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Gbagbo urges Ivory Coast opposition to resume talks

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Ivory Coast's President Laurent **Gbagbo** has urged opposition parties and rebels who quit a transition government to resume talks rejected since security forces violently crushed a demonstration in March.

"I've decided solemnly to ask all the parties and movements that have suspended their participation in the cabinet to resume the republican dialogue," **Gbagbo** said in a televised address to the nation late Thursday.

"Together we must find a swift and lasting solution to end the impasse where the painful events of the last few days threaten to lead Ivory Coast once again," the president said.

The main opposition parties and former rebels known as the New Forces, who still control half the west African country after a civil war unleashed in September 2002, have suspended any participation in government and refused to talk to **Gbagbo** since March 25.

On what the opposition calls "Bloody Thursday", 37 people were killed, including to official figures, when police and troops cracked down after the opposition defied a ban and called for a "peaceful march" of protest.

Opposition sources say that in all, between 350 and 500 people were killed, not only during the repression of the demonstration itself, but in night-time raids carried out since by pro-government forces.

In his **speech**, **Gbagbo** commended the presence of UN peacekeeping troops -- under a mandate which put west African forces already deployed to monitor a fragile ceasefire under direct UN control from April 4 -- but said "it's up to us, ourselves first and foremost, to bring back the conditions needed for peace.

The ceasefire is part of a peace pact signed in France in January 2003 but never fully implemented.

Gbagbo pledged that the state would take charge of "all those wounded" in the confrontations and offer "assistance to families for the organisation of funerals and building tombs".

"Our immediate task is to end, in a durable way, all forms of violence and security, especially in districts of Abidjan," the commercial capital on the country's Atlantic coast, he added.

The United Nations said Thursday that three former legal officials and human rights experts from Burundi, Cape Verde and Italy have been appointed to lead a commission of inquiry into the crackdown.

The commission is due to report back to the UN's acting High Commissioner for Human Rights, Bertrand Ramcharan, by the end of April.

Late on Wednesday, Ivory Coast's parliament amended a controversial law on the status of foreigners that the opposition has said was one of the sparks that turned political turmoil and ethnic strife into civil war.

Early last month, lawmakers called for the immediate and full implementation of the 2003 peace pact, in particular clauses on eligibility for the presidency, land ownership, and a code covering the status of foreigners in the country, where around one-fifth of the population are migrant workers.

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An international committee set up to monitor the peace deal said Friday it was concerned by recent comments by former rebel leader Guillaume Soro, now communications minister, that it said undermined the integrity of the country.

Soro said on April 4 that "if we can manage ourselves, we no longer have any need of Abidjan," the seat of government, adding that his movement would from next month take charge of its fighters' wages.

The 2003 peace deal "is founded on a republic of Ivory Coast that is united," the committee said in a statement Friday.

"No credible solution to the crisis is possible outside of that framework."

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