

Agence France Presse -- English

September 22, 2005 Thursday 4:42 PM GMT

LENGTH: 558 words

HEADLINE: Deepening political crisis in Ivory Coast under threat of UN sanctions

DATELINE: ABIDJAN Sept 22

BODY:

Ivory Coast is churning deeper into political crisis, with President Laurent Gbagbo rejecting west African mediation, renewed threats of sanctions by the UN Security Council and the looming failure of presidential polls.

The deadlock in the divided state, once a bright light in an otherwise troubled region, has again roused fears of a return to violence once the October 30 poll date passes, likely without one ballot being cast.

"The crisis is growing less manageable, with a president who rejects all mediation and an opposition calling for new and different mediation," one weary western diplomat observed Thursday.

"We are in a crucial phase," added another. "And certainly the African Union is not doing the debate any favors by not clearly saying who is in charge of the (mediation) -- which will only create tensions and irritations."

Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo, the current AU chairman, has backed involvement by west African regional bloc ECOWAS, implicitly sidelining the efforts of President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa to act as a mediator, even as South Africa insists there has been no disengagement.

But Gbagbo has said that he has fulfilled all of his commitments to the tattered peace process, and has negated any further involvement in mediation efforts by his west African counterparts, even as a new summit is being planned in Nigeria's capital Abuja of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

It is a bold, but risky tactic for the Ivorian leader, who has also said that he plans to remain in office until elections take place, the almost certain failure of the October 30 polls notwithstanding.

"(Gbagbo) already has a mediator at his disposition, Mbeki, who has delivered him the goods, and so has no reason to change," a western diplomat said.

"Besides, he has no interest in falling prey to his west African counterparts, since

everyone knows that the rebels find themselves at greater ease with them," added another.

The unarmed opposition including former president Henri Konan Bedie, who returned to Ivory Coast from France earlier this month to a thunderous welcome, has also issued its support for ECOWAS mediation, which will only widen the gulf between Gbagbo and his opponents, including the rebels who maintain control of the mostly-Muslim north.

Time is of the essence to resolve the current imbroglio, after the announcement of an imminent visit by the UN Security Council's sanctions pointman, Greek UN Ambassador Adamantios Vassilakis.

His trip, the date of which has not been confirmed, is considered a major step towards imposing targeted sanctions on political players suspected of blocking the peace process.

Included on a much-circulated list of sanctions targets are Gbagbo, his wife, lawmaker Simone Ehevét Gbagbo, and rebel leader Guillaume Soro.

The rebels are also keeping a close eye on the calendar, convinced that a power vacuum will follow from October 31 when, according to their interpretation of the constitution, Gbagbo must step down.

UN peacekeepers operating in the world's top cocoa producer lent their support Thursday to new sub-regional and international initiatives to restore peace, pleading for the unlikely return of consensus to stop the country's downward slide.

"There is no military solution to this crisis," warned UN operation chief Pierre Schori.

dy-mjp/lg/nb