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Despite Accord, Reconciliation Proves Elusive in Ivory Coast

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, March 7 — Nearly six weeks ago, a peace deal aimed at ending the civil war in this country promised a government of national reconciliation. Tonight, there was more horse-trading than reconciliation as yet another round of talks was held to hammer out how much power each side would wield.

At issue is the makeup of the so-called national reconciliation government. The peace accord struck in January in France, Ivory Coast's former colonial ruler, envisioned a power-sharing deal between the government of President Laurent Gbagbo, which controls the southern half of this country, and the rebel groups that have sought to unseat him since September. They control the north and much of the west.

The rebels have said they will drop their claims to the two pivotal cabinet positions they were assigned under the peace deal — the Interior and Defense Ministries — over the strenuous objections of Mr. Gbagbo's supporters, including his army. But they want other concessions from Mr. Gbagbo's government, including an assurance that it would guarantee the safety of their leaders and cede power to the man both sides have agreed would lead the unity government as prime minister, a veteran politician named Seydou Diarra.

Mr. Gbagbo has not yet spelled out the powers he will hand over to Mr. Diarra, who so far has been able to do little more than travel from one West African capital to another in a seemingly futile effort to coax both sides to keep their promises.

"I've exhausted my strength and all my imagination," Mr. Diarra said this week. The United Nations secretary general's envoy assigned to the crisis, Albert Tevoedjre, gently prodded both sides to hew to the deal.

The talks that began on Thursday in Accra, the capital of neighboring Ghana, are intended to work out the shape of a new unity government, but mediators suggested, with frustration, that new hurdles kept emerging.

Among the proposals on the table is a new national security council, which would deal with military issues and in which government officials and rebel leaders would be represented, a spokesman for the main northern rebel group, the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast, said tonight.

The fact that there is no unity government nearly six weeks after the peace deal was worked out is plainly causing concern here and abroad. Ivory Coast is the world's biggest cocoa producer and the main economic engine of French-speaking West Africa.

A high-level mission was dispatched by the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, last week. Its main goal is to determine how to strengthen Mr. Tevoedjre's hand in carrying out the peace deal, including the possibility of a peacekeeping operation. With the Security Council consumed with Iraq, that remains a distant prospect. Besides, as diplomats here point out, there can be no peace to keep if neither side wants it.

"If nothing comes out of here you will stand accused at the bar of history," the president of Ghana, John Kufuor, said on Thursday. "Money does not like noise. Money runs away from trouble and instability."