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Rebels Trade Accusations With the Army in Ivory Coast

By REUTERS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Nov. 27 (Reuters) — Rebels said today that army helicopters had struck into their territory, killing dozens of people in the worst attacks since a truce was called nearly six weeks ago.

The reports raised doubts about peace talks under way in Togo, despite hopeful comments from regional mediators that the two sides were close to a deal after more than four weeks of off-and-on talks that have borne little fruit.

The army earlier accused the rebels of breaking the truce and said it was preparing to take action. But rebels denied the accusation, and French observers said they had seen no signs of a rebel attack.

A rebel commander said at least 40 people had been killed in air attacks on three towns, Vavoua, Pelezi and Diafla, on the edge of the cocoa-growing region.

There was no independent report of casualties. But a military source confirmed that the army's newly acquired Russian-built MI-24 gunships had struck rebel targets, saying this was a response to earlier assaults on government positions.

Hundreds of people were killed in four weeks of bloodshed after a failed coup on Sept. 19. A truce left rebels holding the largely Muslim north and President Laurent Gbagbo's forces controlling the mainly Christian and animist south, further sharpening ethnic bitterness.

Officials of the main opposition party said today that their leader, Alassane Ouattara, an ex-prime minister, had flown into exile from Abidjan, where he had taken refuge in the French ambassador's residence.

Mr. Ouattara, who says security forces had tried to kill him, was at the root of years of turbulence in Ivory Coast long before the latest crisis blew up. Courts ruled that he could not run in elections two years ago because of doubts over his nationality. His supporters said that was a ploy to marginalize Muslims.

On a visit to West Africa today to try to revive the creaking peace process, France's foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, warned that Ivoirians had no choice but to talk. "There can be no solution to the crisis through war or violence," he said at a news conference in Abidjan, the commercial capital of Ivory Coast.

