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Ivory Coast Group Claims Attack on Army as Violence Worsens (1)
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(Updates with comment by resident in fifth paragraph.)

By Baudelaire Mieu, Olivier Monnier and Pauline Bax

Feb. 24 (Bloomberg) -- Violence is escalating in Ivory Coast as an armed group claimed responsibility for its first attack on government troops in the commercial capital, Abidjan.

The Liberation Movement of the Population of Abobo-Anyama said 27 people were killed in the assault late on Feb. 22. The army put the figure at eight, including one soldier and seven people it described as rebels.

The attack by the group, which is named after two neighborhoods of Abidjan that support President-elect Alassane Ouattara, represents a new twist in violence that has marked the world's top cocoa producer since a disputed election on Nov. 28 left it with two rival administrations. While the international community recognizes Ouattara as the winner, incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo refused to resign, citing alleged voter fraud.

Security forces returned to Abobo yesterday afternoon in a large-scale operation, residents said.

"Police came into the neighborhood around 4 p.m.," Ladji Soumahoro, who lives in Abobo, said by phone yesterday. "They were firing everywhere. Everybody was scared, they stayed at home, scared of being hit by a random shot."

Mediation Attempt

An African Union-sponsored mission to Ivory Coast, including the presidents of South Africa, Tanzania, Mauritania and Chad, completed a two-day visit to the country on Feb. 22.

The mission could be the "final attempt" by the regional bloc for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, said Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga, who tried at least twice previously to mediate in the impasse.

The Economic Community of West African States is holding planning meetings and "marshaling forces" to remove Gbagbo from power if sanctions and talks fail to convince him to step down, Odinga told reporters yesterday in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital.

"If all these measures don't result in a change of regime, force will be used," he said. "As to when, I cannot say."

At least 300 people have been killed in clashes since the political struggle began almost three months ago, according to the United Nations. In the west of the country, Amnesty International estimates 70,000 people have fled their homes amid ethnic tensions that have been exacerbated by the impasse.

The country's financial system has come under increasing pressure as at least 10 lenders have closed their doors. The West African regional central bank ordered lenders to halt transactions with its agencies in Ivory Coast after Gbagbo seized their offices.

Cocoa Ban

Ouattara, who on Jan. 23 told cocoa and coffee shippers to halt exports for a month, this week extended the ban until March 15. May-delivery cocoa climbed for the fourth straight day in London yesterday, adding 19 pounds, or 0.8 percent, to 2,357 pounds per metric ton.

In the 14 days to Feb. 17, exports of cocoa beans and processed cocoa products fell to 8,645 tons, according to an official with access to the data. In the two weeks previous, shipments were 71,457 tons, said the official, who declined to be identified because the data are confidential.

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