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Ivory Coast President Urges Followers to Accept Pact With Rebels

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Feb. 7 — While his supporters rampaged through the streets here in defiance of a French-brokered peace deal, the Ivoirian president, Laurent Gbagbo, tonight broke nearly two weeks of silence and beseeched his people to accept the accord.

"Let's try this medicine," he said in a televised speech. "Let us try this medicine, and if does not heal us, we can try another medicine."

"We are tired of war," he added.

While his speech appeared to stave off renewed fighting by rebels, whether supporters will accept his verdict remains unclear. Angry crowds spilled into the streets of a pro-government neighborhood here shortly afterward, but the rest of the city was calm.

The peace accord, which provides for power sharing between Mr. Gbagbo and the rebels who have tried to unseat him, was negotiated two weeks ago in France in a bid to end a four-month-long war that threatens to partition this country, the world's largest cocoa producer. The fate of the peace deal tottered in recent days, as Mr. Gbagbo's supporters both protested and international heavyweights, from the United Nations secretary general to the chairman of the African Union, pressed Mr. Gbagbo to carry through with his promise.

His remarks tonight spoke volumes about his delicate position. Mr. Gbagbo is squeezed between rebels who control about half the country and short-fused supporters who have protested letting the rebels have any piece of the government.

The rebels had issued Mr. Gbagbo a chilling ultimatum today hours before his speech: implement the accord in a week or face an advance on Abidjan, the commercial capital, which is in government hands.

Once a showcase of political stability and economic success in West Africa, Ivory Coast has been plunged into its worst crisis ever, since a failed mutiny by disgruntled soldiers beginning on Sept. 19 led to full-scale rebellions. Rebel groups have accused the government, made up largely of southern Christians, of discriminating against the country's northerners, mostly Muslims.

The peace accord envisions a government of national reconciliation to be headed by a longtime northern politician, Seydou Diarra. It is to appoint a human rights commission and schedule new elections.

