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Ivory Coast Rebels Apologize for Clash

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) -- Ivory Coast's western rebels apologized Monday for a weekend attack on French troops, the latest clash between the elite forces and increasingly bold insurgents fighting to seize control of West Africa's most prosperous nation.

Also Monday, a U.S. missionary feared missing headed out of the battle-scarred west for the southern commercial capital, Abidjan, rebel leader Sgt. Felix Doh said.

Concerns for the safety of William P. Foster, who had been working with Liberian refugees in the western town of Toulepleu, arose after U.S. officials were unable to reach him by telephone. The circumstances of his reappearance were not immediately clear, and U.S. Embassy officials Monday declined to comment.

French forces fought with rebels twice over the weekend around the strategic town of Duekoue, situated at the crossroads of routes to the cocoa-rich center and southwestern San Pedro, Ivory Coast's second port.

Scores of French troops are positioned around Duekoue, manning checkpoints with anti-tank missiles and heavy machine guns. French troops and rebels have clashed here twice before.

French Lt. Col. Ange-Antoine Leccia said a rebel convoy attacked a French position northeast of Duekoue, near the village of Blodi, on Sunday. "Our forces retaliated and destroyed three vehicles," he said.

Rebel commander Sgt. Felix Doh said Sunday's clash near Blodi was "unfortunate" and caused by a misunderstanding. "I would like to present my apologies to the French forces," he said. He said he had no information about vehicles being destroyed, and did not say what led to the clash.

Leccia said French forces also faced attack Saturday from rebels north of Duekoue, on the road to the rebel-held city of Man. Doh did not comment on Saturday's fighting, and has in the past said his men were ready to fight the French, whom rebels accuse of helping Ivorian government troops.

No French soldiers were injured in the confrontations.

The weekend clashes came after a French patrol fired mortars at a group of rebels north of Duekoue on Friday, heightening fears of a deeper French involvement in the three-month conflict.

Ivory Coast's slide into war began with a coup attempt Sept. 19. Rebels who staged the attempt now hold the northern half of the country, while two rebel factions hold large areas of the west, near the border with Liberia. All the rebels want President Laurent Gbagbo to resign.

The northern rebels have agreed to a shaky cease-fire but the western rebels have not, and are backed by notoriously ill-disciplined Liberian fighters.

Amid the weekend fighting, some 300 French reinforcements, backed by helicopters and dozens of light- armored vehicles docked in Abidjan on Saturday. The new arrivals bring the number of troops -- including elite Foreign Legionnaires and paratroopers -- to around 2,500.

French troops are charged with enforcing the oft-violated truce and protecting French citizens and foreign nationals, but they have been increasingly active in the West, blocking rebel advances toward Abidjan, the key to control of Ivory Coast.