

Cocoa farmers strike in Ivory Coast

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast (AP) - Cocoa farmers across Ivory Coast went on strike Monday, holding back their crops to protest low retail prices and high export taxes in a move that could affect the world market.

The West African country is the world's top grower of cocoa beans, producing 40 percent of global output each year, according to government statistics, despite being split following a civil war.

"The strike is on. ... We called on the farmers to hoard their beans," Koffi Kanga, a representative of the country's cocoa farmers association, said by telephone from San Pedro, Ivory

Coast's second cocoa port after the commercial capital of Abidjan.

Union leaders said they planned to stop trucks carrying cocoa and other farm products such as papayas and bananas to the southern port of Abidjan until the price is raised.

The action comes days after authorities officially opened the harvesting season by announcing a retail price of about 40 cents per pound — far below farmers' expectations. Cocoa association President Henri Amouzou said farmers want about 57 cents per pound.

The retail price sets a benchmark for farmers who



Cocoa producers hold up placards in Abidjan during nationwide strike to protest new price for cocoa beans.

plan to sell their beans to local buyers.

Ivory Coast's 700,000 in-

creasingly impoverished cocoa farmers have expressed increasing discontent with

the pricing system, saying they don't have enough ready cash to send their children to school.

Amouzou said farmers also demand the government slash the main cocoa export tax by 45 percent to allow local buyers and exporters to pay farmers a higher price.

Current export taxes are 20 cents per pound. Cocoa taxes are the main source of government revenue and have been used in the past to buy arms and military equipment, according to U.N. experts.

Most cocoa farms are in the fertile south of Ivory Coast and were less affected

than other areas of the country by civil war that broke out after a failed coup four years ago. The nation has since been split between a government-controlled south and a rebel-held north.

Finance Minister Charles Diby Koffi said earlier this month the government would not reduce taxes this season.

"The country is still in crisis. A cut can't be done this season," he said.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have repeatedly called for more transparency in the country's cocoa sector, which produces nearly 1.4 million tons of beans a year.

Rice

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There were reports North Korea had told China it was ready to conduct up to three more nuclear tests. At the State Department in Washington, spokesman Tom Casey said, "We certainly haven't received any information from them, from the Chinese, that they've been told by Pyongyang that another test is imminent."

U.S. government officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive situation, said there was no evidence to suggest a second test was imminent.

But given the underground nature of the testing, officials said, it could happen with little or no warning.

In Seoul, South Korea, the country's foreign minister — the incoming U.N. secretary-general — warned the North not to detonate a second nuclear test.

"If North Korea conducts an additional test, the response of the international community will be much more serious," Ban Ki-moon said.

In her meeting Thursday morning with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Rice reaffirmed Washington's defense commitment and "underscored the strength of our alliance," her spokesman said.

The officials discussed ways of cooperating on carrying out terms of the U.N. resolution that penalizes North Korea for its test. Steps include boarding and inspecting the North's ship for banned weapons, though China has expressed reluctance to do so.

"Ensuring the implementation of the U.N. Security



U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, left, smiles with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Council resolution will lead to changing the North Korean policies," Abe said. "In order to do so, we will work out the details of what we can do and what we need to do on the working level."

Rice's reference to U.S. willingness to honor the "full range" of the nation's security commitments was meant to show that the United States does not want to see its allies on a nuclear arms race to protect themselves. It also was likely to be taken as a reminder to North Korea that, should it use nuclear weapons on a neighbor, the U.S. has powerful forces of its own and is pledged to defend its friends.

The U.S. is concerned that Japan, South Korea and perhaps Taiwan may want to develop their own nuclear weapons programs to counter North Korea. Such moves would anger China, which has nuclear weapons, and raise tensions in Asia.

While North Korea is seeking direct negotiations with the U.S., the Bush administration is committed to six-nation disarmament talks, which have stalled. Rice's spokesman, Sean

McCormack, said before the secretary of state left for Seoul that there are no plans for the U.S., China, Japan, Russia and South Korea to hold a strategy session this week in Beijing.

North Korea contends it needs nuclear weapons to counter U.S. aggression. The U.S. has said it does not intend to attack the North or topple its communist government.

North Korea has a standing army of about 1.2 million, with millions more in reserve, and a supply of missiles capable of reaching Asian cities. North and South Korea technically are still at war more than 50 years after the Korean conflict ended.

The U.S. has 29,500 troops in South Korea, plus other air and naval forces in range. While the U.S. has no land-based nuclear weapons in Asia, it does have submarines equipped with nuclear weapons.

Japan, home to more than 35,000 U.S. troops, was Rice's first stop on a four-day tour of Asia and Russia. "The United States has no desire to escalate this crisis. We would like to see it de-escalate," Rice told reporters.

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Il made his first known public appearance since his country's recent nuclear test, attending a performance of songs praising him, the North's official media reported Wednesday. There was no mention of the nuclear test in the report.

The nuclear explosion has drawn strong international

condemnation and U.N. penalties that the North has rejected. The North, in turn, has threatened further unspecified moves.

Even discussing the issue is sensitive in Japan, with its troubled military history and its experience as the only nation where nuclear weapons were used in wartime.

"The government is absolutely not considering a need

to be armed by nuclear weapons," Aso said with Rice at his side. "We do not need to acquire nuclear arms with an assurance by Secretary of State Rice that the bilateral alliance would work without fault." Later Wednesday, Abe insisted his government would not even discuss building a nuclear bomb.

"That debate is finished," Abe testily told reporters.

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