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HEADLINE: African leaders open summit on Ivory Coast crisis

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BODY:

The African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC) opened a high-level meeting here Thursday to help plan how Ivory Coast will be governed after October 30, the date of a cancelled presidential poll.

The closed-door talks were set to focus on the resolutions of last week's summit meeting of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), convened in Abuja after it became clear the elections marking the end of Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo's mandate would not be held on time, leaving a constitutional vacuum.

Thursday's summit was attended by South African President Thabo Mbeki, Nigeria's Olusegun Obasanjo, Sudan's Omar el-Beshir and Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Other PSC member states -- there are 15 -- sent lower-level officials.

Some 26 heads of state -- from all PSC and ECOWAS states -- had been invited.

"This summit was always going to be difficult," commented one AU diplomat.

"It is possible that heads of state did not want to attend so that the AU could endorse ECOWAS recommendations without too much noise," he added.

Gbagbo, who said Wednesday he would not attend and also stayed away from the ECOWAS talks, sent a representative to Addis Ababa, where the AU has its headquarters.

"We want the AU to stop playing monkey business and to face the situation and say these are the conclusions of the mediation, you have to implement them, that means disarm (the rebels) and go to the elections," Gbagbo's representative, Desire Tagro, told Radio France Internationale.

The cocoa-rich Ivory Coast has for three years been split into two along truce lines patrolled by French and UN soldiers, with Gbagbo controlling the south and New Forces rebels controlling

the north and part of the west.

Efforts to heal the divisions have instead spawned further discord, with the rebels backing an ECOWAS-led mediation and the president favouring an initiative put forward by South Africa's Mbeki.

In addition, the rebels want Gbagbo to step down when his term comes to an end on October 30 - the date initially set for polls -- to give way to a 14-to-18-month transitional period headed by a neutral leader.

But the president has rejected the proposal, insisting that he can only step down after elections are held.

AU peacemakers have given no hint of their own stance on the standoff that threatens to shatter hopes of keeping the former economic powerhouse of the region in one piece.

"We hope that they will come out with an agreement to advance the peace process in Ivory Coast," said Margherita Amodeo, spokeswoman for the UN operation in Ivory Coast.

A failed coup attempt in September 2002 gave rise to an armed rebellion in the north that has unsuccessfully tried to unseat the Gbagbo amid international pressure to end the crisis.

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