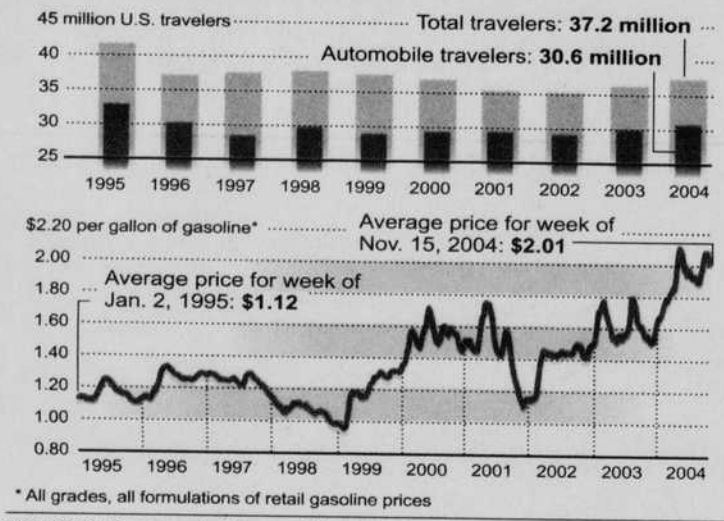
Possible pre-Sept. 11 level for travel

With 30.6 million expected to hit the road before week's end, and 6.6 million likely to travel by other means, this year may be the busiest Thanksgiving for the transportation sector since 2000.



* All grades, all formulations of retail gasoline prices

SOURCES: Department of Energy; AAA; Travel Industry Association of America

AP

'Tens of thousands' of jobs lost in Africa's Ivory Coast

Millions of dollars in infrastructure and merchandise have been lost war-torn nation, business leaders say

BY ALEXANDRA ZAVIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast — Burned, looted shops dot the commercial capital. European airlines have suspended flights. And only a few ships remain in what was one of West Africa's busiest ports.

The latest outburst of violence in Ivory Coast has dealt a serious, and some say irreparable, blow to the world's top cocoa producer and regional economic powerhouse, chasing away many of the foreign business owners and managers critical to its development and stability.

Business leaders were still adding up the damage Monday, but said millions of dollars worth of infrastructure and merchandise were destroyed and tens of thousands of jobs lost in clashes unleashed by an unprecedented showdown between France and its former star colony.

Ivory Coast accounts for 40 percent of economic production in French-speaking West Africa and is the site of two key ports. Its cocoa and coffee plantations provide employment to at least 4 million workers from impoverished neighboring countries; other sectors employ as many as 4 million more immigrants.

A week of looting in cities and towns and the government's resumption of hostilities in a 2-year-old civil war have inflicted "incalculable damage" to West Africa, said Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the U.N. special representative for the region.

"How can we hope to attract foreign investment, essential for creating the jobs that so many millions of West African youths desperately need, if some of our leaders continue to pursue the logic of war and vendetta year after year?" Ould-Abdallah asked.

The harm goes beyond Ivory Coast's borders.

Instability here and in Sudan is having a "ripple effect" across Africa — frightening investors away from stable countries like Senegal and Mali, Anne Miroux of the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development said Monday at a conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

President Laurent Gbagbo, brought to power in 2000 after a 1999 coup, launched the latest cycle of destruction Nov. 4 when his government reopened attacks on rebels after more than a year of peace. A still-unexplained airstrike by Ivory Coast warplanes on Nov. 6 killed nine French peacekeepers and an American aid worker.

France responded by destroying the country's air force and seizing control of the international airport, sending thousands of government supporters pouring into the streets.

Foreign-owned shops, restaurants, bars and other businesses were ransacked and more than 9,000 French and other foreigners fled the country.

Christophe Ndri, head of Peryssac, a leading Abidjan department store, told a conference of business leaders Monday that his company suffered damages totaling $3.9 million. Eleven of its 14 expatriate employees, many of them managers, were evacuated.

Bernabe hardware store in the western port city of San Pedro estimated its losses at $1.9 million. The store was gutted, costing 20 people their jobs, and the company is unsure whether it will rebuild.

French-run schools educating expatriate children were burned, leaving many families no choice but to depart.

Gbagbo appeared unconcerned by the departure of the foreigners, and said last week: "They will be back."

Few of the foreign business leaders who remain share his optimism.

"There is no question of coming back as long as (security) conditions are not convincing," said Michel Tizon, head of the French chamber of commerce in Ivory Coast.

With every departing foreigner, critical Ivorian jobs are lost, he said. The 150 small and medium businesses his organization represents account for some 100,000 jobs, most of them Ivorian. Many of these businesses are closed for good.

Many of those at Monday's conference accused Ivorian security forces of participating in the looting — charges government officials deny.

"We have been attacked by the very people who are supposed to protect us," said Jean-Louis Billon, head of the Ivorian chamber of commerce.

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