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Embattled Ivory Coast Appeals for Fighters, and Many Answer

By REUTERS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Dec. 10 — Thousands of young men chanting "Give us uniforms" volunteered here today to fight in Ivory Coast's spreading civil war after a call to arms by the country's embattled government.

Peace talks in Togo were in doubt as the main rebel group threatened to abandon negotiations after the discovery of a mass grave that rebels say holds the bodies of civilians killed by President Laurent Gbagbo's troops.

The civil war began in Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer, with a failed coup attempt on Sept. 19 that led to four weeks of fighting that killed hundreds of people.

The country sank further into confusion late last month as two new rebel factions emerged in the west.

Thousands of young men answered the Defense Ministry's call today to volunteer for battle, some chanting antirebel slogans and the national anthem as they jogged to army headquarters from Abidjan's sprawling suburbs.

But of those who turned up, only 3,000 will be chosen to join the forces, officials said. They will face selection tests — including running five miles in 25 minutes — before six weeks of training, instead of the usual three months.

"After six weeks they will know how to fight, but they will not necessarily go to the front," said an army spokesman, Col. Jules Yao Yao. "That will depend on the situation."

Ivory Coast's war has its roots in years of mounting ethnic bitterness, and all the rebels say they want to see the end of the presidency of Mr. Gbagbo, a Christian from the Bete tribe of the southwest.

The main rebel movement, the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast, holds the largely Muslim north. Two other rebel factions in the far west, home of the Yacouba tribe, want to avenge the death of a former junta leader, Robert Gueï, at the hands of Mr. Gbagbo's troops.

The western rebels advanced into an important cocoa region over the weekend, and residents said loyalist forces struck back on Monday at the town of Bolekin with helicopter gunships flown by mercenaries.

A truce signed by the Patriotic Movement on Oct. 17 has largely contained fighting on the main front. But the group said today that its leaders were discussing whether to pull out of the talks in Togo, which have yielded little result after more than five weeks.

The rebels have demanded that West African mediators strongly condemn a mass grave found at the village of Monoko-Zohi, behind rebel lines, by cease-fire monitors from the former colonial power, France.

The rebels said loyalist troops killed more than 100 people in a raid. The government has rejected any suggestion that its forces were responsible.

Britain joined several other Western countries in advising its citizens to leave Ivory Coast "while commercial air services are still available."

"It may not be possible to arrange any subsequent evacuation by civil or military means," a statement from the embassy said late Monday.