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French Prestige on the Line in the Ivory Coast Civil War

By CRAIG S. SMITH

PARIS, Jan. 15 — France initiated peace talks here today between rival factions fighting for control of Ivory Coast, hoping to end that country's four-month civil war and extricate itself from a dangerous and expensive military intervention.

France's foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, opened the talks with a stern warning to the 32 invited delegates that Africa's future is at stake. But he might have added that France has much at stake as well.

"France is risking its credibility in Africa," said Danielle Domergue, professor of African history at the University of Montpellier and an expert on France's relations with its former colonies. She believes the peace talks have only "minimal chances" of success.

After Ivory Coast was split by a coup in September, France sent 2,500 troops to to protect the 25,000 French citizens in the West African nation. But the troops have become embroiled in an increasingly complicated civil war that has cost hundreds of lives and displaced more than 600,000 people.

Three rebel groups control a majority of the country, held at bay from the resource-rich south and the coastal city Abidjan by Foreign Legionnaires. France is committed to keeping its troops in the country by a 1961 treaty and the certainty that the rebels would descend on Abidjan if it pulled out.

A French-brokered truce, signed on Monday between the rebels and the government, allowed the talks to take place. The delegates represent the country's principal political parties and the three rebel groups.

The opening ceremony was held in a hall near the Champs-Élysées before negotiations got under way behind closed doors in Linas-Marcoussis, 20 miles southeast of the city.

For France, more is at stake than the safety of French citizens and economic interests, chiefly cocoa plantations, in its former colony. France has long relied on its role as a supporter of developing countries to distinguish itself in world affairs.

"France wants to be seen as a world power and because it isn't as strong as other powers it does that by caring about areas that aren't first rank assets," said Roland Marchal, an Africa expert at the Center for International Studies and Research in Paris. It is a franchise French politicians are eager to protect, Mr. Marchal said, and one that could suffer if the country fails to stop the civil war.

In part, France's Ivory Coast adventure is an attempt by President Jacques Chirac's government to reassert France's military and political influence in a region neglected under past Socialist governments, which scaled down France's political presence in Africa and closed its largest military bases there.

Mr. Chirac had wanted to intervene in Ivory Coast in 1999 when a coup unseated the president but was stopped by France's socialist prime minister, Lionel Jospin, with whom Mr. Chirac then shared power. Now, fully in control, Mr. Chirac is pursuing his African agenda unhindered.

But if France fails to broker a lasting peace, it could find itself engaged in a costly, long-term commitment, fighting on behalf of a nominally democratic government for which Paris has shown little love. Worse, many people fear the fighting could destabilize neighboring countries.

Ivory Coast's president, Laurent Gbagbo, came to power in what opponents say were manipulated elections after the coup. He has rejected rebel demands that he step down or hold new elections and is not attending the talks.