

March 9, 2003

French Soldiers Find Bodies in Ivory Coast Town

By REUTERS

DUEKOUE, Ivory Coast (Reuters) - The French army in Ivory Coast said on Sunday it had found corpses and signs of serious violence against civilians at a deserted rebel-held town that was attacked by armed men said to include Liberians.

Rebel commander Ousmane Coulibaly said he believed more than 200 civilians were butchered in Friday's attack on Bangolo, which he blamed on Liberian mercenaries allied to President Laurent Gbagbo's army.

A senior French military source in western Ivory Coast said on Sunday the 200 figure could be accurate. France has more than 3,000 troops in its former colony where civil war broke out in September after a failed coup.

The fighting in western Ivory Coast at the weekend came as rebels and feuding politicians finally agreed in Ghana to set up a joint security council and form a new government by March 14.

"We believe the political progress we have made will not be threatened by the fighting in the west, which is very localized," Albert Tevoedjre, the U.N. special representative for Ivory Coast, told Reuters on Sunday.

The rebels say they repulsed the assault on Bangolo, some 600 km (375 miles) northwest of the main city Abidjan, but not before the attackers reached the center of town and started killing civilians suspected of backing the rebels.

"ONLY IMAM SURVIVED"

Coulibaly said the victims were mostly foreigners and Ivorian Dioulas from the mainly Muslim north.

"I asked the French to come and see the dead. There is an entire Dioula neighborhood that was decimated. All the houses are full of bodies, only the Imam escaped alive," Coulibaly said from Bangolo.

"There are more than 200 bodies, maybe 300. And there are more corpses in the bush," he told Reuters by satellite phone.

A French army spokesman declined to say how many bodies the French saw when their detachment landed by helicopter in Bangolo on Saturday. He described the violence as "very visible."

“It was clear the violence affected many people,” Colonel Philippe Perret said in Abidjan.

French army captain Steve Carlton said on Sunday his men detained around 100 armed people on Friday night at a checkpoint on the road between Duekoue and rebel-held Man.

They were coming from the direction of Bangolo, 40 km (25 miles) north of Duekoue where French troops are dug in, policing a shaky cease-fire.

“They had their arms in the air. They wanted to surrender. There were French speakers and English speakers,” Carlton, a Foreign Legionnaire, told Reuters.

“They have been disarmed and interned. They are here in the camp. They presented themselves as Lima,” he said, referring to the name of a new armed force which military sources say is pro-government and includes Liberian refugees in Ivory Coast.

Red Cross officials were due to question the Lima detainees, aid workers said.

Liberians, whose own country has been in a state of war for most of the past 13 years, are also fighting with Ivorian rebels.

The Ivorian army denies any links with the Liberians.

A Gbagbo spokesman accused the French army on Sunday of keeping quiet about human rights abuses and brutalities when they were committed by the rebels.

“The French army never denounces the crimes committed by the rebels,” Toussaint Alain told Reuters.

The five-month civil war has split the world's biggest cocoa producer along ethnic lines between the largely Muslim north and the mainly Christian south loyal to Gbagbo.

Several thousand people have died and more than a million have been driven from their homes.

Months of talks have failed to halt the fighting, despite cease-fires agreed in October and January in the north and west.

Perret said the French army would only give information about what its men witnessed in Bangolo to an international committee meant to be helping Ivory Coast end the conflict.

Tevoedjre, who chairs that committee, said he had yet to receive the French army's report.

On Saturday, French troops around Duekoue repulsed attacks by rebels who Coulibaly said were avenging the Bangolo massacre.

About 10 rebels were killed and two French soldiers received light injuries, the French army said, adding that it had reinforced its contingent in the west.

[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)