

# Ivorians Begin Talks in Paris

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PARIS, Jan. 15 -- Warned by France that Africa's future lies in their hands, glum-faced leaders of Ivory Coast's warring factions traded demands today at the start of peace talks here.

"Your people are watching you and they are obliging you. You do not have the right to let them down," the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, told the 32 negotiators from the Ivorian government and rebel groups, who have battled each other for nearly four months in the former French colony.

"What is at stake beyond Ivory Coast is the future of the African continent," de Villepin said at the opening ceremony in a conference hall near the Champs-Elysees.

France has worked to get all sides around the negotiating table and obtained pledges from them to stop hostilities during the talks. But the obstacles to lasting peace are considerable.

Hundreds of people have been killed and tens of thousands have fled their homes since rebels launched a failed coup attempt in September to oust President Laurent Gbagbo, who was elected in 2000.

In Paris, the Ivorian government insisted that the insurgents lay down their arms, a demand that derailed previous negotiations. The rebels want Gbagbo to resign.

Gbagbo, who is not attending the talks, refuses to step down on the grounds that he was democratically elected. But insurgents reject the election's outcome, saying the voting excluded one of the country's leading opposition leaders, Alassane Ouattara, and was tainted by violence.

"We need new elections," said Ouattara, a former prime minister barred from the 2000 vote because of challenges to his nationality. "The government has to show that it's finally credible, which it has not been, so we have to have a government of transition."