

UN Admits Mistake, Apologizes to Minsk

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UNITED NATIONS — The UN peacekeeping chief admitted that the United Nations mistakenly accused Belarus of delivering attack helicopters to military forces supporting Ivory Coast's longtime ruler who refuses to cede power.

Alain Le Roy told reporters Wednesday that he apologized to the government of Belarus on behalf of the United Nations for the erroneous report, which he called a "very bad incident for us."

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's office reported Sunday that in "a serious violation" of UN sanctions, three attack helicopters were being supplied to forces loyal to Laurent Gbagbo who has refused to hand power to Alassane Ouattara, the internationally recognized winner of the Nov. 28 presidential election.

Ban said the first helicopter arrived at Abidjan airport on Sunday evening and additional flights were scheduled for Monday.

Le Roy said the statement was issued based on a written report from the UN peacekeeping mission in Ivory Coast, known as UNOCI, "that claimed ... a plane from Belarus had landed."

"I must admit the report from the mission ... was a mistake," he said. "No plane landed."

Le Roy said he therefore met Wednesday morning with the charge d'affaires from Belarus, Zoya Kolontai, "and I expressed our deep regret and our apologies for the damage caused to Belarus due to a wrong reporting from the mission."

He said Belarus, again and in writing, reaffirmed its "full compliance" with the arms embargo against Ivory Coast, which has been in place since 2004.

Through UNOCI, he said Gbagbo's "people" were also informed "that the information that the plane has landed was wrong."

Le Roy said the initial information about the helicopter deliveries from Belarus came from the independent experts monitoring sanctions. They receive intelligence from many sources.

But he said "UNOCI should not have reported that a plane has landed when it was clearly not true."

The UN mission is conducting "a full inquiry," but Le Roy said the error probably happened because peacekeepers "heard the noise" of a plane but were barred by forces loyal to Gbagbo from entering the airport to confirm the aircraft was actually delivering a helicopter from Belarus.

As the undersecretary-general for peacekeeping and the person in charge of UNOCI, Le Roy said, "I take the blame."

The erroneous report was issued after a week of intensified street fighting in the main city of Abidjan between forces loyal to Gbagbo and Ouattara that left dozens dead.

The clashes led to a UN warning that the country was closer to the brink of re-igniting civil war, a view backed by Le Roy.

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