

France Moves Foreigners From City in Ivory Coast

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Nov. 30 -- French troops evacuated foreigners today from a rebel-held city in western Ivory Coast as loyalist troops headed toward the area with orders to oust the insurgents.

Eighty-three of 160 foreigners seeking to leave the city of Man were flown south to Abidjan, the commercial capital of this former French colony.

The others were expected to follow on a second plane during the night, said Lt. Col. Ange-Antoine Leccia, spokesman for the French force. It was not known if any Americans were among the evacuees, half of whom are thought to be French citizens.

Earlier, French soldiers fought gun battles with the rebels in Man -- a city of 135,000 people northwest of Abidjan -- while trying to secure the airport for the evacuation. One French soldier was wounded and at least five rebels were killed, Leccia said.

Ivory Coast, the world's leading cocoa producer, has been divided three ways as a two-month rebel uprising evolves into a multi-front war in the former French colony. The government holds the south, including Abidjan. The rebels who launched the Sept. 19 uprising control the north, and the new insurgents claim the west.

French forces evacuated hundreds of French, American and other foreigners from rebel-held towns in the north at the start of the uprising. The French troops are also monitoring a cease-fire agreed to by the northern rebels and the army on Oct. 17, but which has crumbled in recent days.

Rebels calling themselves the Ivorian Popular Movement for the Greater West now hold two towns in the mountainous west -- Man, the center of a cocoa-producing area, and Danane, 40 miles farther west.

Residents of the two cities described the rebels as young men dressed in a mix of military fatigues, black jeans, T-shirts and flip-flops. Some rode scooters and others had commandeered cars, the residents said, but there seemed to be little discipline among them.

Peace talks in nearby Togo seemed on the brink of collapse after West African mediators rejected the latest rebel proposals. The increasingly acrimonious discussions have stalled on rebel demands that President Laurent Gbagbo step down -- a demand Ivorian authorities refuse to meet.

The conflict has fanned tensions between northern and southern groups. The northern rebels say they oppose discrimination against mainly Muslim northern tribes by Christian and animist southern groups that have traditionally dominated the government.

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