

LOAD-DATE: October 2, 2005

Copyright 2005 Agence France Presse
All Rights Reserved

Agence France Presse -- English

October 2, 2005 Sunday 7:15 PM GMT

LENGTH: 272 words

HEADLINE: Ivory Coast should hold elections by early 2006: France

DATELINE: PARIS Oct 2

BODY:

Elections in Ivory Coast should be held by the beginning of 2006 at the latest, France, the west African country's former colonial power, insisted Sunday.

"These elections should be held as soon as possible," French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said on a TV and radio broadcast.

"We need, by the latest at the start of next year, transparent elections that will allow democracy to return to Ivory Coast," he added.

Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, who was elected in October 2000, last week said fresh polls due when his mandate expires at the end of this month could not be held after all because rebels holding the north of the country had not disarmed.

"We must move quickly and take this very, very seriously. The crisis cutting Ivory Coast in two is very deep," the minister said.

"I think that the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, the United Nations and especially the Security Council should explain with one voice that the Ivorians' two main obligations, transparent elections with international observers and the disarming of all militias, must be carried out," he added

"Otherwise, the Security Council must deal with it," the minister said, without actually using the word "sanctions."

"Now is the time to be very strict, very firm," he added.

Ivory Coast's opposition has called on Gbagbo to step down at the end of the month and for an interim administration to be set up.

Gbagbo has flatly rejected this appeal, saying he would only hand over power to a duly elected successor.

France has some 4,000 peacekeeping troops stationed in Ivory Coast along with 6,500 deployed under a UN banner.