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Chirac Praises France's Peacekeeping Role as Ivory Coast Casualties Mount

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

PARIS, Jan. 7 — A day after 30 rebels were killed and 9 French soldiers were wounded in clashes with rebels in Ivory Coast, according to French officials, President Jacques Chirac reaffirmed today the importance of French peacekeeping troops around the world.

"In the Balkans, in Afghanistan, in the Ivory Coast, our forces act to re-establish and maintain peace and allow suffering peoples to be able to live in better conditions," Mr. Chirac said in his New Year's speech to the armed forces.

He said there was every reason to believe that troops already in the field would continue to be needed, apparently a reference to the 2,500 French troops in Ivory Coast.

Earlier today, Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie told French radio that the attacks were staged by gunmen not under the control of any of the three rebel groups. "It seems that even the person who in theory controls the zone on the rebel side was not informed of the attack," she added.

She reiterated that France would retaliate against any party that attacked its troops and would take action against any breach of a fragile cease-fire.

"French troops are there to protect French and foreign nationals," she said. "If they are attacked or if the French or foreign nationals are attacked, they can fire."

The attacks, in two places, underscored the danger of the mission of the French peacekeepers, who have come to be perceived less as a neutral buffer monitoring a cease-fire and more as a party fighting on the side of the government in the former French colony.

In a hastily arranged visit last week, Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin persuaded the government and the main rebel faction to respect a cease-fire and to attend peace talks in Paris.

But two smaller rebel groups refused to meet with him. Insisting that they are not bound by the cease-fire, they said they had attacked the French in retaliation for an attack by Ivoirian government forces.

Citing the "barbaric" actions of the French soldiers against the rebels, the main rebel faction today threatened to withdraw from the talks scheduled in Paris later this month, which are aimed at ending nearly four months of conflict.

"This could dangerously compromise the Paris trip," said Sidiki Konaté, a spokesman for the northern-based Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast, which has held the northern half of Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer, since an uprising on Sept. 19.

Guillaume Soro, the group's secretary general, questioned French assertions that 30 rebels had been killed and 9 French soldiers had been wounded in the attack, saying that 6 French soldiers and 12 rebels had been killed.

The clash on Monday was by far the deadliest yet between French and rebel forces. Previously, one French soldier was wounded.