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French army widens Ivory Coast mission

French troops have exchanged gunfire with rebels

The French army says troop reinforcements it is sending to Ivory Coast will have a broader mandate.

We will see to it that no one on the ground tries to destabilise the situation and jeopardise negotiations

Colonel Christian Baptiste

So far, the 1,200 troops deployed in France's former colony have been monitoring a shaky ceasefire between government forces and the rebels who now control the north of the country.

A French army spokesman said the French forces' mission in Ivory Coast would now be two-fold: to guarantee the security of foreign nationals, including French citizens, and to "preserve stability" on the ceasefire line.

Meanwhile, Ivory Coast's main political parties have signed a document condemning the rebels and voicing support for the peace process.

Talks between the two sides in Togo are stalled, and four West African leaders are expected to meet on Monday to discuss the crisis.

'Enough is enough'

Speaking to the BBC French service, Colonel Christian Baptiste of the French army said: "We will do more now and get a bit more involved in the stabilisation process created by the ceasefire accords".

France said on Thursday that the first of hundreds of reinforcement troops would arrive in Ivory Coast within 72 hours.

"We will see to it that no one on the ground tries to destabilise the situation and jeopardise negotiations," Colonel Baptiste said.

He dismissed a recent rebel statement which warned France against "involving itself in one way or another in the crisis".

"The French initiative is an opportunity for all the sides so that Ivory Coast can remain an entity and keep its soul," he said.

"All the sides should tell extremists that enough is enough, and that the time for dialogue and negotiation has come."

'Coercion'

On the political front, Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo has welcomed the signing by seven parties of a document in which they call for the liberation of the rebel-held zones and urge respect for constitutional legality and territorial integrity.

One of the signatories was the Rally of Republicans (RDR), the party of Alassane Ouattara, who has been accused by the authorities of supporting the rebels.

However, Mr Ouattara has said from his exile in Gabon that the party official, Kone Tiemoko, who signed the document on behalf of the RDR, did so "under coercion" and that the signing was "null and void".

Mr Ouattara fled to Gabon last month

The rebels of the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast (MPCI) condemned the meeting, saying its sole purpose was to isolate them.

As a sign of protest, they suspended their participation in peace talks, saying they needed to consult their base at home.

A meeting of West African leaders - the presidents of Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana and Togo - originally scheduled to take place at the weekend, will now be held in Togo on Monday to try to take the peace process forward.

Thousands of young men volunteered to fight for the government on Thursday, while the MPCI also launched a recruitment drive, renewing fears of an all-out war between the two sides.

Western countries have asked their nationals to leave Ivory Coast or to avoid travelling to the country.

At least 400 people have been killed since the uprising by disgruntled soldiers, and hundreds of thousands displaced by the fighting.

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