Ivory Coast mobs clash with French

U.N. Security Council calls emergency session

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ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) -- French troops clashed with soldiers and angry mobs Saturday after government warplanes killed at least nine French peacekeepers and an American civilian in an airstrike -- mayhem that threatened to draw foreign troops deeper into Ivory Coast's escalating civil war.

Mob violence broke out in Ivory Coast's largest city, Abidjan, after France retaliated for the airstrike by destroying two government warplanes at an airport outside the capital.

Thousands of pro-government youths, some armed with machetes, axes or chunks of wood, took to the streets of Abidjan, the country's commercial capital. Crowds went door to door looking for French citizens and set fire to a French school, sending a pall of smoke over the city.

"Everybody get your Frenchman!" young men in the mob shouted to each others.

Later, massive explosions and heavy gunfire rocked Yamoussoukro, the capital of the West African nation. It was not immediately known what caused the apparent fighting in the city, where both Ivorian and French forces are based.

The U.N. Security Council held an emergency session Saturday, with U.S. and French diplomats preparing a sharp warning to Ivory Coast's government.

France quickly sent three Mirage fighter jets to West Africa and ordered more troops to Ivory Coast in response to the violence.

French Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie said Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo would be "held personally responsible by the international community for (maintaining) the public order in Abidjan."

Hard-liners in Ivory Coast's military broke a more than year-old cease-fire, launching surprise airstrikes Thursday against rebel positions and vowing to retake the northern part of the country in rebel hands since the civil war began in 2002.

Government officials said Saturday's airstrike that hit a French peacekeeper position was an accident -- but the violence highlighted the nationalist fervor in the pro-government south.

Many in the south resent the French troops, suspecting them of siding with rebels, even though the peacekeepers have protected government troops in the past. France has about 4,000 troops in Ivory Coast, and a separate U.N. peacekeeping force numbers around 6,000.

Extra French troops deployed

Saturday's violence began when government warplanes struck French positions at Brobo, near the northern rebel-held town of Bouake, in the afternoon, U.N. military spokesman Philippe Moreux said.

Eight French soldiers were killed and 23 others wounded, said Defense Ministry spokesman Jean-Francois Bureau in Paris. An American citizen was also killed in the raid, the French presidency said, without providing details.

A ninth French soldier died of his wounds, said France's U.N. Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sabliere before the emergency council meeting. Council diplomats said the American who was killed was believed to have worked for a non-governmental organization and been at the French base.

U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Ergibe Boyd in Abidjan said they've been told of the death by the French but haven't confirmed it. She said the American was likely a missionary, since there is no U.S. military or diplomatic presence in the area.

In response to the strike, French infantry destroyed the Russian-made Sukhoi fighter jets on the ground at an airport in Yamoussoukro, 75 miles to the south, French military spokesman Col. Henry Aussavy said. The jets were believed to be the ones that carried out the strike.

"Our forces responded in a situation of legitimate defense," Bureau, the spokesman, said. "Now the priority is the immediate end of combat."

France deployed three Mirage fighter jets to nearby Gabon, French military spokesman Col. Henry Aussavy said. France also ordered two additional companies to Ivory Coast.

At the U.N. Security Council, the United States, which currently holds the council presidency, and France were drafting a presidential statement warning Ivory Coast's government to stop attacks immediately or face "serious consequences," council diplomats said.

TV appeal for calm

In the violence in Abidjan, loyalist mobs tried to overrun a French military base near the airport. French troops fired in the air and lobbed tear gas at the crowd.

"French go home!" loyalist mobs screamed as they marched through the city. Mobs went house to house, seeking out French civilians, French military spokesman Henry Aussavy said.

At least three French families had called French authorities to say loyalist militias had stormed their homes, a Western diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity. There was no immediate word on any civilian casualties.

At the same time, Ivory Coast soldiers tried to destroy French aircraft at the airport itself, sparking clashes with French forces, a French spokesman, Jacques Combarieu, said. Combarieu said a French soldier was lightly injured and an airplane was lightly damaged before the fighting ended.

After nightfall, state TV ran a nonstop crawl across screens, asking for restraint: "We are asking all patriots and Ivorians to not attack, and to not attack the property, of French people or the international community."

A senior member of Ivory Coast's government -- Sebastien Dano Djeje, Cabinet member for National Reconciliation -- said the bombing of the French position in the north "was a mistake. We didn't aim to hit them."

But then he questioned whether the government air force was really behind the strike. "But what proves it was Ivorian planes? We have to do an investigation," he told The Associated Press.

Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer, had been the pride of France's former colonial empire for prosperous decades after independence in 1960. A downturn in commodities prices and political change in the 1990s helped bring instability, and the country suffered its first-ever military coup in 1999.

Turmoil and regional, ethnic and political hatreds have reigned since. Civil war erupted in September 2002. A power-sharing deal brokered by the French ended major fighting in 2003, but otherwise failed to take hold.