

February 15, 2003

Ivory Coast Rebels Extend Peace Talks With Ghana President

By REUTERS

ACCRA, Ghana, Feb. 14 (Reuters) — Ivory Coast rebels held talks with President John Kufuor of Ghana late today in an effort to find a way of rescuing a shaky peace accord, as the insurgents' deadline for resuming the civil war in Ivory Coast drew closer.

Ghanaian government officials said Ivory Coast's new prime minister, Seydou Diarra, who traveled here today for talks with both Mr. Kufuor and the rebels, would return to Ivory Coast later in the evening.

Time was running out on a rebel ultimatum threatening Ivory Coast's president, Laurent Gbagbo, with more bloodshed unless he implements terms of a French-brokered cease-fire by midnight on Sunday.

Mr. Diarra is charged with naming a new government, and the rebels have said that unless they get the powerful defense and interior cabinet posts they will march on Abidjan, the country's main port.

Military officials said the three-man rebel negotiating team planned to leave Accra for a whistle-stop tour of West Africa starting with Dakar, the capital of Senegal, and then visiting Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria. But the rebels also reserved rooms in a nearby hotel as the talks dragged on at the Ghanaian presidential palace.

Mr. Gbagbo, who met Mr. Diarra on Wednesday, has cast doubt on the rebels' demands and insists he will have the last say on nominations for ministerial posts in Mr. Diarra's government.

Before the talks, the political leader of the rebel Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast, Guillaume Soro, appeared in no mood to make concessions.

"I am just going to Accra to hear what Seydou Diarra has to say," Mr. Soro said. "There are no more compromises to be made. Everything has been discussed already.

"The ultimatum still stands and you will see from midnight on Sunday what happens afterwards," he said.

The Patriotic Movement is the main rebel faction in Ivory Coast and controls the northern part of the country, the world's largest cocoa producer.

Two other rebel factions fighting in the west, near the border with Liberia, did not send representatives to the talks in Ghana.

"We are crossing our fingers," Mr. Diarra said on arrival in Accra.

Ivory Coast's civil war blew up out of a failed coup in September. Officials say thousands have been killed and more than one million people were forced to flee their homes.

Since his formal appointment this week, Mr. Diarra has been locked in talks with participants from all political movements in an effort to form a unity government.

The creation of a unity government was a key element of the peace agreement reached near Paris last month and sparked furious anti-French protests.

Many supporters of Mr. Gbagbo find the idea of rebels in charge of the country's police and the army, which fall under the responsibilities of the defense and interior ministries, unacceptable. Mr. Gbagbo has said only that the deal is a good base from which to work.

If the rebels do attack when Sunday's deadline expires, they will find French soldiers in their path. France has some 3,000 troops in Ivory Coast to protect French and foreign nationals and to police a cease-fire.

The rebels have repeatedly called on the French to leave, saying the French military presence is the only thing stopping them from sweeping through the country and seizing control of Abidjan.