in the Muslim north.

But as often happens with peacekeeping, France got stuck, and its mission morphed into something much more ambitious and dangerous. A cease-fire unraveled, and French troops, bound by a 1961 treaty, now find themselves trying to stop the rebels from advancing.

LAST week, a clash between French troops and rebels that left 30 rebels dead and nine French soldiers wounded reflected the extent to which France is seen as having sided with the government. But that is only part of the story. While there is no talk of withdrawing, there is also no stomach in Paris for the effort it would take to defeat the rebels. "Neither interference nor indifference" is Mr. De Villepin's mantra.

But if peace talks that start this week in Paris fail, French troops are locked in. Herman J. Cohen, a former United States assistant secretary of state for African affairs, calls it "a security commitment lite."

Mr. Cohen criticized the French for giving the rebels equal footing with the Ivorian government.

"The French have decided not to use decisive force and get boxed in and have told rebels not to go further," he said. "But to treat them as equals in negotiations undermines the whole idea of democratically elected regimes. In effect the message to other countries is, 'Any bunch of guys with guns can shoot their way into power.' "

French officials insist that the French public is willing to sacrifice for their honor and national interests. But they don't want to be seen as too tightly embracing the president of Ivory Coast, Laurent Gbagbo, whose critics accuse of inciting ethnic tensions and gaining office in an unfair election.

But qualms about too much involvement are balanced by fears of doing too little — that France could be blamed should Ivory Coast descend into genocide or civil war. The fear has a name — "Rwanda syndrome," a reference to France's cooperation with the Hutus who ruled Rwanda in the early 1990's before they carried out mass killings in 1994 of ethnic Tutsis.

"Now there is a real fear, both in the French military and the political class, that there could be terrible crimes against humanity and that this could be a new Rwanda," said François Heisbourg, director of the Foundation for Strategic Research here.

"So being involved in the Ivory Coast means you risk being an accessory to the crime," he said. "And not being involved means that you run the risk that your absence allows the crime to be committed. Rwanda is the sum of all French fears."