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Ivoirian Leader Accepts French Demands on War

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

PARIS, Jan. 3 — President Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast today agreed to French demands to expel foreign mercenaries and stop aerial bombings in an effort to resolve the country's four-month-old conflict.

Mr. Gbagbo made the pledge after a meeting in Abidjan, the Ivory Coast's commercial center, with the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, who is on a hastily arranged two-day peace mission.

"We will abstain from all acts of war on all fronts," Mr. Gbagbo said after meeting Mr. de Villepin. "We will immobilize our helicopters and keep our men in the positions they are holding, because in the end we want peace."

Despite his words, fighting raged in the southwest part of the country. A rebel commander there said he had ordered his troops to move toward the strategic port of San Pedro, which exports a fifth of the world's cocoa crop.

France has sent 2,500 peacekeeping troops to Ivory Coast, its former colony, in the largest French deployment to a foreign country in two decades. It is seeking to restore peace to a country that was the jewel in the crown of its empire and a bulwark of regional stability.

Mr. de Villepin's visit, his second in five weeks, was marred by a jeering demonstration of more than 100 people — mainly women and young people — who forced him and aides and journalists to barricade themselves inside Mr. Gbagbo's official residence in the capital.

"Villepin terrorist! Villepin assailant!" they screamed. They also threatened to kill him and his entourage. Mr. Gbagbo intervened, and after about half an hour, the protesters allowed the group to leave the residence.

Mr. de Villepin, showing his anger, said later that the protest was "not spontaneous" but appeared to have been planned. "We are in an Ivory Coast where emotions are heated, very tense, very worried," he said.

The country's prime minister, Pascal Affi N'Guessan, who met Mr. de Villepin and apologized, denied that the protest had been instigated by the government.

The incident did little to deter Mr. de Villepin, who announced later that France would call a weeklong meeting of all Ivoirian political parties on Jan. 15 in Paris. He said the meeting would be followed by a meeting of the leaders of countries affected by the crisis.

A fragile cease-fire between the government and the main rebel group, the Ivory Coast Patriotic Movement, has not held as two other rebel groups entered the conflict.

The government broke it this week, when a government helicopter gunship attacked the rebel-held fishing village of Menakro inside a cease-fire line monitored by French peacekeepers. France denounced the attack, which left 12 civilians dead.

Mr. Gbagbo said today that mercenaries fighting alongside government troops would leave the country on Saturday. The mercenaries reportedly include South Africans and Europeans.

During his visit, Mr. de Villepin plans to visit Yamoussoukro, the inland capital where French troops have been stationed, and also to meet with the the Ivory Coast Patriotic Movement in its stronghold in the city of Bouaké.

The war started with a failed coup Sept. 19. The rebels behind the coup now hold the northern half of the country, while two new rebel groups are now operating in the cocoa- and coffee-producing west. Since then, hundreds of people have been killed and tens of thousands displaced.