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Life in Ivory Coast, Once an Oasis, Now Unsettles Immigrants

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Jan. 21 — For millions of Africans, this place had long represented something close to hope. A penniless man from Burkina Faso could ride a bush taxi from Ouagadougou to come pick cocoa. People from as far as Mali, Niger and Nigeria could sell cassava on the side of the road here in the country's largest city, drive a taxi, guard the villas of its quiet, leafy suburbs.

Today, hope lies ruined in a shantytown on the edge of one of those suburbs. Its residents woke up one morning, just weeks after northern rebels set off a civil war last September, to find police officers and bulldozers outside their doors.

The government said the slum, home mostly to migrants from Burkina Faso and Mali, sat too close to its security headquarters, that it was a potential haven for rebels and their sympathizers. The residents, for their part, say that, as foreigners, they are easy scapegoats.

For them, life remains precarious. Work is gone. Homes are gone. What is left of their possessions is stuffed into oil barrels. They do not know where their next meal is coming from.

This state of affairs bewilders Dayuo Souleyman, who worked on the country's coffee and cocoa plantations for close to 40 years. "When we first came, there was no difference between Burkinabe and Ivoirians," he said. "Life was easy. You showed your identification card and you just came in. What happened here, we couldn't imagine."

Nor, government officials say, could they imagine the havoc wreaked on this country by lawless rebels from the north and west, ruining the reputation of a nation once considered a model of stability, squeezing its economy and driving what the United Nations estimates to be more than a million people from their homes. Rebels now control half the country, while the crucial port cities of San Pedro and Abidjan remain in government hands.

The question of citizenship is at the heart of the conflict in this country, for years the cosmopolitan hub of West Africa.

Foreigners — a term that can apply to those born here — make up over 25 percent of the population. Nativist anger began to swell when cocoa prices took a nosedive a few years ago and the good times began to fade. New laws were passed tightening the rules on who could vote and run for office and how to obtain the coveted "certificates of nationality."

"Ivoirité" became a matter of bloodlines, a far cry from the radically open embrace of African migrants by this country's founding president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny.

Politics became vexed by the question of parentage. A former president was tarred by critics as an immigrant's son. A northern opposition leader offered DNA tests to prove his Ivoirian ethnicity. Alpha Blondy, the outspoken Ivoirian singer and critic of President Laurent Gbagbo's government, ridiculed it as a national obsession to inspect one's mother's undergarments. Suspicion of foreigners has only grown since insurgents from the mostly Muslim north staged an attempted coup last September. They failed, but not before grabbing much of the north. Two months later, rebels from the west joined the fray.

A delicate cease-fire has held since peace talks began last week outside Paris. With 20,000 citizens and hefty investments in this country, France has dispatched 2,500 soldiers to police the truce. West African peacekeepers began arriving last week.

Perhaps the greatest danger is that the Ivory Coast conflict could spread, and its neighbors have been drawn into the inferno recently. On Monday, Liberia accused Ivoirian insurgents of invading a town near the border — an incident the Ivory Coast government says it is unaware of. In a published interview today, the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, pressed for Mr. Gbagbo's resignation, comparing his future to that of the Serbian strongman, Slobodan Milosevic. "The only solution is for Gbagbo to go," he told the French newspaper *Le Parisien*.

The peace talks have already wrestled with the question of nationality laws that have angered northerners. Yet to be resolved is the thornier issue of whether to hold early elections — a demand of all the rebel groups and the northern opposition leader at the eye of the political storm here, Allesane Ouattara.

Mr. Gbagbo, who took power after what some regard as flawed elections in 2000, has rejected calls for early voting. The next presidential elections are not due until 2005.

Toussaint Alain, Mr. Gbagbo's adviser in the talks in France, expressed disappointment this evening with the direction of the discussions, saying that the mediators have sided largely with the rebels. He also said the government had not been permitted to explain its position on nationality — laws, he said, that its citizens have already voted on. "It is the choice of Ivoirian citizens," he said in a telephone interview.

The conflict bodes ill for Ivory Coast's neighbors. The world's largest cocoa producer, it accounts for 40 percent of the region's gross domestic product, and the war has increased the cost of doing business in the region by at least 10 percent, the African Development Bank estimates.

Trade routes are perilous, making it difficult for cotton from Mali to make it to the seaport in Abidjan, or cocoa from the west to make it to the port in San Pedro. Remittances from migrant workers here have suffered; Burkina Faso alone earns 20 to 30

percent of its revenues from its natives in Ivory Coast, the bank estimates. Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, already struggling, have had to absorb the cost of returnees.

The development bank is among several international organizations now assessing whether to stay or go. Embassies have shut their doors. An annual festival that draws artists to Abidjan from across the region is in danger of being canceled. The city's night life, once the buzz of West Africa, has been all but snuffed out.

At the shantytown, night time is worry time. Even Nikiema Atuko, 35, born here to parents from Burkina Faso, hasn't been spared. One night last fall, he was awakened by men who claimed to be from the national police. He gave them what money he had. Cellphones, gas cylinders, bicycles — the nocturnal visitors took it all, the shanty dwellers said. They strip-searched a woman they suspected of hiding money. They threatened to take another away, until her mother and the other shanty women screamed and shouted to the skies.

"There are too many things you can't talk about," Mr. Atuko whispered.