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Rebel Faction Strikes French, Imperiling Ivory Coast Talks

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Jan. 6 — Rebel factions in western Ivory Coast attacked French troops today, damping hopes for peace even after the main rebel group in the north and the government agreed to a cease-fire and new peace talks. The clashes today were near the strategic town of Duékoué.

Over the weekend, President Laurent Gbagbo and leaders of the main rebel movement agreed to meet on Jan. 15 in Paris to try to end the war. The French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, won their consent during a visit to Ivory Coast, a former French colony.

The conflict has killed hundreds of people, caused thousands to flee their homes and threatened West Africa's tenuous stability.

The two rebel factions operating in the cocoa- and coffee-producing west did not meet with Mr. de Villepin. They have never agreed to a truce.

It was not immediately clear what caused the fighting today near Duékoué, which straddles main roads leading to Daloa and San Pedro, a port in the southwest. Both those towns are in government hands.

"We faced attacks by rebels on foot on two roads," said Maj. Frédéric Thomazo of the French forces. He said the rebels fired mortars and the French responded.

Four French soldiers were wounded by shrapnel, an army spokesman, Col. Christian Baptiste, said in Paris. He said the rebels appeared to have suffered "rather heavy losses."

More than 2,000 French troops, including Legionnaires and paratroopers, are in Ivory Coast to help enforce the cease-fire and protect 20,000 French citizens and other foreigners.

The leader of one rebel faction in the west said he had ordered attacks because government forces bombed his positions this weekend.

"I have ordered my men to attack everywhere and to head for Abidjan," the rebel leader, Félix Doh, said by satellite telephone. Mr. Doh has repeatedly threatened to march on Abidjan, the commercial capital, 310 miles southeast of Duékoué.

All the rebels want President Gbagbo to resign, saying his government fans ethnic hatred. The government says that is out of the question and insists the rebels disarm.

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