

February 13, 2003

Ivory Coast's Leader Balks, and So Do Rebels, on Cabinet Posts

By REUTERS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Feb. 12 — Ivory Coast's new prime minister held fresh talks with President Laurent Gbagbo today to try to form a government, but there was no sign of compromise on important posts sought by rebels threatening to resume a civil war.

Seydou Diarra, the newly appointed prime minister charged with coming up with a list of names for the new administration, met Mr. Gbagbo in Abidjan, the economic heart of the West African nation, African diplomats said.

Mr. Diarra, a former diplomat, faces a herculean task in bringing bitter enemies together in the same cabinet after five months of war, in which officials say thousands have died and more than a million have been displaced.

On Monday, Mr. Gbagbo met West African leaders in the sprawling capital, Yamoussoukro. He told Mr. Diarra, who was also prime minister under a military junta in 2000, to start consultations with political players.

A diplomat who attended the talks said Mr. Gbagbo had made it clear that he would never give critical defense and interior portfolios to rebels, who say they were promised the jobs under a French-brokered peace deal.

"He would not accept to talk about it," one diplomat said.

The creation of a consensus government is a large part of the peace deal, which was agreed in Paris last month and which has aroused fierce anger among the president's supporters, who see it as a blatant attempt to weaken their leader.

Mr. Gbagbo has said he will have the final say in nominations to the government. Rebels insist the two cabinet posts are theirs and have threatened to plunge Ivory Coast, a former French colony, back into war if the deal is not carried out by Sunday.

Ivory Coast's civil war exploded out of a failed coup in September. One rebel faction now holds the northern half of the nation while two other groups have seized large areas in the west, near the border with Liberia.

Around 3,000 French troops are stationed in Ivory Coast to protect French and other foreign citizens and police a cease-fire.

As the peace deal appears to falter, rebel patience seems to be wearing thin in the western reaches of the country, the world's largest cocoa producer.

The rebel commander, Felix Doh, said he had repulsed a government attack on Tuesday, and accused Mr. Gbagbo of hiring Liberian mercenaries to fight with the army.

"We are on maximum alert," Mr. Doh said. "I am preparing to attack because Gbagbo is using mercenaries against me."

Liberian fighters have also joined rebel ranks in the west. The Liberians fighters are feared throughout the region for their brutality and lack of discipline.

Today, the United Nations' special envoy to Ivory Coast, Carolyn McAskie, said that ensuring the nation's stability was critical for the volatile region.

"The most serious area of concern is the far west behind the cease-fire line along the Liberian border where Liberian militias are running rampant," she said in Geneva.

"Drugged kids with guns," she said, "are committing every kind of atrocity possible."