

January 19, 2003

Rivals Rally in Ivory Coast as Peace Talks Enter 4th Day

By RUETERS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Jan. 18 (Reuters) — Demonstrators on both sides of Ivory Coast's conflict held marches today, in shows of support for the government and rebels, as peace talks near Paris to end the civil war moved into a fourth day.

A boatload of Senegalese peacekeepers arrived in Abidjan, the commercial capital, as part of a West African force meant to help the French police a cease-fire that was signed earlier this month. Up to a million people have been displaced and hundreds have been killed in the fighting, which began with a failed coup in mid-September.

[On Saturday, a United Nations envoy, Carolyn McAskie, visited people in a slum in Abidjan whose shantytown homes had been destroyed by the government, which said the area housed rebel supporters. She said she was shocked by the conditions she found, Agence France-Presse reported.]

Thousands of government supporters gathered in Abidjan's main square, many with painted faces and branches wrapped around their heads to show they were prepared for war.

Witnesses in Bouaké, Ivory Coast's second largest city, said a similar display of support for the rebels took place there. Bouaké, 220 miles north of Abidjan, was taken by the rebels on the first day of the conflict on Sept. 19.

The first sizable contingent of West African peacekeepers destined for the cease-fire line — 172 Senegalese Army soldiers with military vehicles — arrived today aboard a French boat. The Senegalese will head to the capital, Yamoussoukro, and from there will move north to the front line between loyalist forces and the main rebel group. The peacekeeping force will eventually have more than 1,200 soldiers.

For now, no West African peacekeepers will be on the shakier truce line between the rebel factions in western Ivory Coast and the French army. The French have clashed several times with the insurgents there, killing dozens of them.

France has no plans to draw down its 2,500-member military force in Ivory Coast once the West Africans move up to the front line.

The round-table talks near Paris are to continue until Friday.

