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Agence France Presse -- English

October 30, 2005 Sunday 11:02 PM GMT

Ivory Coast leader vows early election; rebels call for him to leave

LENGTH: 578 words

DATELINE: ABIDJAN Oct 30

Ivory Coast President Laurent **Gbagbo**, whose mandate was due to go into extra time following the west African state's failure to hold elections, pledged Sunday to do everything he could to organize a vote before a one-year deadline set by the United Nations.

Meanwhile the New Forces rebels, who hold most of the north of the country, reaffirmed their call for **Gbagbo** to leave and said their leader, Guillaume Soro, should be the prime minister of a government of national reconciliation, due to be set up on Monday.

"Monsieur Laurent **Gbagbo's** presidential mandate is well and truly over," the rebels said.

Under political plans drawn up by the African Union and backed by the UN, a transitional prime minister was to have been chosen before Monday by mediators including presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria.

Under the plan, the prime minister would enjoy enhanced powers and it would be his job to organise elections.

After a day marked by protests calling for him to step down, **Gbagbo** seemed eager to mollify the nation when he addressed it on television.

"The international community calls on us to complete this (electoral) process within 12 months at the latest...

"For my part I hope that those elections take place well before those 12 months, and that is the mission I shall give to the prime minister we will be appointing in a few days' time," he said.

Elections were due to have been held by Sunday, when **Gbagbo's** term officially expired, but they were not possible due to the civil conflict that has torn the country in half since September 2002.

Earlier Sunday, security forces fired in the air and used tear gas to disperse demonstrators seeking to march to **Gbagbo's** residence to protest the extension of his mandate.

Some 400 protesters, who had taken part earlier in a rally of nearly 4,000 young opposition supporters, tried to break through a security cordon near **Gbagbo's** home despite organizers' calls to disperse peacefully.

In Paris, there were scuffles as French police blocked a march by some 500 anti-**Gbagbo** demonstrators who were headed for the embassy of Ivory Coast, a former French colony.

Despite calls for his ouster from the political opposition and the New Forces, the UN Security Council voted on October 21 to allow **Gbagbo** to stay in power for an extra year, a proposal earlier put forward by the pan-continental African Union.

In his **speech Gbagbo** blamed the postponement of the elections on the opposition and the rebels.

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"The fact that it was impossible for us to hold elections is due to the rebels and all the parties which supported them in their refusal to disarm," he said, referring to a so-far unapplied peace plan brokered by South Africa.

He also described the rebels as "armed bands that are out of the control of the legitimate and legal Ivory Coast authorities" and accused them of betting on the situation deteriorating so that they could seize power without elections.

"My profound conviction is that our country will only emerge from its crisis through elections," he said.

In their own statement, the New Forces said they had mandated Soro "to make all necessary contact with all political groups who signed the Linas Marcoussis accord with a view to forming a government of national reconciliation very soon, in the coming hours."

The main players in Ivory Coast's crisis signed the now effectively defunct Marcoussis deal in France in 2003 after the New Forces mounted a failed coup against **Gbagbo**.

LOAD-DATE: October 31, 2005

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newswire

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