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Ivorian President Caught Between 2 Leaders He Groomed

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Feb. 5 — "Gbagbo Between Two Fires," a morning tabloid roared here this week, describing the predicament of the Ivorian president, Laurent Gbagbo, a man caught between the guns of rebel forces and the rage of his supporters.

Actually, the president seems caught between the two young men who were, politically speaking, his two prodigal sons. Mr. Gbagbo plucked both from the student movements at the national university here, where he once taught. He groomed both for greatness. Today both are fiery, charismatic orators, lauded as among a new generation of West African leaders. (Both give their ages as around 30, but there is some disbelief about the veracity of their claims.) And both have emerged as real political contenders from the chaos of Sept. 19, when an inchoate uprising by disgruntled soldiers in the Ivorian Army plunged this nation into civil war.

One, Guillaume Soro, leader of the largest rebel group, calling itself the Patriotic Movement of Côte d'Ivoire, has sought to topple Mr. Gbagbo for nearly four months, accusing the president, who is a southerner, of coming to power through rigged elections and discriminating against northerners like himself.

The other, Charles Blé Goudé, leader of the group known as the Young Patriots, is working harder than ever before to see that the president remains in place, turning out hundreds of thousands of young people in support of Mr. Gbagbo, making almost daily television appearances and skewering his rival, the rebel leader, as an enemy of democracy.

The drama is further complicated by this country's relationship with its colonial parent, France: President Gbagbo's rise to power has been marked by a crusade to throw off what his supporters decry as the long leash of French colonialism.

But the fact that Mr. Gbagbo has made a political campaign of diminishing French influence, explains in part why his supporters have recently been so livid about a French-brokered peace deal aimed at ending the Ivorian conflict.

French troops, enforcing the fragile cease-fire, reinforced their ranks this week, bringing their numbers to well over 3,000 soldiers and gendarmes. The United States, meanwhile, dispatched what an embassy official called a small "military advisory team."

The peace deal, negotiated in Marcoussis, France, two weeks ago, provides for a government of national reconciliation, in which power would be shared between Mr.

Gbagbo's government, whose troops control the southern half of this country, and the rebels, who control the north and west.

At the moment, though, peace looks to be on its last breath, though no one can say for sure when the guns will start up again. The Army, as well as several political parties, have rejected letting rebels have any piece of their government, and President Gbagbo has said nothing about whether he will abide by the deal. He was scheduled to speak later today about the pact.

In that silence, Mr. Soro and Mr. Goudé have spoken loudly. Virtually every day since the accord was signed, Mr. Goudé has pulled out his troops, often draped in Ivorian colors and sporting T-shirts that read "Xenophobe. And So What?" At times, the street protests have turned ugly, with angry young Ivorians targeting foreigners, African and European alike, looting shops, setting up street blockades, sometimes demanding cash of unwitting commuters.

"I call them, and they come. I am their general," he said matter-of-factly, over an omelet in a tony tea salon at a shopping mall here. An AK-47-toting bodyguard sat at the table in front. Parts of the mall had been looted a few days before.

Decrying the street violence of the early protests here, Mr. Goudé likens his movement to the non-violent struggles of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas K. Gandhi. He beseeches America to help his country stave off the rebels, whom he calls terrorists. "These rebels who came in and attacked our country will be in the government? We don't want them — definitely not. Doing so is promoting terrorism, killing democracy."

Mr. Soro has reserved his most cutting words for Mr. Gbagbo and his supporters. "Patience has its limits," he warned, speaking at a rally earlier this week in Korhogo, a northern rebel stronghold. "The situation cannot go on forever. Ivory Coast is left to its own devices without a government."

Mr. Soro was meeting with other rebel leaders in the western town of Man today. "Maybe we will issue an ultimatum," he warned.