

Ivory Coast: Violence stokes ethnic tensions before historic presidential vote Associated Press

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As Ivory Coast prepares to complete its first presidential poll in a decade, the two candidates in Sunday's runoff called for an end to the violence that has marked recent campaigning.

Multiple clashes between the candidates' supporters in the last week have caused at least two deaths in a key battleground in the center of the country, stoking ethnic tensions right before a vote that could bring a peaceful closure to the world's largest cocoa producer's enduring crisis, or plunge it back into ethnic violence.

Interior Ministry Official Auguste Zoguehi said a man was killed in clashes in Oume, in the center of the country, on Friday. The previous night, Zoguehi had announced on state television that one man was stabbed to death by rival supporters in nearby Bayota.

That announcement came just minutes before President Laurent Gbagbo and rival Alassane Ouattara participated in one of the first live televised candidates' debates in African history.

Though both men called for calm, they each accused the other of involvement in political violence over the last ten years of conflict. Ouattara said that Gbagbo collaborated with the military putsch in 1999, while Gbagbo said Ouattara had a hand in a failed coup in 2002, which divided the country in two and led to an 8-year political standoff.

During the debate, Gbagbo announced a nationwide curfew at 10 p.m. the night of the vote to prevent any interference in vote counting, a decision his opponent said would only further heighten suspicions over the vote.

International observers say they fear large-scale violence if the loser refuses to accept the results. (...)

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