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## **On Brink of Chaos, Ivory Coast Sides Try to Save a Peace Deal**

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Feb. 22 — In a last attempt to salvage a peace pact that could save this onetime gem of West Africa from chaos, representatives of Ivory Coast's government and the rebels who control half the country negotiated through this weekend to devise a face-saving compromise.

Neither side would comment on what a compromise might entail. But the high-pitched bluster of recent weeks diminished over the past few days. International pressure intensified on President Laurent Gbagbo to seize the chance for peace. The rebels tempered their insistence on having two high cabinet posts. Optimists believe a new government of national reconciliation could be announced as early as this week.

If not, renewed conflict appears imminent and will potentially be most dire if it reaches south to this heavily populated port city, the country's commercial hub. For more than five months, this country, the world's largest cocoa producer, has been split into a rebel-held zone in the north and a government-controlled area in the south — a fragile partitioning not likely to hold for long.

The talks that took place in Paris today and on Friday were an effort to save the talks that took place a month ago in Marcoussis, outside Paris. The peace agreement worked out at that time had envisioned a power-sharing arrangement between Mr. Gbagbo and the rebels who have tried to unseat him since last September.

News of that peace pact only led to more violence. The army said it would not tolerate rebels in the government, and the president's loyalists led street protests that degenerated, at times, into wanton looting and rioting. Rebel leaders, meanwhile, threatened to forcibly occupy Abidjan, which is still in government hands with help from French peacekeepers.

France, which ruled over this country for 100 years and continues to wield enormous power here, has dispatched more than 3,000 soldiers to protect its citizens and enforce a cease-fire. France announced last Thursday that French troops, along with Western African soldiers, would ensure the protection of the new Ivorian government.

Several African leaders, the United Nations and the United States have pressed Mr. Gbagbo to abide by the Marcoussis peace deal. At the heart of that pact is a government of national reconciliation, with a new prime minister, Seydou Diarra. The negotiations this weekend took place between Mr. Diarra and leaders of the main rebel group.

The president's endorsement of the Marcoussis accord was lukewarm at best. He vowed to follow it but only so long as Ivory Coast's Constitution remained the highest law of the land. But much of the conflict has been driven by sections of that constitution, particularly those that impose new restrictions on who is eligible for Ivorian citizenship. The rebels, who are Northerners and largely Muslims, accuse the government of discrimination. Mr. Gbagbo is from the south, which is largely Christian and animist. The president has declined requests for interviews.

Even if a new government is announced soon, some chilling questions remain. What exactly will the rebels settle for? How much power will President Gbagbo cede to his prime minister? Will he be able to control his violent supporters if and when rebels take a seat in the government? Not least for the people of this city, is there any assurance that either side will disarm?

The bravado on both sides has clearly diminished in recent days. Government officials have privately said they could imagine power-sharing for the sake of peace, as long as it did not involve the crucial Defense and Interior Ministries. Just two weeks ago, in an interview, the defense minister, Kadet Bertin, compared such a proposal to letting thieves into his house.

For their part, rebel leaders have said over the past few days that they were not interested in those two cabinet positions anyway. The main northern rebel group had issued an ultimatum for last Sunday, saying it would enter Abidjan by force if the government failed to live up to the Marcoussis agreement. But the deadline came and went. This week, the rebel group said the demand was not an ultimatum.

"We are not obsessed with ministerial posts," Dakoury Taley, a negotiator for the rebels, said in an interview. "If Gbagbo recognizes the Marcoussis agreement, that's essential for us."