

Pledging Peace, Creating Chaos

Ivory Coast Leader Said to Be Behind Anti-French Protests

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast -- Crouched in the steamy noon heat, the fish women sell their meaty snapper out of yellow buckets and whisper about how it all went down. Sitting on puffy armchairs deep inside their high-rise offices, the diplomats recount the same chain of events in the same hushed voices.

Everybody, it seems, knows why Ivorians poured into the streets to protest against a French-brokered deal to end this country's five-month civil war. According to foreign diplomats, intelligence sources, Ivorian analysts and people on the street, President Laurent Gbagbo, desperate to derail an agreement that would force him to share power with rebels and rivals, swung into action even before the deal was finalized on Jan. 24.

Telephone calls were made. Deals were struck. Pro-government student leaders handed out beer, cash and rice to thousands of out-of-work young men and gave them free bus rides to the city, according to participants. The result was a series of dramatic and violent anti-French demonstrations that raged through downtown Abidjan -- beginning the day after Gbagbo signed the accord and ending two weeks later, when he called on his countrymen to accept "the medicine" that the agreement prescribed.

As a result, Ivory Coast dangles between war and peace. Armed rebels still control half of the country, and representatives of the warring factions are engaged in fresh negotiations aimed at moving the peace process forward.

Gbagbo's actions, diplomats and analysts say, reflect not only his desire to maintain control, but a long practice of publicly endorsing agreements while privately ensuring that they are undermined. The cunning president has found a way to resist the peace pact and stay in power without actually saying no, artfully flicking a switch on when he wants a protest and off when it is time to appear cooperative, the sources say.

"We all know everyone was pushed out there to protest for the president," said Chantal Balou, 29, who sat hunched over a bucket of fish with six other women who serve up gossip along with grouper and snapper. "He bought us, then he sold us."

A European diplomat who asked not to be identified said: "Everything has been manipulation, manipulation, manipulation. As soon as the president could, he started organizing his people to protest, making one call after another after another. None of these demonstrations were spontaneous. If the people did this on their own, they would still be out there."

At the same time, supporters of the president say he is trying to put down a rebellion and should not be blamed for trying to hold onto power when he has a legitimate claim to it.

"Will this mean anyone with guns can just take over an elected government?" asked Anderson Appiah, an adviser to Gbagbo. "Of course our president has to protect his rule of law. He was elected to the government."

The agreement calls for Gbagbo's government to share power with the rebel factions it has been fighting since Sept. 19, when a coup attempt shook this former French colony, long thought of as a haven of plenty and peace in a restive region. Hundreds have been killed in the conflict and thousands driven from their homes.

When France gathered representatives of the government, the rebels and opposition political parties near Paris for peace talks in mid-January, the factions reached an accord under which Gbagbo would create a broad-based unity government. All sides agreed that Seydou Diarra, a neutral politician from the northern region, the area that gave rise to the rebellion, should be appointed prime minister. A new nine-member cabinet would be formed; the rebels say the defense and interior ministries should be theirs, though it is unclear what they base the claim on.

Gbagbo flew to Paris on Jan. 23, joined West African leaders in signing the accord the following day and flew home. On Jan. 25, protesters took to the streets of Abidjan and attacked buildings associated with the French.

Diplomats and the United Nations urged Gbagbo to address the nation. But he said little, and it ended up meaning a lot: He described the peace pact as "proposals," and then fell silent.

The protests intensified. The windows of French schools were smashed. Vehicles were set on fire. French mothers carrying children flocked to the airport, where Ivorian protestors stormed the tarmac, trying to stop commercial flights from leaving.

Still Gbagbo said nothing. His police did nothing.

"We begged him to speak," said a Western diplomat who asked not to be named. "We said, 'Please, stop this. Tell them.' He said, yes, he would. Then he kept delaying his speech."

Two weeks passed before the president finally spoke, telling Ivorians on Feb. 7: "Let's try this medicine. If we get better, then we keep it. If not, we try something else."

The protests stopped.

"It was just like when Tony Blair wanted to convince England that it was right to go into war with Iraq," said Charles Ble Goude, 31, the student leader who orchestrated many of

the anti-French riots. "He spoke, and at the end of his speech, his people were convinced. We would calm down."

Wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, Ble Goude was sipping freshly squeezed orange juice this past week in a posh French café in a mall that his protestors had ransacked. His armed bodyguards circled. Shoppers teased and laughed when he arrived, calling him "the vice president."

"We're okay, now. It's fine," said Ble Goude, who took a break from his studies in politics in Manchester, England, to come home and lead the protests. "We totally agree with the president."

If Gbagbo hoped to prove to the international community that his people had spoken and that a peace plan that included the rebels should be dropped, it has not worked, diplomats said. Soon after Gbagbo gave his speech, the United Nations called on him to implement the accord and authorized West African and French troops to use force if necessary. France has about 3,000 troops in Ivory Coast, including the Foreign Legion, to protect French and other foreign nationals and guard cease-fire lines.

On Wednesday, the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, had stern words for Gbagbo. "France has fulfilled its responsibilities. All Ivorians must do the same, and in the first place President Gbagbo, by forming a government of national union with a place for everyone," de Villepin said.

Diplomatic sources acknowledged that it was unlikely that the peace process would proceed smoothly, especially in light of Gbagbo's pattern of evading pressure and preserving power by saying one thing to international leaders and doing another.

In October, Gbagbo kept leaders from Ghana, Nigeria and Mali waiting at the airport in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast's official capital. They had come to negotiate a cease-fire, which the rebels said they would sign.

But Gbagbo never showed up. Instead, he invited the West African ministers to dinner. They refused, and flew home exasperated.

He also has promised the French again and again that he would expel the white mercenaries he hired to fly helicopters and help his army. Yet at a festive ceremony on Monday at a Yamoussoukro hotel, during which Diarra was named prime minister, starting the process of implementing the peace pact, mercenaries were sipping rum-and-Cokes at the hotel bar.

In December, the president told foreign diplomats that he would allow the opposition party led by Alassane Ouattara, a northerner and Muslim who had been barred from recent elections, to enter candidates in local elections. He then went on television and said he wouldn't do it. The diplomats said they were shocked.

"He's not sincere, and he's a very complex character who will do anything to stay in power," said Joachim Beugre, editor of 24 Hours, an independent newspaper in Abidjan, the commercial capital. "He says yes, and then does no. He does not care about the people he sent to the streets. He just uses them to keep his power."

As the sky turned pink and the sun set this past week over Yopougon, a sprawling working-class neighborhood of wooden shacks and cement houses where many of the protesters live, a group of men said they were not disappointed in the president or his speech. Many belong to Gbagbo's Bete tribe, and they said they would stand by him, whatever he decides.

"I agree with the president," said Zarango Rathurin, 31, a laborer who attended the protests. "He wants peace and we want peace. If he wants us to protest again, we will."

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