

# France Escalates Military Involvement in Ivory Coast

By Clar Ni Chonghaile  
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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Dec. 15 -- France today escalated its military involvement in Ivory Coast's three-month-old rebellion, sending an additional 150 troops with a tougher mandate to enforce a truce.

The troops, who will be followed by a second wave of soldiers this week, have orders to open fire if necessary, raising the prospect of combat with increasingly resentful rebels.

Rebels have seized the north and part of the west in this former French colony, West Africa's economic hub. Regional leaders have failed to negotiate a peace deal, raising fears of a full-fledged war.

The paratroopers join more than 1,000 well-armed French troops who are manning checkpoints across Ivory Coast's central belt.

At the same time, the French are expanding their role in the conflict between northern rebels and the government. Until now, French forces were charged only with protecting their citizens and foreign nationals, and monitoring an Oct. 17 cease-fire that has been frequently violated.

A French army spokesman said the mandate now included authorization for troops to fire on anyone who impedes their mission.

"We can shoot if we are directly set upon, or prevented from carrying out our mission, or if people carry out abuses in our presence," said Lt. Col. Ange-Antoine Leccia.

The stronger mandate has angered rebels, who charge French forces with intervening on the side of President Laurent Gbagbo, whom they want to oust.

The insurgents have urged France to withdraw, calling its forces "an imperial occupation force" and saying the rebels are "ready to take up the challenge."

Thousands of people demonstrated Saturday against the French in the rebel-held central city of Bouake. A rebel spokesman, Antoine Beugre, said that protesters marched on a French base outside the city and that French soldiers fired at the crowd.

Leccia denied that, saying troops had merely helped disperse the crowd. Witnesses said four people were injured, some by gunfire.

But French troops have already clashed with rebels, most recently on Nov. 30 while trying to secure an airport to evacuate foreigners from the western city of Man. Ten rebels were killed and one French soldier was injured.

Until a 1999 coup, Ivory Coast was one of the region's most stable and prosperous nations. Rebels include hundreds of disgruntled former army officers, and northerners, who accuse the southern-based ethnic groups that traditionally hold power in Ivory Coast of discrimination and harassment.

With peace talks foundering, Togolese President Gnassingbe Eyadema planned to hold a meeting Monday of regional leaders, including the presidents of Nigeria and Senegal. Rebel and government delegates are also to attend the meeting in the northern Togolese city of Kara, where Eyadema has been mediating negotiations.

France has not stated the number of troops who will arrive this week, but French media reports have said there will be about 500.

Government supporters and the rebels have accused the French forces of backing the other side. At the same time, Gbagbo has appealed for greater intervention from France.

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