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HEADLINE: Ivory Coast army and rebel leaders to meet amid disputes over disarming, recruiting foreigners

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BODY:

Ivory Coast's army chief is making his first foray behind rebel lines, pursuing a new peace accord already challenged by disputes over disarming and charges his forces are recruiting foreign fighters to renew conflict in the West African nation.

Hours before Thursday's meeting, the wife of an army commander said he had been detained in an alleged coup plot.

A military prosecutor said Commander Marcellin Kofi Mbahia was only being interrogated.

Solange Mbahia told The Associated Press that troops surrounded his house Tuesday night at Akouedo military barracks in Abidjan, the commercial capital, and accused him of plotting to overthrow President Laurent Gbagbo's government.

Ivory Coast has been divided between a rebel-held north and loyalist south since a failed coup in September 2002 erupted into civil war. A 2003 peace agreement signed in France and another in Ghana last year failed to take hold.

"Will the Pretoria Accord be just words, or action?" the U.N. Information Network asked in an analysis reflecting general skepticism.

On April 6, all parties agreed to end hostilities and immediately start disarming, at a meeting mediated by South African President Thabo Mbeki.

They also agreed to allow Mbeki to decide the most contentious issue, a constitutional nationality clause that effectively barred Gbagbo's most potent rival from the presidential race, exiled former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara.

On Wednesday, Mbeki sent a letter saying all signatories to the French agreement must be allowed to contest elections scheduled October - effectively giving Ouattara the green light.

Ouattara's Republican Rally party, which disputes government claims that his mother is not Ivorian, welcomed the announcement, saying "We hope that this will put an end to the misunderstandings that have led to this war."

No immediate comment was available from other players. On Tuesday, Ivory Coast's U.N. Ambassador Philippe Djangone-Bi refused to say whether the government would abide by Mbeki's decision.

Speaking in New York, he chided skeptics, and said: "We in Ivory Coast believe that it is necessary to give peace a chance."

Back home, anxiety mounted with a confrontation between pro-government militia fighters preventing French troops from patrolling in western Ivory Coast, and gunmen firing up to 20 shots at a U.N. outpost in the government-held south. No one was injured, but the incidents were seen as indicators that militant government supporters are not willing to end hostilities.

Guinean officials this week denied reports of a gunbattle with Ivorians on the border, saying there was a shootout on the Ivorian side that did not involve Guinean troops.

There are growing fears that tensions will explode into renewed war and spread to neighboring countries if peace is not enforced.

"Extremists on both sides would probably take up arms again," France's Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie said in an interview published Wednesday in Le Figaro newspaper.

"If the partition of Ivory Coast was confirmed, violence would without doubt spread to neighboring countries and provoke a destabilization of West Africa," she said. "By capillary action, all of Africa, which is very fragile at the moment, would be overtaken by the questioning of frontiers and interethnic clashes."

Fighters loyal to Gbagbo are ignoring his commitment to dismantle and disarm pro-government militias.

"We do not trust these (rebel) guys and it is out of the question to lay down our weapons and let them slaughter our parents," the leader of the Liberation Front of the Great West militia, Denis Maho Glofiehi, told the AP Wednesday from his base in western Guiglo.

"For security reasons, the disarmament will have to be done simultaneously, but not before the rebels," Glofiehi said.

He spoke shortly after about 200 of his fighters laid down their weapons in Abidjan at a ceremony chaired by Maj. Gen. Philippe Mangou, the hard-liner recently appointed head of security forces.

The main New Forces rebel group says it is willing to disarm, but: "First of all, the militias must be dismantled and disarmed," according to spokesman Sindou Cisse.

He spoke in the northern rebel stronghold of Bouake, where Mangou, Prime Minister Seydou Diarra and rebel leader Guillaume Soro are to meet Thursday.

On Tuesday, the rebels accused Gbagbo of recruiting 3,000 Liberian mercenaries and planning to use them to conduct attacks he would blame on the rebels.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said last week it had interviewed Liberian fighters recruited by Ivorian soldiers, and U.N. peacekeepers have confirmed a buildup of forces in government-held western towns, near the border with Liberia.

Critics say more pressure must be brought on Gbagbo, who in November sent his newly built-up air force on bombing runs in rebel territory, violating a cease-fire and killing nine French peacekeepers and an American aid worker. French troops retaliated by destroying the air force, sparking anti-foreigner riots that sent thousands fleeing.

France's defense minister said she would ask for reinforcements for 6,000 U.N. troops in Ivory Coast.

Similar past requests have been ignored, as has a U.N. plea for humanitarian aid. Donors have pledged just 0.5 percent of US\$39 million.

Oil companies in Sierra Leone raised fuel prices last week, saying Ivory Coast was refining only half what it used to since foreign technicians fled. Landlocked countries long ago stopped shipping goods through the port at Abidjan.

Still, Ivory Coast remains the world's leader producer of cocoa.

Associated Press writers Nafi Diouf in Dakar, Senegal, and Parfait Kouassi and Pauline Bax in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, contributed to this report.