

85 of 402 DOCUMENTS

Agence France Presse -- English

**February** 8, 2003 Saturday

## **Ivorian president seeks to please all by partially accepting peace deal**

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**SECTION:** International News

**LENGTH:** 643 words

**DATeline:** ABIDJAN, Feb 8

Ivory Coast President Laurent **Gbagbo's** half-hearted acceptance of a Paris-brokered peace to end a ruinous rebel war was a delicately balanced move to appease both militant supporters and ex-ruler France.

**Gbagbo** late Friday accepted the "spirit" of the accord, peppering his long-awaited **speech** with conciliatory remarks to all to soothe national rage, wounded pride and frayed nerves.

The deal was reached January 24 after nine days of talks in France between rebels holding half the territory of the world's top cocoa grower and the political parties.

**Gbagbo** then hesitated for two weeks, undertaking crisis talks with leading players in the peace process after rebel claims that they had been promised the sensitive defence and interior portfolios triggered national anger.

On Friday, he stressed that the accord was a "compromise."

The president underlined that he would not allow his powers as head of state to be eroded by the accord, which provides for a power-sharing government headed by a "consensus" prime minister.

Clearly addressing his militant supporters -- mainly youths -- who ran riot in the main city of Abidjan for days and staged violent attacks against France, **Gbagbo** said: "All compromise texts are bad."

But immediately, he urged his war-divided countrymen to try the "medicine," adding: "if does not heal us we can try another medicine."

He said he "understood" their anger, which at one point brought hundreds of thousands out onto the streets of Abidjan in a peaceful rally to denounce the deal.

"If I was not president, I would have been on the streets with you.

"But I am the head of state. I cannot say that I reject the text," he said.

He also made it clear he would not allow any of his authority to slip into the hands of new prime minister designate Seydou Diarra, who already served in that post during a military government after Ivory Coast's first coup in 1999.

Under the deal **Gbagbo** will remain in office in Ivory Coast -- but with his power limited by a national unity government including his opponents and a new "consensus" prime minister empowered to prepare the country for elections.

Stating the accord tried to "turn our presidential regime into a parliamentary one," he gave notice that "I intend to conserve all the prerogatives the constitution puts at my disposal."

Under the country's constitution, only the president can name or sack a prime minister.

The accord, which stipulates that Diarra will remain prime minister only until the current government's term expires in 2005, "will not be a parallel constitution," he said.

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The president hedged the burning question of whether the rebels would get the key government posts.

"I have not formed a new government, so nobody can say this ministry will go to that person or that ministry to this."

He clearly rejected the disarmament of government forces under the accord -- another point that has inflamed public opinion and the military who said this put them on a par with the insurgents.

A diplomat Saturday said **Gbagbo** had proved himself a "past master of the art of eyewash, in opening non-existent windows."

Playing to the gallery, **Gbagbo** asked the nation for forgiveness for "all the errors which had been committed" at the talks and the subsequent accord, which he had accepted before UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

He also raised questions about the "legitimacy" of the talks, arguing that the Ivorian state had not been represented at the parleys in Marcoussis, a small town near Paris, unlike at earlier peace talks in the west African country of Togo.

**Gbagbo** ended by appealing for calm in the country, asking his supporters to "leave the streets" and return to their homes, work or school.

But he added: "If I need to you to defend the country, I will do so."

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**LOAD-DATE:** February 9, 2003

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

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