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Côte d'Ivoire

Poisonous days

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A toxic-waste scandal shows up the country's fragility

AFP



Perilous slops from an oil cargo

IT IS not normal for an environmental scandal to bring down a government, but then Côte d'Ivoire is anything but normal. The country, once West Africa's most stable, has been split in two by a four-year civil war. A succession of peace deals imposed an

unwieldy national-unity government composed of members of the ruling party, the opposition, some former rebels and others. On September 6th, as the growing scale of a toxic-waste dumping scandal became clear, the prime minister, Charles Konan Banny, offered the resignation of this government. But at this the cabinet expressed bewilderment, and some ministers are refusing to take part in the new government that Mr Banny, who was asked to stay on by President Laurent Gbagbo, hopes to name soon.

Meanwhile the numbers affected by toxic waste keep growing: by this week, six people had died and more than 16,000 had sought treatment. The crisis began in August when 528 cubic metres (116,000 gallons) of toxic liquid unloaded from a ship called the *Proba Koala* were dumped in 11 open-air sites in residential areas around the commercial capital, Abidjan. The Dutch-based company which chartered the boat, Trafigura Beheer BV, says that it had informed the Ivorian authorities that the "residue washings [slops] from its gasoline cargo" were dangerous, and that, from then on, it was Ivorian responsibility to dispose of the stuff safely.

That did not happen. More and more people began to fall ill, and thousands took to the streets in protest, but the government's response was slow. Yet when Mr Banny offered its resignation, opposition and rebel ministers were sceptical, arguing that the supposedly neutral prime minister was just using the toxic-waste scandal to push through a cabinet reshuffle.

The scandal shows up the ineffectiveness of a national-unity government composed of factions that disagree on just about everything. The government took too long to act, and then got lost in mudslinging over who was to blame. The port authority, run by one of Mr Gbagbo's cronies, and the minister of transport, an opposition politician, are accusing one another. And now that the government no longer exists, who will clear up the mess?

A team of French experts has arrived to try to identify what exactly the liquid was, and several other Western countries have said they will help. The Dutch government is investigating the role of the chartering company. Meanwhile the hospitals are short of medicine, and all unemployed doctors have been called up.

The political fallout from the scandal reveals just how fragile the peace process is. On September 20th the UN will examine the Ivorian crisis at a special meeting in New York. Elections are due in October but will not happen: the country is still split in half and electoral lists have not been drawn up. The UN-appointed mediators of the International Working Group have accused all sides of failing to work towards peace. At the same time, the group made it clear where it felt the fault lies: Mr Banny has not been given the powers he needs to take the country to elections, and it recommended a new UN resolution ensuring that he gets them.

This, by implication, allots the largest share of the blame for the botched peace process to Mr Gbagbo. The president's supporters, already angry, will be infuriated if the UN votes for a resolution reinforcing the prime minister's mandate. Yet this is what it is likely to do next month.