

LOAD-DATE: October 1, 2005

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Agence France Presse -- English

September 30, 2005 Friday 7:29 PM GMT

LENGTH: 642 words

HEADLINE: West African leaders hold Ivory Coast crisis summit

DATELINE: ABUJA Sept 30

BODY:

West African leaders met Friday to seek a way to avert a potentially violent political crisis in a bitterly divided Ivory Coast after a planned presidential election was indefinitely shelved, but remained tight-lipped about their conclusions.

Nine heads of state gathered in the Nigerian capital Abuja under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to look at the peace process three years after Ivory Coast split into two rival armed camps after a failed revolt against President Laurent Gbagbo.

Gbagbo's constitutional term in office is due to end on October 30 but no mechanism has been put in place to ensure a fair nationwide election, raising fears that violence may once more erupt between government troops and the rebel forces holding the north of the country.

The west African leaders met to decide what advice to give to the full African Union on the crisis. Afterwards, they gave little away.

"Whatever has been concluded here cannot be publicised here because the recommendations have to be submitted to the African Union's Peace and Security Council on October 6," explained Nigeria's Foreign Minister Olu Adeniji as the leaders trooped out.

But the minister appeared to drop a hint when he was asked about the demand from both Ivory Coast's mainstream opposition and from the rebel forces holding the north of the country that Gbagbo's government should be replaced by a transitional regime.

"That is an option. I think that would be an extreme option," he said.

ECOWAS officials said that a full summit communique would be released later Friday.

Before the meeting the head of the United Nations operation in Ivory Coast, Sweden's Pierre Schori, warned of a "dangerous atmosphere" on the ground, where the tense front line is patrolled by 6,500 UN peacekeepers and 4,000 troops from France, the country's former colonial power.

Afterwards, President John Kufuor of Ghana said simply: "The situation in Ivory Coast is at a crisis point."

Gbagbo refused to attend the meeting -- and has rejected west African mediation -- but an invitation from the chairman of the African Union, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, was accepted by the leaders of Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Mali.

Both sides in the Ivorian conflict, as well as the United Nations, accept that with the country split into two opposing camps it would be impossible to organise the planned election.

But, while the rebel New Forces insist that Gbagbo must leave office at the end of his mandate and allow a transitional regime to organise elections, the president insists that the constitution allows him to stay on until a poll can be held.

To that end, he says, the rebel forces must be disarmed.

Both sides try to lend authority to their positions by reference to the Linas-Marcoussis peace accord they signed in France in 2003, and to subsequent negotiations overseen by the African Union and its chosen mediator, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa.

The accord foresaw the disarmament of rebel forces, but also sufficient political reform to allow full opposition participation in the national government. Both sides accuse the other of failing to implement the deal, and appeal to different outside actors for support.

Gbagbo has put his faith in Mbeki to persuade AU leaders at their upcoming meeting on October 6 that the opposition forces must disarm. He has dismissed the west African mediation as a failure.

Meanwhile, the rebels reject the South African leader's intervention and are looking to ECOWAS to provide a new impetus.

"After three years of shuffling since the signing of Linas-Marcoussis agreement, the whole political class expects bold decision from the ECOWAS summit to impose a political transition on Laurent Gbagbo," New Force's leader Guillaume Soro said Friday in Addis Abeba.

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