

# Ivory Coast's Western Rebels Sign Truce

Two Factions Reach Agreement to Cease Fighting in Advance of Paris Talks

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LOME, Togo, Jan. 13 -- Ivory Coast's western rebel factions signed a truce today aimed at stopping the fighting on all fronts before peace talks in France.

The conflict began with a failed coup attempt Sept. 19 and has split the West African country on ethnic lines. Rebels holding the largely Muslim north signed a cease-fire in mid-October, but two new groups sprang up in the west in November.

Hundreds of people have been killed in the fighting and a senior U.N. official said that unless the conflict is stopped quickly, much of West Africa, already one of the world's poorest regions, could slide into economic disaster.

Carolyn McAskie, recently appointed to coordinate U.N. relief for Ivory Coast, said the country faces a health catastrophe and growing hunger. She said emergency needs are being calculated on an estimate of 1.1 million people displaced.

"But that could be soon increased if there is no permanent solution," she told reporters in Geneva.

The truce agreement was signed in Togo today by leaders of the Movement for Justice and Peace and an allied group, the Ivorian Popular Movement of the Far West, as well as by a representative of President Laurent Gbagbo. It was to take effect at midnight.

The document said the foes agreed to "stop hostilities to allow negotiations in Paris to begin, during which a cease-fire and a general peace plan will be negotiated." The signing of a deal, agreed to by the rebels in principle last week, was repeatedly delayed by government attacks on rebel positions and then by wrangling over the wording.

Western diplomats said France exerted pressure on the rebel factions to sign the truce and ensure an auspicious start to peace talks in Paris on Wednesday involving the insurgents, government negotiators and political parties. France has committed a 2,500-member force to Ivory Coast, its biggest African intervention since the 1980s, to stop the crisis from escalating out of control in a country where France has major business interests and up to 20,000 nationals.

All three rebel groups are united in their desire to oust Gbagbo, who was elected in a disputed election in 2000. The rebels accuse him of fanning hatred among Ivory Coast's tribes and against millions of immigrants.

