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France Sending More Troops to Ivory Coast

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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DAKAR, Senegal (AP) -- France is sending about 1,500 more soldiers to Ivory Coast to enforce a crumbling cease-fire in its former colony in West Africa.

France will station a total of 2,500 soldiers in Ivory Coast, the French government said. There are already about 1,000 French troops in the country.

West African leaders gathered in Dakar, Senegal, ahead of a Wednesday summit to try to breathe new life into the moribund peace talks to end three months of fighting in Ivory Coast.

The country plunged into chaos following a failed coup attempt and is now divided between rebel factions and the government, with French troops holding the middle.

West African leaders said new rebel factions have emerged in the west, further complicating efforts to end the war that threatens to destabilize neighboring countries.

"We are particularly concerned now about the development of the new front in the West," said Mohammed Ibn Chambas, executive secretary of the West African regional bloc.

About 150 French paratroopers arrived in Ivory Coast over the weekend, armed with a tough new mandate to shoot anyone threatening their ability to enforce the ceasefire.

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said France had helped avert a disaster in its former colony.

"Without France's presence in Ivory Coast, there would have already been a catastrophe," de Villepin said during a visit to Algeria.

De Villepin said the troops' mission is to protect an estimated 20,000 French nationals in Ivory Coast and enforce a truce signed in October between the government and the northern rebels.