

# Region Pledges Ivory Coast Force, Urges UN Action

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By Diadie Ba

DAKAR (Reuters) - West Africa's leaders pledged on Wednesday to deploy troops in Ivory Coast and urged the United Nations to help end a war France has already stepped in to halt.

As regional bloc ECOWAS met in Dakar, Senegal, to draw up a plan to end the conflict, new fighting for a key western Ivorian town deepened confusion over the situation on the ground in the world's top cocoa producer, with loyalists dismissing rebel claims to have taken the town of Man.

"The summit has fixed December 31, 2002 as the deadline for deploying ECOWAS forces in Ivory Coast," the bloc said in a statement after five hours of last-ditch talks to rescue regional peace efforts.

"The summit asks the African Union, the United Nations and its secretary-general to get involved in resolving the crisis."

ECOWAS has already held peace talks in Togo between the government and the main rebel group, but has so far failed to deploy a planned peacekeeping force due to leadership disputes.

A cease-fire was shattered by the emergence of two new rebel groups in the west, throwing talks into confusion and prompting France to raise its own peacekeeping mission to 2,500 troops.

One of the newborn rebel movements said on Wednesday it had recaptured the key western town of Man, some 400 miles northwest of the main city Abidjan, from government forces in the worst fighting for more than two weeks.

"Now I control Man, I am in Man," Felix Doh of the newly created Ivorian Popular Movement for the Far West told Reuters by satellite phone.

Ivorian military sources confirmed the fighting in Man, a coffee-growing center, but denied the rebels were in control.

"They have taken nothing back and they will take nothing back," one source said.

FEAR OF ANARCHY

War in Ivory Coast, long a pillar of prosperity and stability in an often anarchic region, threatens to destabilize the whole region.

The crisis began on September 19 with an uprising by the northern-based Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast (MPCI).

The conflict has its roots in the growing polarization between northern Muslims and southern Christians, exacerbated by massive immigration in recent decades and a 1999 coup.

France said a ship left Toulon on Wednesday with 300 personnel, armored vehicles and transport helicopters, which will take its force in Ivory Coast to between 2,300 and 2,500 -- its biggest military intervention in Africa since the 1980s.

The French troops say they have orders to open fire on anyone violating the truce signed by the MPCI, which controls the northern half of the country.

But Doh and his men in the west, who have been joined by hundreds of Liberian fighters, say they are not bound by it.

France is eager to host a peace summit in Paris, but the rebels accuse it of siding with President Laurent Gbagbo -- who has his stronghold in the Christian and animist south and west.

The ECOWAS force, expected to be at least 1,600 strong, was due to deploy last month but has been delayed by a row about who should take command. The Dakar summit named Senegal's General Papa Khalil Fall as force commander.

It also said Gbagbo would present fellow ECOWAS leaders with a comprehensive plan to end the crisis next week.