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Bush Seems to Favor Sending a Modest Force to Liberia

By RICHARD W. STEVENSON

WASHINGTON, July 14 — President Bush today gave his strongest indication yet that he would send a small force of American troops into Liberia to help enforce the cease-fire there. But he said that he was waiting for further information from military teams in the region before deciding, and that the peacekeeping operation would ultimately be taken over by the United Nations.

After meeting at the White House with the secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, Mr. Bush said the United States would help West African countries bring peace to Liberia, which has been racked by fighting between rebels and troops loyal to the government of President Charles Taylor.

Mr. Bush, who spent last week in Africa, said any American military involvement would be limited in scope and duration and would be conditional on Mr. Taylor's stepping aside.

He said that if he sent in American troops it would be to support those coming from other African countries under the umbrella of the Economic Community of West African States, which is known as Ecowas.

His remarks were hedged but seemed to indicate that his remaining decisions were less about whether American troops would be involved than about how they would be deployed and in what numbers.

"What I'm telling you is that we want to help Ecowas," Mr. Bush said in response to questions from reporters. "It may require troops, but we don't know how many yet. And therefore it's hard for me to make a determination until I've seen all the facts."

He said American military teams in Africa were "assessing Ecowas strength — how soon, how quick, what kinds of troops, who they are — to determine what is necessary from our side to fulfill the commitment I have made that we will help maintain the cease-fire," Mr. Bush said.

Pentagon officials have been considering a variety of options, including limiting the American participation to logistics, command and communications support. Among many in Liberia, the presence of even the assessment team in the capital, Monrovia, has raised hopes that the United States will finally bring peace after years of fighting.

Mr. Annan, who has been pressing the United States to take a military role in stabilizing Liberia, said he was pleased with what he heard.

"I'm satisfied with the discussions we've had and the approach the U.S. government is taking," Mr. Annan said. "And of course there is an assessment team in West Africa. But we have more or less agreed to a general approach on the Liberian issue, and I'm very pleased with that."

Mr. Annan, who was in Africa last week discussing the issue, said his understanding was that the West African nations would send 1,000 to 2,500 troops to Liberia. He said Mr. Taylor would then leave Liberia, as Mr. Bush has been urging him to do, at which point more peacekeeping troops, perhaps including some from the United States, would arrive. Then, he said, the United Nations would take over the peacekeeping operation and American forces would leave.

One American assessment team is in Liberia and another is working with the countries of Ecowas on what kinds of forces they intend to contribute.

"I think everybody understands that any commitment we had would be limited in size and limited in tenure," Mr. Bush said. "Our job would be to facilitate an Ecowas presence, which would then be converted into a U.N. peacekeeping mission."

The fighting in Liberia has led to widespread bloodshed, a growing refugee crisis and the threat of the conflict spreading.

Mr. Taylor has agreed to a cease-fire plan under which he would step down as president and leave the country, probably for Nigeria. But it is unclear whether he will follow through on the agreement, especially because he faces war-crimes charges lodged by a United Nations-backed tribunal in neighboring Sierra Leone.

While the State Department has been pressing for a vigorous response from the United States to Liberia's problem, the Pentagon has been skeptical, reflecting a long-held view within the military that American forces should not be put at risk for peacekeeping operations in which there is no compelling national security interest for the United States.

From the Pentagon's perspective, the loss of 18 American soldiers in Somalia during a peacekeeping mission in 1993 still stands as a lesson in the perils of inserting the United States into African conflicts. In an indication of how sensitive the Pentagon remains to the safety of American military personnel in the region, it said today that it had moved four aircraft and about 100 troops into Sierra Leone and Senegal in case the assessment team in Monrovia needs to be evacuated.