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Liberian Archbishop Calls for U.N. to Send More Troops

By TIM WEINER

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 17 — The Roman Catholic archbishop, his congregants singing "Amazing Grace" and "We Shall Overcome," called here today for the United Nations to send thousands of additional troops to help save Liberia from those who want to rule it.

In a service mixing West African, American and Roman Catholic traditions, Archbishop Michael Kpakala Francis, 67, denounced Liberia's past leaders and pretenders to power, and warned against the warring factions now haggling over an interim government. "Those who came to kill us want to rule us," he said.

"They came to 'liberate' us and kill us and destroy us," Archbishop Francis said from the pulpit at Sacred Heart Cathedral. "They have destroyed a whole country, and now they say they love us."

The cathedral was jampacked with joyous congregants, many of whom had been too terrorized to come to church for 10 consecutive Sundays before.

Afterward, in an interview, Archbishop Francis said the United Nations should send up to 15,000 troops to Liberia to serve as "part of the solution for the next two years."

"The immediate problem is security," he said, calling for the rebel factions and government militias to be disarmed and dissolved.

With security from fear, he said, relief can flow, and the reconstruction of the ruined nation can begin. "Then," he said, "we can have a government."

The archbishop is perceived in Liberia as a powerful moral and political force; the Catholic Church runs a significant number of the nation's schools and social services, along with Radio Veritas, knocked off the air by missiles in recent fighting but normally a source of apolitical information for Liberians.

Archbishop Francis, who said he had lost 17 close relatives to Liberia's civil conflicts, was also seen as perhaps the only man in the nation who was feared by Charles G. Taylor, the former president.

Mr. Taylor, a former warlord, stepped down last week, leaving for exile in Nigeria and turning over his widely despised government and militias to Vice President Moses Blah. Two armed rebel groups fiercely fought the former government; uncounted civilians died

in the crossfire from early June onward. Perhaps 250,000 have died in a nation of 3 million since Mr. Taylor began fighting his way to power 14 years ago.

Representatives of the government and the rebels continued a war of words today at peace talks in Ghana, whose foreign minister advised them to reach a formal agreement today or risk losing the chance of holding top posts in any interim Liberian government.

In Monrovia, roughly 1,000 Nigerian-led West African peacekeeping troops tried to extend control from the city to the nearby countryside, as 200 United States marines who arrived here Thursday continued to support the peacekeeping.

The marines, whose deployment has been greeted here with almost unqualified joy and relief, had come in no small part at the urging of Liberians like Archbishop Francis.

At the height of the recent fighting in late July, he left Liberia, returning only three days ago, he said. In the interim, he traveled to Washington, where he went to the White House, Congress and the State Department, urging Americans to consider "the historical relationship, the strategic relationship and a moral imperative" to help Liberia live by sending American troops to help stop the fighting.

Today, throughout this city ravaged by war and privation, churches were filled with people praying for peace.

At the cathedral, nearly 1,000 Monroviaans who had been trapped in the fighting came to worship and sing. A choir sang hymns in three West African languages, backed by powerful traditional drumming, and the parishioners, most dressed in Sunday finery, a few in plainspun clothes, rocked the building with contrapuntal clapping.

Then came a reminder of the nation's founding by freed slaves from the United States in 1847.

In mid-sermon, prompted by the archbishop, the congregation broke into "Amazing Grace," the traditional Baptist hymn and an unofficial anthem in the United States. The scene felt as American as Alabama.

The Roman Catholic eucharist — the representation in wafer and wine of the body and blood of Christ — were framed by the archbishop's references to the murderous months of June, July and early August in Monrovia.

The men and militias that now seek political power were "butchered people" back then; they were "trying to destroy us and, alas, have destroyed some of our brothers and sisters and loved ones," Archbishop Francis said. "They want to kill us in the street as if we were animals."

"We've gone through hell," he said. "Many of our friends have perished."

Yet, he said, "at the end of the tunnel, I see a bright light — and we shall overcome." The congregants instantly burst into that soaring theme of the American civil rights movement.

As the song died down to its last word, "someday," the archbishop said: "Rest assured, that day is coming. No one can frustrate us forever."

"Pray for our country, that our country, so beautiful in the past, can come back, and be better," he said. "Let Liberia truly be a land of the free."

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