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Thousands Rally in Ivory Coast to Protest Peace Plan

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Feb. 1 — Virtually sounding the death knell on a French-brokered peace accord aimed at ending a four-month-long civil war in this country, Ivoirians by the tens of thousands took to the streets today to denounce the deal, as West African leaders huddled with the Ivoirian president in an effort to restore peace.

The rally, not far from President Laurent Gbagbo's office here in the commercial capital, was the largest in the country since a failed coup attempt plunged Ivory Coast, the world's largest cocoa producer, into the brutal war.

Crowd estimates ranged from 100,000 to 300,000.

The peace accord, negotiated during talks in Marcoussis, France, provides for a government of national reconciliation, in which the elected government of Mr. Gbagbo and the rebels who have tried to oust him would share power.

Mr. Gbagbo's supporters have said they will never turn over any piece of their government to insurgents.

Since returning from France nearly a week ago, Mr. Gbagbo has said virtually nothing about whether he plans to abide by the peace deal, except to call some elements of the accord "proposals." It was not clear when he planned to speak to his compatriots.

The streets of Abidjan apparently spoke for him today. Leaders of the Young Patriots, an umbrella group that organized the rally, wore T-shirts emblazoned with an X over the word Marcoussis. They reserved their wrath for France, this country's former colonial ruler, which brokered the peace talks. They accuse the French of forcing their president's hand. They have appealed to the United States to intervene on their behalf. American government officials have expressed support of the fragile peace deal.

Still, the affection for Americans and anger toward the French was on full display today. Demonstrators waved American flags. One held up a photograph of Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. "We Trust in USA," read one placard. Another: "Bush please help Ivory Coast against French terrorism." R. Kelly and Aaliyah songs blasted improbably from the stage speakers.

Anyone who could speak a few words of English did, whether broken or polished. "Do you want me to speak French?" the firebrand leader of the Young Patriots, Charles Ble Goude, shouted from the stage. The crowd hollered its disapproval.

"Are you ready for English?" he shouted again. The crowd hollered heartily.

"I want the United States to come and help my country, which is being destroyed by the right wing of the French government," Mr. Goude, 30, said in an interview later in the afternoon.

"Ivoirians love America because America governs peace of the world," said Zadi Any Roland, 49, a rally participant.