

January 31, 2003

Ivory Coast's Residents Look for the Exit

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Jan. 30 — First, it was the Africans. Immigrants who could afford to return home to neighboring Burkina Faso, Mali and Liberia packed up and left this rattled, war-torn country. Today, it was the Europeans, mostly the French, Ivory Coast's former colonial rulers, who crowded into the departure lounge of the newly refurbished airport here and hunted for an exit.

They boarded for Paris or Amsterdam, if they were lucky. A great many took off for Cotonou, Dakar, Lomé, Ouagadougou — anywhere but here. The exodus was prompted by a recent spate of anti-French attacks. Government loyalists have blamed France for imposing a peace accord that they said gave too much power to rebels who plunged this country into a brutal four-month-old civil war.

The peace accord, which calls for sharing power among the elected government and the rebels, could be short-lived, even by the standards of the continent. Several ministers in the cabinet of President Laurent Gbagbo, as well as the army, have denounced crucial elements of the accord — namely, turning over the Defense and Interior Ministries to the insurgents. The interior minister, Paul Yao N'Dre, described the accord as "legal sorcery" intended to provoke the population. Rebel leaders have rejected any suggestion of renegotiating the pact. France, which brokered the talks, has pressed Mr. Gbagbo to abide by the agreement.

Of the roughly 20,000 French citizens in this country, more than 500 left today, a diplomat said, and many more are expected to depart this weekend. From Paris 130 gendarmes came to supplement more than 2,000 French soldiers already here. At sundown, the Ivoirian first lady met with a clutch of French citizens at the presidential residence. Reporters were shooed away.

The antipathy toward the French, brewing under the surface for years as a residue of more than 100 years of colonial rule, may have been sudden and violent, but more bizarre than the rabid Francophobia on display here has been the intense pro-American sentiment.

Earlier this week, government loyalists here rallied in front of the United States Embassy, very near the French Embassy, which they had tried to torch. They waved American flags and tried to mouth the lyrics to "The Star Spangled Banner." Angry young men surrounded an American reporter and gleefully shouted the only words of English they knew, one of them chanting repeatedly, "Yes, very yes."

"We are tired of the French people," said Koty Managnan. "We need a new partnership. We want Bush involved in our case."

An official at the American Embassy said: "We did not go out to talk to them. We did not exchange in any conversation."

The ardor for the United States, observers said, is driven by a growing resentment against the French — not just for what they say is an unfair domination of the Ivoirian economy but for the treatment of Africans in France. "People love America because they think it's easier for them to go to America, even if it's not true," argued Francis Kpatindé, editor in chief of *Jeune Afrique*, a newsweekly based in Paris.

The young mobs that ran through the city for nearly three days ransacked prominent French businesses, the Air France office, the French Embassy, the French Cultural Institute and several French lycées. Homes of some French citizens were raided. Until this morning, a white face was rare on the streets of Abidjan.

Today, the people waited for Mr. Gbagbo to clarify what the peace deal might mean. He did not speak, though his aides suggested he would do so in the next few days. In his silence, tension prevailed, though the streets were relatively calm. For the first time this week, banks opened, schoolchildren marched along the roads and the main highway was clogged with rush-hour traffic.

The airport, named after Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the country's founding president and a man known for preserving the former colony's close links to France, grew crowded soon after the curfew lifted at 6 a.m. Ivoirian soldiers, rifles slung on shoulders, manned the entrance to the departure terminal, some having their shoes shined by street children, others chasing away beggars. Luxury cars disgorged anxious travelers, some carting dogs, some toting children, nearly all trailed by locals hauling bags. Hustlers offered to find taxis, change currency and, for a few local francs, provide the use of a mobile phone.

An Indian businessman put his employees' families on a plane to Burkina Faso. An American missionary bound for Texas carried an African drum on his shoulders. Hundreds of Africans milled about, waiting for flights that had been canceled or postponed since the weekend.

Jean-Pierre Vivet, 67, a French retiree who had taught at a school here for three months, blamed the Mr. Gbagbo for inciting "the gangsters." His sympathy, though, was mostly for the locals and not his fellow Europeans. "They can leave," he said. "The Africans have to stay."

A wide-eyed, 24-year-old teacher from Marseille queued up in front of the Air France ticketing office. In his hand, he had a ticket for the next day's flight but his heart, he said, was heavy. "I know when I come back tomorrow, I will cry," said Aurélien, 24, who had been here for six months and fallen in love. Having watched from his apartment window

as rioters waved T-shirts that read "Xenophobe. So What?" this weekend, he was afraid, he said, to disclose his full name.

Air France Flight 703, which flies daily between Abidjan and Paris, took off this morning for the first time in five days: all 256 seats were sold, mostly to French citizens, an airline spokeswoman said. This evening's return flight from Paris was not expected to be full.