

Ivory Coast presidential election ends in street riot

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast — Opposition leader Laurent Gbagbo claimed the presidency of the Ivory Coast on Wednesday after a tumultuous 24 hours that ended the rule of the military junta that seized power 10 months ago.

Soldiers and civilians took to the streets to celebrate, although the festivities were short-lived as supporters of one of Ivory Coast's largest political parties launched a new round of street protests to demand a new vote.

Junta leader Gen. Robert Guei, who had declared himself the winner of Sunday's presidential election, was forced from power earlier in the day when his security forces turned against him and joined thousands of unarmed demonstrators who took to the streets to back Gbagbo's bid for power.

Later, Gbagbo was introduced on state television as "president." He said he would be forming a Cabinet shortly.

The longtime left-leaning politician and former university professor had urged his followers to undertake a

"We are taking control as I speak."

— Henry Cesar Sama
former Guei information minister

popular uprising after Guei disbanded the country's electoral commission on Tuesday and declared himself the election winner.

More than 50 people were killed in clashes involving civilians and military since Tuesday, said Nguessan Afi, an official in Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front party. The toll could not be independently confirmed.

At least three bodies were seen in downtown Abidjan, and five other people were seriously injured. Four soldiers died in fighting early Wednesday, soldiers said.

Guei's whereabouts were unclear. A former aide, Desire-Paulin Dakoury, said he remained in the presidential

offices in Abidjan, Ivory Coast's main city, and "will be the one to decide when he talks and when he leaves."

However, former Guei information minister Henri Cesar Sama, who is now allied with Gbagbo, said Guei had fled Abidjan for Cotonou, a city in nearby Benin.

Airport officials in Cotonou also said Guei and his family were there. Well into the evening, senior government officials and their bodyguards hovered around the airport terminal.

"We are taking control as I speak," Sama said Wednesday. He said pro-Gbagbo soldiers were trying to convince the remaining junta forces to put down their arms. In a state TV broadcast Wednesday evening, army chief of staff Soumailia Diabakate pledged the fealty of the "entire armed forces" to Gbagbo.

Gbagbo praised his supporters for opposing what he called Guei's "electoral coup d'etat."

"You went out in the hundreds of thousands," he said on state television. "I pay particular homage to those who died in the cause of this."

Crowds of supporters exploded in celebration in Abidjan and the western city of Gagnoa, a Gbagbo stronghold, at the news that Gbagbo had taken power. Some drums while others sang and danced in the streets.

"With Gbagbo, we have hope for the future," Koffi Nguessan, a university economics professor, was among those celebrating.

Within a few hours, though, the celebrations turned to protest: More than 1,000 supporters of opposition leader Alassane Dramane Ouattara, who had been barred from taking part in the election, rallied in front of the television offices.

Several hundred Ouattara supporters also protested in Gagnoa and marched in the northern city of Kofidji to demand new elections. They warned clashes if Guei refused.

Young men turned out in the streets of Abidjan with black-painted faces, symbolizing traditional war rituals. Soldiers drove the crowds away several times with tear gas, occasionally firing in the air.

Russian airplane crashes in Tbilisi due to bad weather

TBILISI, Georgia (AP) — A Russian Defense Ministry plane slammed into a mountain while trying to land in bad weather Wednesday evening in Georgia. Officials said all 75 people on board were feared dead.

A search and rescue team sent to the crash site about 15 miles east of the city of Batumi found pieces of the plane and scorched earth, Georgia's Emergency Situations Department said. Russia's RTR television reported that bodies had been found and showed footage of flaming pieces of wreckage lit by rescue workers' floodlights.

The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

The plane veered off course on approach in "difficult weather conditions," said Alexander Silagadze, head of the civil aviation agency Sakaeronavigatsiya.

Russian military officials said the plane, an Il-18 transport with 64 passengers and a crew of 11, was at an altitude of 5,300 feet near Mount Tzirava when communications with it were lost, the Interfax news agency reported. Both military and civilian personnel were aboard, Interfax said.

Mount Tzirava means "Weeping Mountain" in Georgian, RTR said. Interfax said passengers aboard the plane included servicemen and their wives and children returning from vacation. Although Russia and Georgia became independent countries when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, Russian still maintains troops in Georgia.

A spokesman for the Georgian emergency department said on condition of anonymity that it was unlikely anyone survived.

The plane was flying from the Chkalovsky military airfield outside of Moscow to Batumi, home to a Russian military base. It was a mail plane that made twice-monthly flights along the route, military officials said.

The Russian emergency services were sending a plane carrying a search and rescue team, and an investigation committee had been formed.

Russia is in the process of withdrawing its troops and equipment from two bases in Georgia and is negotiating withdrawal from two in Armenia. Equipment from the bases is being shipped through Batumi.

The Il-18 is a Russian-made engine turboprop. In 1997, it crashed on a charter flight while trying to take off in Johannesburg, South Africa. All five people on board died, and the reason for the crash was not determined.



Russian Defense Ministry plane crashed near Batumi



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