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Rebels Threaten to Renew Ivory Coast Civil War

By REUTERS

BOUAKÉ, Ivory Coast, Feb. 16 (Reuters) — Ivory Coast rebels flew to Nigeria today to seek regional backing for a peace agreement as new fighting was reported at home and the clock ticked down to a rebel deadline for renewed civil war.

Rebels say they were promised cabinet posts for the Defense and Interior Ministries last month in a peace accord and threatened to take up arms again if President Laurent Gbagbo did not make concrete progress on carrying out the agreement by Sunday midnight.

The rebel team left Ghana for Abuja, Nigeria, today after lengthy talks with the new prime minister of Ivory Coast, Seydou Diarra. Officials said the insurgents were to meet with President Olusegun Obasanjo before flying to Mali.

Mr. Diarra is to form a coalition government under the Paris-brokered agreement but Mr. Gbagbo has cast doubt on whether he will go along with the cabinet posts for the rebels.

Since the rebels fired off the ultimatum last week, they have said that they will not necessarily start fighting immediately.

A rebel spokesman said today that they were waiting to hear from a committee set up to supervise carrying out the agreement, which includes the United Nations secretary general's special representative in Ivory Coast, Albert Tevoedjre.

"Nothing came from the meeting in Accra except the fact that Diarra made clear that Gbagbo continued to refuse the ministerial posts," said Antoine Beugré, spokesman for the main rebel faction, the Patriotic Movement for Ivory Coast.

He said that loyalist troops had been seen moving in the past 48 hours toward the capital, Yamoussoukro, and along the road north from there to Bouaké to strengthen their positions.

Witnesses in Abidjan, 219 miles south of Bouaké, saw a column of loyalist light armored vehicles heading to the interior on Sunday morning.

"Everyone is getting themselves into position," Mr. Beugré said.

Ivory Coast's civil war erupted after a failed coup attempt in September. Officials say thousands have been killed and more than one million have been forced to flee their homes.

The rebel group holds the north of the country, while two other rebel factions control large chunks of the west of Ivory Coast, the world's largest cocoa producer. It was not immediately clear what the western rebels would do about the ultimatum.

More than 3,000 French troops are here to protect foreigners and to police a cease-fire line. Rebels have urged the French to stand aside, saying the soldiers are the only obstacle blocking their path to the ports of Abidjan and San Pedro.

An Ivoirian Army spokesman said in a statement today that an army patrol was attacked in the far west of the country near the border with Liberia on Saturday.

He said, though, that the attackers might have been looters acting independently and that they had fled toward the border.