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HEADLINE: African leaders out to avert Ivory Coast collapse

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BODY:

African leaders will meet Thursday to seek means of averting the disintegration of war-divided Ivory Coast, plunged deeper into crisis with the indefinite postponement of elections meant to bring peace.

The African Union Peace and Security Council summit at AU headquarters in Addis Ababa was convened as a shaky peace process in the west African country is endangered by rifts between President Laurent Gbagbo and New Forces (FN) rebels.

The cocoa-rich Ivory Coast has for three years been split into two along truce lines patrolled by French and UN soldiers, with Gbagbo controlling the south and the rebels controlling the north and part of the west.

Leaders from the 15-members security council of the pan-African body are due, according to AU sources, to consider resolutions reached at a meeting hastily convened by a west African economic and military bloc.

The outcome of that summit of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) remains undisclosed, but it was called when a presidential election due on October 30 as part of a programme to end the crisis was called off.

Decisions made by in the Ethiopian capital will be submitted to the United Nations, which with the former colonial power has deployed thousands of troops and other personnel in peacekeeping missions, for further action.

The FN rebels, who swiftly seized their half of the country when war broke out in September 2002, back an ECOWAS peace initiative, but the country's leader spurned peace overtures by the

west African bloc and instead favours further mediation by South African President Thabo Mbeki.

Gbagbo has accused ECOWAS of incapacity owing to a string of failed efforts in the past and has not said whether he will attend the Addis Ababa summit. His foes have said they no longer want Mbeki as the internationally appointed mediator, claiming he is biased.

Both camps have been swapping blame over the faltering plans to hold polls by the end of October, when the presidential mandate comes to an end. The United Nations finally said it simply could not be done, preparations were too far behind.

Gbagbo, now considered an interim leader, has vowed to stay in power until a vote take place, but the the FN wants a 14-to-18-month transitional period led by a neutral party, saying he must step down by the end of the month.

With either side unwilling to alter its position, AU peacemakers have given no hint of their own stance on the standoff that threatens to shatter hopes of keeping the former economic powerhouse of the region in one piece.

"Unless all the agreements are in place it is difficult to have elections and unless you have elections in Ivory Coast you will be unable to come back to normality," said an Addis Ababa-based diplomat.

The diplomat echoed the FN's call for to establish a transitional period to defuse the political tension.

"Considering that the elections cannot possibly be held on the October 30, the idea is probably to establish a transitional period of about one year, which would establish necessary conditions to organise the elections," added the diplomat, who insisted on anonymity.

"There have been a lot of gaps between the agreements and the enforcement, so the idea is to find a way to push the process forward... including sanctions," said the diplomat.

A failed coup attempt in September 2002 gave rise to armed uprising in the north that has unsuccessfully tried to unseat the Gbagbo amid international pressure to end the crisis.