

January 31, 2003

## Demonstrators Storm Airport in Ivory Coast

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Jan. 31 — Several hundred young Ivoirians stormed the international airport early today, trying to block French citizens from leaving the country, and hurling stones at the French soldiers charged with protecting their countrymen.

France, the former colonial ruler of the Ivory Coast, has come under attack by Ivorian government loyalists since a French-brokered peace deal was sealed last week in an attempt to end a civil war that has rent this country for four months. The peace accord calls for power-sharing between the government of President Laurent Gbagbo, who was elected in 2000, and the rebels who have tried to unseat him since launching a failed coup last September. Mr. Gbagbo's supporters accuse the French of supporting the rebels, who control the north, and of trying to force the president, whose troops control the south, to agree to the accord. They have vowed to never let the rebels have a piece of their country.

The French Embassy has advised its citizens in the Ivory Coast to stay indoors, and a Foreign Ministry spokesman in Paris has urged all citizens "whose presence is not essential" to leave the country. The Ivory Coast was once the jewel in France's imperial crown and is still home to 20,000 French citizens. About 800 French citizens left the Ivory Coast today on commercial flights and planes chartered by French companies here.

Today's attack against the French — or anyone white who looked French — was one of the most violent to date. Protesters, draped in Ivorian colors and holding hand-made placards denouncing the French, snatched luggage from a few passengers and broke car windows in the airport parking. A smaller group rushed on to the airport tarmac, trying to prevent planes from taking off, according to a French Army spokesman.

Two French soldiers were injured by stones hurled by some members of the crowd, but were not seriously. There were no civilian injuries, according to the authorities, and no reports of any arrests.

The three days of riots that followed the news of the peace deal last weekend left French schools, businesses, as well as the French Embassy torched, ransacked or scarred by graffiti. Some French citizens were pulled out of their cars on the roads, and some of their homes were raided.

But it has been Ivoirians and other Africans who have borne the most painful toll of the civil strife. Here in government-controlled Abidjan, a once calm and prosperous port city with a reputation for fine restaurants, immigrants from other West African countries have been attacked, particularly those Burkina Faso, Mali and Liberia, who are accused of supporting insurgents in the north and west. Meanwhile, thousands of Ivoirians have fled

rebel-held areas; their houses have been burned and looted. The United Nations estimates that the conflict has displaced more than a million people.

The doors to the Félix Houphouët-Boigny International Airport were blocked by three armored personnel carriers. Dozens of French soldiers with machine guns at the ready faced a livid crowd. Would-be travelers were trapped inside. The road to the airport was blocked by nearly a dozen French armored vehicles, including a light tank. An Army spokesman said also that two helicopters had been deployed.

The siege of the airport began at 8 a.m., around the time passengers for a scheduled 10:20 a.m. Air France flight to Paris would be checking in. The standoff lasted roughly five hours. French soldiers ceded control of the airport to Ivorian army troops by mid-afternoon, leaving an unspecified number of paramilitary gendarmes.

Three of the 14 scheduled flights today were canceled. It was unclear whether a scheduled Air France flight from Paris would land here tomorrow morning.

A spokesman for the Ivorian army, Jules Yao Yao, said the incident did not warrant a reinforcement of troops at the airport.

Eugene Djue, president of Patriotic Union for the Total Liberation of Cote d'Ivoire, an umbrella group that called the demonstration, vowed to never accept the peace deal, which calls for a national unity government headed by Prime Minister Seydou Diarra.

Mr. Diarra, who was said to be returning here today, apparently postponed his homecoming, opting to stay in Dakar, Senegal, where West African leaders met in an attempt to resolve the crisis.

"We want to tell Chirac and Seydou Diarra that Cote d'Ivoire is a sovereign country just like France," Mr. Djue said. "And we do not allow them to decide for us."