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Renewed Fighting in Ivory Coast Threatens to Halt Peace Talks

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Nov. 29 — Peace talks appeared in danger of collapse today as Ivory Coast's Army rushed to reclaim the west from new insurgents who have joined the fighting.

Western diplomats said the western rebels seemed to include supporters of a former junta leader, Gen. Robert Gueï. Two previously unknown groups appeared to be operating in the area, calling themselves the Movement for Justice and Peace and the Patriotic Movement for the Greater West.

Soldiers loyal to the government headed through the cocoa-rich western belt today under presidential orders to remove rebels from the strategic city of Man and nearby Danane — the latest front in an increasingly complex and fractured conflict that started with a rebel uprising two months ago.

General Gueï, who led Ivory Coast's first coup in 1999 and was shot and killed at the start of this rebellion, was from the Man region and was fervently supported in the far western part of the country. Some of the northern rebels also helped bring him to power.

Ivory Coast has been split into a rebel-held north and government-held south since insurgents calling themselves the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast started a failed coup attempt on Sept. 19. Now, new rebel groups appear to be taking control of the western region.

The conflict has fanned simmering ethnic tensions. The northern rebels say they are fighting against the discrimination of mainly Muslim northern groups by Christian and animist southern groups that have dominated the government.

As warring groups prepared for battle despite a month-old cease-fire, West African mediators faced the possible breakdown of peace talks to end a conflict that has cost hundreds of lives, sent thousands fleeing their homes and crippled the economy.

After a month of talks in Togo, the Ivory Coast government's top negotiator said the rebels' response Thursday to a draft accord was "unacceptable." He said the sides are "back to square one."

Laurent Dona Fologo, the mediator, urged negotiators to decide whether to continue the talks, which have stalled on rebel demands that President Laurent Gbagbo resign — a demand the government team refuses to consider.

The rebel delegation condemned what they called a "flagrant violation" of the cease-fire by loyalist forces. Rebels "will be obliged to resort to use of arms if nothing is done to stop these attacks against the civilian population and our positions," said their chief negotiator, Guillaume Soro.

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