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Gunfire Sends Liberian Civilians Fleeing to Capital

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 17 — With United Nations officials growing increasingly frustrated over delays in sending West African soldiers to enforce a fragile cease-fire in this country, a familiar tableau of terror emerged late this afternoon: the sound of mortar fire on Monrovia's northern outskirts sent weary civilians marching swiftly toward the city, mattresses and clothes piled on their heads.

Government officials told reporters that rebels had begun advancing toward the capital and had attacked a government army base about 12 miles north of here. Independent verification of the report was impossible, and rebels denied there was any fighting.

Nevertheless, the exodus of villagers from the area renewed fears of fresh fighting between warring factions, with no peacekeepers in sight.

West African countries have pledged to send between 1,000 and 1,500 soldiers but have yet to work out their entry and exit plans. In an interview this afternoon, Gen. Cheick Diarra, deputy executive secretary for the Economic Community of West African States, or Ecowas, said an assessment team of 10 military officials was scheduled to arrive here on Friday to lay the groundwork for deployment, which would begin in 10 to 15 days.

Officials of the West African organization have been meeting with an American military team this week in Ghana, which currently holds the group's rotating chairmanship, to discuss how Washington can support their efforts. The Bush administration has not yet said whether it would dispatch American soldiers to this ravaged country.

The Bush administration has repeatedly said it would not send American soldiers to this country so long as Charles Taylor, the Liberian president, is in power.

Mr. Taylor has said he will not step aside until peacekeepers arrive.

"The idea is to separate the warring parties and create a security zone around Monrovia," General Diarra said, speaking from the Ghanaian capital, Accra.

Speaking to reporters at the United Nations today, the recently named special representative to Liberia, Jacques Klein, called on the West African bloc to mobilize "very, very quickly." Delay, he said, "means no American decision, means no American commitment, means I can't send my assessment team there, which means I can't deploy the U.N. peacekeeping mission that we desperately need."

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