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French Troops Meet Ivory Coast Rebels in Cocoa West

By REUTERS

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (Reuters) - French troops met two of Ivory Coast's rebel factions for the first time Monday in the western town of Duekoue to iron out differences after a string of clashes near the strategic cocoa center.

Rebels clashed with French troops enforcing a cease-fire in West African country for the fourth time in eight days on Sunday, and for the fifth time in all. At least 16 rebels have been killed and one French soldier injured in fighting.

"I can confirm there was a meeting between French officers and members of the (rebel groups) MJP and MPIGO," said French army spokesman Ange-Antoine Leccia.

Fighting broke out in the world's biggest cocoa grower on September 19 when a failed coup by soldiers led to four weeks of clashes which left hundreds of people dead and a country divided.

The main rebel group MPCI, which holds the largely Muslim north, signed a truce in October, but peace talks have been fruitless so far. The crisis deepened last month when two new rebel groups in the west seized key towns near the Liberian border.

The French said none of their troops was injured in the latest skirmish northeast of Duekoue, a loyalist-held junction town which western rebels would need to seize to advance toward the main city of Abidjan or the cocoa port of San Pedro.

Sergeant Bamba of the Movement for Justice and Peace rebels said it had apologized for Sunday's clash during the 45-minute meeting in Duekoue and said the French had reassured them of their neutrality.

"We're not here to take sides. We don't have the intention of engaging in combat. I think they (the rebels) are beginning to understand that," the French army spokesman said.

The rebel factions, who had earlier threatened an all-out offensive in the event of another clash with French troops, have recently been making conciliatory noises.

"We have nothing against the French. They are our brothers-in-arms," said Felix Doh of the Ivorian Popular Movement of the Far West (MPIGO) Monday.

CEASE-FIRE PROPOSAL

Neither the rebels nor the French said they had broached the subject of a cease-fire in Monday's meeting. However, another MJP commander said he was discussing with rank-and-file members a recent truce proposal put forward by Togo.

Togolese President Gnassingbe Eyadema, who has been spearheading regional mediation efforts, sent Togo's Defense Minister Assani Tidjani to the MPCI's stronghold of Bouake a week ago where he met all three rebel factions.

Eyadema said Monday he foresaw a solution to the war in Ivory Coast if the new rebel factions in the west signed a cease-fire and laid down their arms.

Despite these small steps, a fresh contingent comprising hundreds of French soldiers which landed in Abidjan Saturday is due to be deployed this week.

An official for the regional Economic Community of West African States told Reuters he expected the deployment of a force originally meant to replace the French to start in early January. It will work with the French to police the truce line.

Ivory Coast's neighbors fear that if the conflict is not stopped it will tear apart the country of at least 16 million people and create a huge refugee problem, echoing bloody conflicts in nearby Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The rebel groups all want to depose President Laurent Gbagbo, a Christian from the southwest. They accuse him of fanning tension between tribes and the immigrants who make up a quarter of the population since he won a disputed poll in 2000.