

July 19, 2003

Liberians Grow Impatient With Waiting for Help

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 18 — The thousands who have set up camp inside an American Embassy-owned compound here are hungry, sick, and tired of running. Today, with fresh fighting just six miles north of the city, they are also increasingly tired of waiting.

The world has promised to help them, they say. Even the Americans, whom they see as their closest kin, have said they will do something. But no one, not American soldiers nor even West Africans who have offered to come first, show any signs of getting here soon. An assessment team was to arrive this afternoon on behalf of the Economic Community of West African States, known as Ecowas, but it postponed its visit until next week.

"It's taking too long," said Jefferson Innis, 29, whose home is now a makeshift tent inside Greystone, the embassy storage yard. Greystone is now home to 9,000 to 13,000 destitute Liberians, with newcomers trickling in over the last 24 hours as fighting approached Monrovia once again.

"It's easy for the Americans to put this under control," said Leo Massequoi, 20. "The situation gets worse every day. You should ask Ecowas, 'What's taking so long?'"

"We're in a very dangerous period here, which needs to be shortened very quickly," said Magnus Wolfe-Jackson, the country director for Merlin, the British aid agency. "This purgatory we're living in, we're neither here nor there. It's a period when anything can happen."

Clashes between government and rebel forces continued for the second day today, reaching closer to the capital and sending the handful of civilians still on the outskirts once again to pack up and flee. Both government forces and insurgents accused each other of having attacked. Government officials said the town of Po River, six miles north of Monrovia, had fallen to the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy. The rebels, meanwhile, threatened to advance toward the capital if government soldiers kept up their attacks.

If the rebels carry out the threat, it will be their third attack in six weeks. Since the last two attacks, more than 150,000 people have crowded inside virtually every empty building in the capital, which has become a petri dish of cholera and malaria, hardly a surprise, because there's one toilet for every 2,000 people.

The sound of shelling on Thursday drove a steady trickle of civilians from their homes in the Irongate area north of Monrovia.

American involvement, if any, is likely to be limited to providing logistical support to West Africans.

Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company