

# Ivory Coast Accuses Liberia of Attack

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast -- The military claimed it had come under attack from Liberian fighters at a western border town Sunday, as West African leaders pressed peace efforts for Ivory Coast.

Attackers "consisting primarily of Liberian fighters" hit Ivorian army troops in the town of Toulepleu from the north, west and south early Sunday, Ivory Coast army spokesman Lt. Col. Jules Yao Yao said.

The town is 10 miles east of Ivory Coast's border with Liberia. Yao Yao said fighting lasted 90 minutes until Ivory Coast troops repelled the attackers.

Rebel groups could not be immediately reached for comment. French military spokesman Lt. Col. Philippe Perret, whose country has more than 3,000 troops in Ivory Coast, said his forces had no "material proof" of the attack, since the nearest French troops were about 100 miles to the east.

In Liberia's capital, Monrovia, a senior defense official neither confirmed nor denied Sunday's alleged attack -- but said it was already well-established that Liberians beyond the government's control were fighting in Ivory Coast.

"What is clear is that this government does not sanction their involvement," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Ivory Coast has claimed before to have come under attack by fighters from Liberia. Liberian insurgents, many left over from that country's ruinous 1989-96 war, have entered Ivory Coast's civil war in the west.

Most of the Liberian combatants are fighting on the side of Ivory Coast's rebels, who in September took up arms to oust Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo. Rebels since have seized the northern half of the country and parts of the cocoa- and coffee-rich west.

All sides have signed cease-fires to allow for peace talks last month in France, Ivory Coast's colonial ruler. Fighting generally has been stilled since then.

Ivory Coast's nearly five-month-old civil war has killed hundreds and displaced more than 1 million.

The government accuses neighboring Liberia and Burkina Faso of sending guns and

mercenary troops to aid the Ivorian rebels. Both countries -- who together have millions of citizens living in Ivory Coast -- deny the charge.

Although the government and rebels signed a French-brokered peace accord Jan. 24 outside Paris, Gbagbo has given only conditional support to the agreement. Gbagbo on Friday urged all sides to give the peace deal a chance but said he will prevent the dismantling of the military and will have the final say in choosing members of Cabinet in a unity government to be created under the accord.

The rebels insist the accord gives them control of the key interior and defense ministries, a claim that outrages loyalist hard-liners. Loyalists have held two weeks of often-violent protests against France, accusing it of trying to impose the accord on Ivory Coast.

West African leaders, including Gbagbo, were due to meet Monday to discuss the deal in either Ivory Coast's capital, Yamoussoukro, or the capital of neighboring Ghana, Accra, Ivorian officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Until Ivory Coast's first coup in 1999 shattered its reputation of stability and prosperity, the country was a magnet for French businesspeople, American missionaries and jobseekers from across West Africa. About 15,000 French remain in the country.

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