

August 10, 2003

THE ENDLESS ENDGAME

Why Can't This Leader Be Pushed From the Stage?

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia — For more than two months, pounded by rebel mortars, indicted for crimes against humanity, pressed to leave office by the American president and faced with a humanitarian disaster in his country, Charles G. Taylor, the Liberian president since 1997, has managed to hang on.

He has dangled promises, tried to plea-bargain his way out of the indictment and tried to depict himself as an African statesman unfairly set upon by the West. All the while, and as recently as a few days ago, he has continued to fly in arms for his followers, despite a United Nations arms embargo and the presence of West African peacekeepers at the airport.

Mr. Taylor has now said he will cede the presidency tomorrow, but no one knows whether he will actually do so, or whether he will leave Liberia, especially if American troops do not land in force.

"You're dealing with a very wily and resourceful character," said Peter Takirambudde, head of the Africa division at Human Rights Watch in New York.

True enough, but Mr. Taylor's staying power is more than an illustration of his personal qualities. The fact is that Africa at present suffers from a number of brutal leaders, and there is no local, regional, continental or international mechanism by which they can be efficiently removed.

In part, this is due to the reluctance of the United States to step into the bog of an African war that, in the estimation of Bush administration officials, has little to do with vital American interests.

"If the U.S. had put troops on the ground and said if he doesn't leave they would arrest him, I think that would have been the final incentive for him to go," said Salih Booker, executive director of Africa Action, a Washington-based advocacy group. "The international community has not been able to bring enough coercive power to force him out."

Within the Bush administration, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell has made the case for intervention. But Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, among others, has forcefully made the case for caution. Mr. Bush himself seems undecided. He has stationed more

than 2,000 Marines in Navy ships off Liberia's coast, but has given no indication when or whether they might be deployed.

Mr. Taylor has said he will cede the presidency to his vice president, Moses Blah, tomorrow at noon. But the rebel forces, who call themselves Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, are already rankled by Mr. Blah's candidacy, calling him too much of a Taylor crony. Whether fighting will resume at 12:01 p.m. is anyone's guess.

And if the fighting does begin anew, it is unclear that the 776 Nigerian peacekeepers who arrived last week will be able to stop it. The resumption of fighting will also make it far harder to persuade Bangladesh and Namibia, which have agreed to join the Nigerians in a United Nations peacekeeping force, to send their soldiers.

Even if those countries agree to assist the effort, it is not clear that these poorly paid, trained and equipped troops would amount to an effective and professional armed force. The last time West Africans came to keep the peace in Liberia, they were roundly accused of looting the country, of selling arms to one faction over another and of not stopping the infamous execution of President Samuel K. Doe. A warlord named Prince Johnson cut off his ears and let him bleed to death at the Free Port of Monrovia, then under the control of the peacekeepers.

This time, Washington has so far released \$10 million to feed and clothe the West African forces and allocated seven Marines to help with logistics.

"International peacekeeping has to be more than hiring soldiers from poor countries," Mr. Booker argued. "You can't do it all on the cheap, and drop it all off on the B team."

Liberia, in fact, offers a textbook study of both the need for, and the present limits of, African intervention in African wars, said Mr. Takirambudde.

"One cannot bank on the West to respond to situations of this nature," he said. "It's going to be sporadic. It's going to be slow in coming, as has been demonstrated in the case of Liberia, in the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the case of Burundi. One has to generate an intra-African capability to respond, hopefully with support from international sources. I think there's that realization."

But that capability does not yet exist, nor is it likely to anytime soon. Meanwhile, an estimated 30 percent of Monrovia's residents suffer from malnutrition and Mr. Taylor keeps his people and the world guessing.