

COTE D IVOIRE: Preparations for war reported despite UN sanctions threat
ABIDJAN, 15 Nov 2004 (IRIN) - The threat of sanctions loomed over Cote d'Ivoire on Monday as the United Nations prepared to vote on an arms embargo and other penalties on the West African nation. On the ground, however, Ivorian rebel and government forces were reported to be preparing for war.

"What we are getting is that all sides are trying to get new offensive weapons," Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo told reporters on Sunday in Abuja, Nigeria, after four hours of talks on the Ivorian crisis with his counterparts from Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Senegal and Togo.

France has been pushing fellow Security Council members to slap a ban on the sale of arms to Cote d'Ivoire and impose travel restrictions on Ivorian officials from 10 December. The French move came after the Ivorian army shattered an 18-month ceasefire and killed nine French peacekeepers in the process.

A diplomatic source told IRIN the vote, delayed from last week so African leaders could hold crisis talks, might take place on Monday afternoon.

South African President Thabo Mbeki and other government officials held talks with Ivorian opposition leaders in Pretoria late last week, while Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo was to have attended Sunday's meeting in Abuja, but did not. Instead, he sent the speaker of parliament, and did little to allay the regional leaders' fears.

"Do you think I am going to leave my country with no air defence?" he said in an interview on French radio broadcast on Sunday.

The African leaders threw their weight behind the draft resolution at the weekend and even went one step further, calling for sanctions to take effect immediately instead of giving Cote d'Ivoire a month's grace period.

"We support the proposed UN resolution, particularly the arms embargo in Cote d'Ivoire. This should be immediate," said Obasanjo, who is the current chairman of the African Union.

Since rebels attempted to topple Gbagbo in September 2002, Cote d'Ivoire has been split into a government-controlled south and a rebel-held north.

In a move widely seen as favouring a military solution, Gbagbo replaced the head of the army, Mathias Doue, with Philippe Mangou, the man who oversaw this month's ceasefire-breaking assault on rebel territory.

"We are just trying to reunify our country," Mangou - considered a hardliner by many - told IRIN when the assault kicked off on 4 November. He repeated that line on state television on Sunday after his appointment.

Reuters news agency quoted a military source at the weekend as saying Gbagbo had already ordered new fighter jets and helicopter gunships and some had arrived in nearby states. Virtually all of Cote d'Ivoire's airforce was destroyed on 6 November by French forces in retaliation for a bombing on one of their bases, in which the nine French peacekeepers were killed.

On Monday there were fears of fresh attacks, given that electricity and water supplies to the north have been cut, as they were before the first government offensive.

Military and diplomatic sources, humanitarian workers and residents all said the supplies - which had been restored earlier in the week - were cut again on Sunday afternoon, as African leaders were meeting in Abuja.

"The alarm is that that used to be the prelude to an imminent attack," Obasanjo said. "Both parties should not start anything that will amount to a retaliatory attack. We call on everybody to observe the ceasefire."

Civilians in the north are preparing to march on Wednesday from the main rebel-held city of Bouake, across the buffer zone, to Abidjan, some 400 km away, to demand Gbagbo's resignation. "Given that the civilian population has been targeted and hurt, we have to take our destiny in our own hands," Abel Dgohore Gbakayoro, one of the organisers, told IRIN.

"We think we can get 24,000 people out on the street. The buffer zone is for belligerents and we are not armed so it should be fine," he said.

The streets in Abidjan were quiet on Monday, a public holiday, and the flood of foreigners fleeing the country had slowed to a trickle.

A spokesman for the French forces in Cote d'Ivoire said just one evacuation flight was scheduled for Monday, and that there were now only around 50 people taking refuge at the French military base, which at one point had sheltered almost 2,000. An official at the French embassy said the last evacuation flight would probably be on Wednesday.

More than 6,000 foreigners, around 85 percent of them French, have fled in the past five days after Ivorians, irate at Paris for wiping out their airforce, went on a rampage, stripping expatriate homes bare and torching businesses and schools. Foreigners were attacked, some with machetes, and women were raped, according to various sources

No expatriate deaths were reported, but Gbagbo's spokesman has said 62 Ivorians died and more than 1,300 were injured during demonstrations against and clashes with French troops.

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