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Anti-French Protests Swell Over Ivory Coast Accord

By REUTERS

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (Reuters) - Stone-throwing mobs attacked the French Embassy and army base in Ivory Coast Sunday as thousands marched in an explosion of anger over a peace accord they said France had imposed to the advantage of rebels.

The massive protests underlined the problems facing the power-sharing deal agreed by President Laurent Gbagbo in Paris Saturday to end the four-month war that has split the world's top cocoa producer along ethnic lines.

Soldiers from the former colonial power used teargas and riot-control stun grenades to drive demonstrators from their military base in Abidjan and from the French embassy, where marchers started a small fire and damaged the gate.

From Paris, Gbagbo appealed for calm and defended the accord, saying that he had no choice but to compromise. He set off for home straight after a meeting with West African leaders who gave their own nod to the deal.

"People have to understand that you don't leave a war in the same way as you leave a gala dinner," Gbagbo said.

"There are two ways of getting out of a war. You win militarily, or if you don't win, you negotiate and compromise."

Gbagbo was due home just after 8 p.m. (2000 GMT).

Ivory Coast was plunged into crisis by a coup attempt on September 19. The putsch failed, but ensuing civil war has left hundreds dead, displaced more than one million and split the country of 16 million along ethnic lines.

Rebels accuse Gbagbo of fanning discrimination against northerners and immigrants. His supporters in the largely Christian south say the insurgents are simply hungry for power.

SHARING POWER

Gbagbo agreed to share power with political rivals and rebel chiefs Saturday and named respected former prime minister Seydou Diarra, from the rebel-held Muslim north, to head a "government of national reconciliation."

But his own army said Sunday that some aspects of the accord ``humiliate the defense and security forces, the state and the Ivorian people." The army nonetheless called for calm.

A hard core of protesters ignored the appeals to stop for a few hours, but trouble appeared to have largely died down by evening as everyone awaited Gbagbo's return.

Overnight, protesters set fire to a French school and smashed up the French cultural center. They attacked and looted businesses owned by French citizens or African immigrants accused of helping the rebels who hold half the country.

Mobs set fire to neighboring Burkina Faso's embassy in an act certain to worsen regional tensions.

Demonstrators in Abidjan, the country's commercial hub on the Atlantic coast, were particularly maddened that rebels said they had been offered defense and interior ministry portfolios.

``The rebels must never enter government. We say 'No'," youth leader Charles Ble Goude told marchers, comparing the Paris peace deal to France's 1940 capitulation to Nazi Germany during World War II.

REBELS CELEBRATE

Thousands of people partied through the night in the rebel stronghold of Bouake. ``The war is over, we have won," they sang.

France has committed a 2,500-strong force to protect some 20,000 citizens in Ivory Coast and stop a spiralling crisis that threatens to plunge West Africa into turmoil.

French pressure was vital in bringing three rebel factions to negotiate in Paris and getting Gbagbo to agree to a deal that takes away some of the powers he won at disputed 2000 elections, but allows him to stay until 2005 to complete his mandate.

The street protests triggered by the peace deal had echoes of the massive demonstrations that brought Gbagbo to office after then junta ruler Robert Guei tried to rig the results of the presidential election to keep hold of power.

``France has imposed this accord on us. The French will pay for this one by one," said one soldier, heading off to join the protesters.

French President Jacques Chirac condemned the violent protests, but said he saw no reason to send extra troops.

“It is in the interest of all Ivoirians that everyone calms down, that everyone understands we are starting a new page in the history of Ivory Coast,” said French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin.

Some of the pro-Gbagbo mobs that took to the city streets have also targeted immigrants from Muslim neighbors, who are widely blamed for sympathizing with, if not helping, the rebels.

Most of the immigrants are from Burkina Faso -- whose President Blaise Compaore said last week that Gbagbo should resign or end up “like Milosevic,” referring to the former Yugoslav strongman on trial for war crimes.