



Former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo made an unannounced visit to Ivory Coast, arriving late Saturday for a private meeting with the country's defiant president in a final effort to get him to cede power after losing the recent election.

The Nigerian leader arrived at the luxury Pullman Hotel surrounded by bodyguards yesterday. He declined to comment and was whisked away to his suite on the hotel's 9th floor, where he spent around an hour before re-emerging to head to the presidential palace.

Incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo has remained in office, insisting that he won — a victory handed to him by the head of the constitutional council, a member of his inner circle, who cancelled votes from his opponent's strongholds.

The spokesman for Alassane Ouattara, who is considered to be the legitimate president-elect after results issued by the electoral commission, said that Obasanjo came to meet with Ouattara immediately after leaving the palace.

Ali Coulibaly, the spokesman, said that Obasanjo will see both leaders a second time on Sunday.

The international community has been unanimous in recognising Ouattara as the winner of the election because the results issued by the electoral body were certified by the United Nations in accordance with a 2005 peace deal. The UN sent over 900 observers who fanned out across the country to watch as the votes were cast and who later reviewed results poll station-by-poll station.

While Gbagbo continues to occupy the presidential palace, Ouattara has been forced to live in a hotel guarded by some 800 UN troops. Over Christmas, Gbagbo's troops sealed the exits to the hotel and refuse to let anyone in or out. Reporters and diplomats, as well as provisions, are brought in to him via a UN helicopter that lands on the hotel's lawn.

So far, four African presidents have come in to see Gbagbo, including most recently on Monday, but all attempts at mediation have failed. He is now being threatened by the 15-member regional bloc of West African countries known as ECOWAS, which has warned that if he does not step down he could face a military ouster.

A close adviser to Ouattara said that Obasanjo is coming to carry a message from the government of Nigeria, whose current president is the chair of ECOWAS. The bloc is scheduled to meet in coming days to decide whether or not to go ahead with a military intervention.

The adviser said that Obasanjo — a former military strongman — carries weight when matters of force are in question.