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Ivory Coast's Raging Conflict Draws France In

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

ARIS, Dec. 24 — As the United States rushes to complete its war preparations against Iraq, France is becoming more deeply enmeshed in a conflict on a much different battlefield: Ivory Coast.

The complicated dispute in France's former colony — once the most stable and prosperous country in West Africa — is France's largest and most precarious military commitment in Africa in almost two decades.

Although it has received scant attention in the United States, it has dominated conversation in the corridors of power and news reports in France since rebels tried to overthrow the government three months ago.

France has more than 2,500 troops, including members of the Foreign Legion, in Ivory Coast. The most recent deployment of 300 troops, accompanied by helicopters and light armored vehicles, will be operational by next week.

Their stated mission is twofold: to serve as a buffer between government and rebel forces along a cease-fire line until a multinational West African force takes over and to protect French and other foreign residents living in the country.

But little by little, the French troops have been drawn into what may become a long war that could spiral into anarchy.

The situation deteriorated on Monday after Ivory Coast's three rebel factions warned French troops that any military attack on rebel positions would be considered a "cause for war." The rebels also began discussing forming a coalition, a move that could significantly increase their power.

Those developments followed a clash last Saturday in which French Foreign Legion troops equipped with light tanks fired on a rebel group. The rebels had opened fire on French soldiers as they approached the strategic town of Duékoué from the northeast after bypassing government troops, according to a French army spokesman.

The French troops initially fired in the air but then responded to the attack. Three four-wheel drive vehicles belonging to the rebels were destroyed, and rebels said the assault had killed six people.

The Ivory Coast conflict has its origins in bitter ethnic and religious divisions that have built steadily since the death nine years ago of Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the country's longtime autocratic ruler.

A succession of presidents from the Christian south have worked assiduously and often unscrupulously in the intervening years to deny power to Alassane D. Ouattara, a popular leader from the more heavily populated and predominantly Muslim northern region. He was barred from the election in September 2000 that brought Laurent Gbagbo, Ivory Coast's current president, to power.

Disaffected northern soldiers rose up against President Gbagbo in a coup last September.

About 400 people were killed in the uprising, which has shattered the reputation the Ivory Coast as a country with a stable government, a vibrant economy and an infrastructure that works. Since then, two other rebel groups have emerged and tens of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes.

The conflict has been complicated by rumors of the involvement of foreign powers and mercenaries, the discovery of two mass graves believed to hold up to 200 bodies and human rights abuses reported to have been committed by both government forces and rebels.

French troops intervened initially to protect foreign civilians caught in the fighting. But as rebels from different factions began to advance toward the country's largest city, Abidjan, French troops have increasingly been put in the position of keeping them away from the government-controlled part of the country.

The rebels, and even some French newspapers, have accused France of trying to prop up the increasingly unpopular government, and they warn against a deeper involvement.

"The French are not invincible," Guillaume Soro, a leader of the main rebel group, said on Sunday. "They lost in Indochina. We can at least make sure there are families mourning in France as well as in Ivory Coast."

"France has found itself in a trap," said Bernard Conte, a political economist who is an expert on Ivory Coast. "France's intervention started out as humanitarian, and now it is preventing the rebels from advancing. So it gives the impression that it has taken sides."

A recent editorial in *Le Figaro* said, "By choosing what side it is on, Paris is taking a huge risk." An editorial in *Le Monde* said, "In terms of realpolitik, Ivory Coast, where only bad things can happen, holds no interest for anyone, not for France, not moreover for the United States."

The rebels have called the foreign troops an army of "conquest and occupation," a charge that France has denied.

"There is no question of our setting off to reconquer Ivory Coast or engaging in offensive operations," the chief of staff of the French Army, Gen. Henri Bentegeat, said on Sunday during a visit to Abidjan.

Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa grower, was once the jewel in the French colonial crown, and Abidjan was called the Paris of West Africa. Even now, 20,000 French citizens live in the country, and French corporations are involved in public works and utility projects.

President Jacques Chirac is determined that France play the lead in bringing restoring order.

But President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, the current chairman of the Economic Community of West African States, said recently that regional troops could not be sent until the rebels and the government reached a political settlement.

That means that French troops may have to stay. France "can leave 2,500 men in Ivory Coast for some years if need be," General Bentegeat said on Sunday, if that is required to negotiate a political solution.