

## UK troops on Ivory Coast standby

Downing Street has confirmed British troops are on standby in case they need to help evacuate several hundred UK citizens from Ivory Coast.

The news came as it emerged France had begun evacuating its hostages after days of anti-French demonstrations. Trouble flared after nine French peacekeepers were killed and President Jacques Chirac ordered the destruction of the Ivory Coast's air force. A company of 100-120 UK troops is understood to have been put on standby. They are ready to fly out and secure the route from the embassy to the airport if called upon. Prime Minister Tony Blair's official spokesman said: "There are British nationals in Ivory Coast and as you can imagine we are making the usual contingency plans in case the situation deteriorates further, but that's all I can say at this stage."

He added the situation would be monitored carefully in case evacuation became necessary. France has played a lead role in international peacekeeping in Ivory Coast - a former colony - after President Laurent Gbagbo broke an 18-month ceasefire with rebels bombing their positions and killing the nine French soldiers. The decision to destroy the African nation's small air force prompted riots against French and other foreign nationals. The Spanish have already put their forces on standby to evacuate their nationals if necessary.