

U.S. Won't 'Overextend' in Liberia

West African Force to Receive American Support

By Karl Vick
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MONROVIA, Liberia, July 9 -- A union of West African nations announced plans today to send 1,000 peacekeeping troops to Liberia with logistical and "some other support" from the United States.

A U.S. military team was in the West African nation assessing the possibility of a larger American deployment, but President Bush said today he would not "overextend" U.S. forces. In an appearance with South African President Thabo Mbeki in Pretoria, Bush repeated the assertion he made in Senegal on Tuesday that the United States would work "to enforce the cease-fire" between government and rebel forces in an undetermined way.

"My answer to people is that we won't overextend our troops, period," he said.

While expectant Liberians cheered the U.S. military team in Monrovia, the unexpected announcement from Accra, Ghana, by the Economic Community of West African States underscored the uncertainty of U.S. involvement.

Mbeki also suggested the U.S. role could be more limited than one of direct military aid. He said the United States could "lend support to those processes, processes of restoration of peace, making sure people don't starve, making sure that there's a restoration of democracy in Liberia."

Liberian President Charles Taylor, who was indicted for crimes against humanity by a U.N.-backed court in neighboring Sierra Leone, said on Sunday that he would step down and accept an offer of asylum in Nigeria, but did not say when. Taylor said his exit would fulfill Bush's most public condition for U.S. involvement.

The 32-member U.S. military team arrived in the Liberian capital on Monday to assess the humanitarian and security situation. Thousands of jubilant Liberians hailed its arrival as evidence that help was at hand.

"I'm very concerned about raising expectations," said a U.S. official in Monrovia tonight. "That's become a primary concern. You see the reaction driving down the street, they think we're the first part of an American advance."

"The crowds are not cheering for [West African] intervention supported by the United States," said one foreign analyst here, noting that Liberians recall with some bitterness the last West African peacekeeping operation in Liberia.

The Nigerians who dominated that 1990 deployment during the civil war that eventually brought Taylor to power were widely regarded as accepting his bribes and generally treating him

favorably. "First Taylor attacked them, then he manipulated them to his own advantage," the analyst said.

U.S. and Liberian officials made clear that the U.S. deployment is far from certain.

"There seem to be two schools of thought," said Liberian Defense Minister Daniel Chea, shortly after meeting with leaders of the U.S. team on Tuesday. One option, he said, would bring U.S. troops to Liberia as the backbone of a multinational force that eventually would be taken over by forces from other nations.

The other is to give a West African force financial and logistical support, Chea said, adding, "They'll both be fine."

Today's announcement from Ghana that the regional bloc would send a thousand troops in two weeks was reported by the Reuters news agency and the Associated Press. The statement included no details, however, and was greeted with skepticism grounded in the union's normally sluggish pace of operations.

Liberians, for instance, are still awaiting the arrival of a West African military team that was to arrive in the country weeks ago to map the front lines. Meanwhile, Liberians continued to shower adulation on the U.S. team. When the specialists visited a military airfield in the capital this morning, hundreds of civilians swarmed through a downpour, chanting, "We want peace!"

The reception was milder during a visit to Monrovia's deep-water port, which rebels held for two days late last month. Now back in government hands, it served to underscore the dilapidated state of Liberia's economy. Three ships stood quay side: a cargo vessel being loaded with rubber, the ruins of another cargo ship that capsized two years ago while being improperly unloaded, and a third vessel, the Aqua Sierra, its crew abandoned by its owners four months ago.

"Before George W. Bush speaks, we got problems," said Jamie Toe, a seaman. "But when George W. Bush speaks, our problems are gone."