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Rebels Seize Western City in Ivory Coast

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) -- Rebels took the largest city in Ivory Coast's coffee-rich far West on Thursday after a day and night of fighting, rebels, residents of the city and Western military sources said.

Residents reported rebels patrolling the city of Man at daylight Thursday, with no government forces in sight.

"We have taken control of Man," rebel commander Felix Doh said by telephone from Man. "There are still pockets of resistance, and we'll be taking care of them soon."

Locals in Man, a city of 135,000, said the insurgents were Liberians, speaking only English -- making them members of the latest and most-feared faction in the three-month-old rebellion that has shattered this once-stable West African nation.

"The fighting went all night," said one man reached by telephone at his home in the center of Man, "The only soldiers in town are rebels. There are no loyalists."

Residents said the insurgents also held the city's airport. Western military officials confirmed that rebels controlled Man, and rebels boasted Ivory Coast's vital commercial capital in the south was next.

"Our objective is to get to Abidjan and control the whole country," Doh said.

Government soldiers backed by foreign mercenaries, tanks and helicopter gunships had made Man one of the most heavily defended and fought-over sites in the growing war splitting a country that is the world's largest cocoa producer, and a leading coffee producer.

French forces evacuated foreigners from Man on Nov. 30 after rebels took the city in a surprise attack days earlier.

On Dec. 1, government forces reclaimed the hill-ringed town. Rebels since have carried out several ambushes south of the city, and Wednesday attacked full force to retake it.

Fighting in the West last month opened a new front in the war, and introduced Liberians to the fight -- ill-disciplined, often drugged fighters much feared by residents.

Ivory Coast's rebellion broke out Sept. 19 with a failed coup attempt, and quickly saw rebels seize the northern half of the once tranquil country. Rebels are demanding that President Laurent Gbagbo resign, opening the way for new elections.

West African leaders late Wednesday approved deployment of what's expected to be a 1,500-strong force to try to enforce a shattered cease-fire. Meeting in Dakar, Senegal, leaders picked Senegalese and Nigerian commanders for the force, due to deploy Dec. 31.

France, Ivory Coast's colonial ruler, already has more than 1,000 troops in the country and is building to a deployment of 2,500. French forces are charged with protecting their nationals and other foreigners and overseeing the cease-fire, but are taking an increasingly muscular role.

A key economic hub and port for West Africa, Ivory Coast was West Africa's single-most prosperous and stable nation until its first and only coup, in 1999. Skyscraper-lined Abidjan, a city with millions of immigrant African workers, long has been a base for international business in the region.