Rebels lift siege of Liberia's starving capital, U.S. Marines land

Glenn McKenzie, The Associated Press, 08/14/03

Rebels lifted their two-month siege of Liberia's starving capital Thursday, and dozens more U.S. troops came ashore, significantly increasing the American presence in support of West African peacekeepers. With a handshake between Brig. Gen. Festus Okonkwo of Nigeria and rebel leaders on the middle of a front-line bridge, insurgents ended an offensive that had brought down President Charles Taylor, killed well over 1,000 civilians, and left hundreds of thousands more trapped and starving.

Dancing, singing and cheering, tens of thousands of residents and refugees massed on both sides of the New Bridge as rebels withdrew. "Thank you! Thank you, America!" many cried. U.S. fighter jets and helicopters swept back and forth above, drawing roars from the crowds. Blocked by West African peace troops on the bridge trying to control the chaos, many jumped into the swamp water below and swam across. After the handover, some U.S. Marines joined West African peacekeepers as they sped off to secure Monrovia's port - crucial for opening the way for food and other aid, particularly for the hundreds of thousands in the government-held part of the city who have had little more than leaves to eat for days.

The retreat of the rebels and the reuniting of the city follow Monday's resignation and departure of Taylor, under pressure from rebels and from U.S. and West African leaders hoping to end 14 years of conflict. As rebels pulled out, U.S. military helicopters touched down at Liberia's main airport, ferrying in what was to be 200 Marines and other forces for a stepped-up American military presence here. Clutching M-16s, Marines leapt out in flak vests, helmets and jungle green camouflage.

The United States on Wednesday had promised a 150-member "quick reaction" force for Liberia, in support of a steadily building West African-led force here. Another 50 new arrivals are expected to help with the logistics of getting aid flowing again to Liberia's cut-off capital. "We are just here to help the people," U.S. Sgt. Michael Hobbs said minutes after arriving. "This operation today is going to be an important one," said U.S. Ambassador John Blaney, who traveled to the airport to greet the new arrivals. "You are going to see American boots on the ground, and a firm commitment to uphold humanitarian concerns in this country."

The United States previously had only about a dozen American forces in Liberia, serving as liaisons with the 10-day-old West African peace mission. Washington has stressed that the U.S. role would be as back-up to African peace troops, concerned primarily with getting in humanitarian supplies, and that it did not intend the Americans to take part in combat. For Liberians, sight of the American helicopters and troops was enough. "I am so happy. All these years we've been praying for America to come," said Randolph Eggley, a 51-year-old worker at the airport. "Today maybe peace will begin."

Soon after the initial peacekeeper deployment to Monrovia's port, more Marines deployed to the facility by helicopter, by amphibious landing craft and by road. At least 40 worked to seal off one side of the port, unrolling barbed wire and pounding stakes for a barrier. Peacekeepers
sought to secure the site and prepare it for at least one aid ship waiting off Liberia with three tons of food. Looting, which built to a frenzy by thousands in the last days before the handover, left aid and commercial warehouses empty. Piles of grain and computers lying on the ground marked the pillaging.

Pacts negotiated by West African military leaders and Blaney, the U.S. ambassador, obligate the rebels to pull back to the Po River, about six miles outside Monrovia. A second rebel group, based in the south, pledged to pull back to the St. John's River outside the southern city of Buchanan, Blaney said Thursday. Firing into the air, rebels bounced out of shelled, bullet-riddled Monrovia in pickup trucks, still clutching their AK-47s and rocket launchers and stereos, sacks of food aid and other loot stolen in the city.

While no rebels could be seen at the port, a few remained on the streets. Crowds that had been kept inside for weeks under the rebels poured out, both celebrating and setting up market stalls in anticipation of the hungry crowds about to pour across from the government-held side. West African peace troops unrolled barbed wire to hold back the throngs on the government side. West African nations have been landing peace troops since Aug. 4, keeping them at a temporary base at the airport until the force reached sufficient strength to deploy in the capital. The Atlantic Ocean-side city of more than 1 million crowded now with hundreds of thousands of refugees.

About 800 West African peacekeepers, mostly Nigerian soldiers, have landed so far. A second Nigerian battalion started flying out of a base in northern Nigeria on Thursday. Leaders of Liberia's post-Taylor government said they welcomed the U.S. deployment. "It's long-awaited and we thank God it's been realized," said Lewis Brown, the foreign minister. "It leads one to believe we might be closer to the end." Brown spoke at the airport, accompanying new President Moses Blah to Ghana and ongoing peace talks there. Mediators have talked of a Sunday signing ceremony for a peace accord, still being negotiated. West African leaders say Blah is to hand over power in October to a transitional government that will lead Liberia to new elections. Rebels insist Blah is only a stand-in for Taylor, and want him out sooner.