

January 5, 2003

Main Rebel Faction in Ivory Coast Agrees to Join Peace Talks

By REUTERS

BOUAKÉ, Ivory Coast, Jan. 4 (Reuters) — The main rebel faction in Ivory Coast has said it will attend peace talks in Paris, the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, said today.

Mr. Villepin is on a two-day visit to Ivory Coast, where France has sent 2,500 troops to protect its citizens in its former colony and to help keep the peace. He met with leaders of the Patriotic Movement of Ivory Coast, the rebel group, known by its French initials M.C.P.I., in Bouaké, their stronghold.

The French foreign minister said Ivoirian political groups planned to meet in Paris on Jan. 15. A meeting involving regional leaders with United Nations and African Union representatives, also in Paris, is scheduled for Jan. 26.

France is concerned that the civil war in Ivory Coast will spiral out of control after weeks of talks have failed to make major progress.

Hundreds of people have been killed since the conflict started with a failed coup on Sept. 19, and tens of thousands have been driven from their homes.

Mr. Villepin said the rebels had also made a commitment to pass on a message to two other factions still battling in the western part of the country, the world's biggest cocoa grower, to respect a cease-fire signed between the government and the main rebel group on Oct. 17.