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Troops in Ivory Coast to Fight on Liberian Border

By REUTERS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, May 16 (Reuters) — The top United Nations official in Ivory Coast said today that President Laurent Gbagbo had given approval for French and West African troops to move into the country's anarchic west.

The troops have been waiting for the president's go-ahead before entering the area bordering Liberia, where fighters have been coming in across the border and have complicated efforts to end the eight-month-long civil war in Ivory Coast, a former French colony.

The United Nations special representative to Ivory Coast, Albert Tevoedjre, said the movement of troops could start in a matter of days. "The president has given us his decision to help the rapid deployment of the necessary forces to the west," he told reporters after meeting with Mr. Gbagbo in Abidjan, the country's main city.

Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa grower and traditionally one of the most stable countries in western Africa, tumbled into civil war after a failed attempt by renegade soldiers to oust Mr. Gbagbo last September. Three rebel factions now hold the predominantly Muslim north and large chunks of the west. Rebel ministers have joined a power-sharing government under a peace accord signed in January.

No clashes have been reported between Mr. Gbagbo's forces and the rebels for more than 10 days, after a total cease-fire signed largely to end persistent clashes in the west.

Fighting in the west has been complicated by the involvement on both sides of fighters from Liberia's civil war, West African mercenaries and tribal militias. Reports of atrocities against civilians have been widespread.

French officers say they plan to deploy up to 900 of their 4,000-person military force in Ivory Coast to the west, to keep the warring sides apart and prevent gunmen from crossing the border in either direction. The French force is to be helped by regional troops.

The United Nations has agreed to deploy a force of 26 military observers to assist in peacekeeping, bringing in another 50 if they are needed, officials have said.