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In the Mud, Liberia's Gentlest Rebels Pray for Peace

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, June 30 — In a part of the world where one quickly becomes inured to the sight of scrawny, red-eyed, gun-toting teenage boys, there was an astonishing sight today along this capital's main road.

In an empty field, in a heavy downpour in the middle of the rainy season in one of the world's wettest countries, was a small group of women, nearly all dressed in white, throwing their arms to the sky and dancing and singing, drenched from head to toe, calling to God to bring an end to war.

The women sang, "Thank you, Jehovah, God, thank you, for you have spared my life to see this day."

These are Liberia's peaceniks, a radical, some would say delusional, breed, who for the last three months have been bent on praying on the side of the road, in sun and rain, every single day, to bring an end to war.

"We are tired, we are tired, we are tired of suffering," declared Louise M. Tucolon, 42. "So we come in the rain, we come in the sun to pray to our God. We know he will not come down. But he will pass through people to help us."

Their prayers are practical. They want an international peacekeeping force to come now and stop the killings. "Tell our international brothers to come quickly," Ms. Tucolon said. "Even if right now, as I am speaking, if they could hear us, and come right now, right now, we would be happy."

Last week, as government and rebel forces raged through town for two and a half days, killing, wounding and scattering tens of thousands of people, the Women in Peacebuilding Network, as they are called, were forced to hole up indoors.

But a tenuous cease-fire has held since Friday morning, and by 8 this morning, the first of the women had come back to this barren field. The battering rain, not to mention the prospect of another bout of fighting, seemed to matter little. Naturally, today their numbers were a fraction of those who have been gathering each morning. But the hardiest showed up. One woman was gang-raped by seven men. The son of another woman was shot in the leg as he tried to flee bullets.

"We want this oppression of women to stop in our country," Ms. Tucolon went on. "What is going on now, this raping, this abduction of our children, these are the reasons we are on the street."

For the past 20 years, Liberia has been embroiled in one war after another. The latest involves two rebel factions seeking to oust President Charles Taylor. In the last month alone, the rebels have made two violent attempts to take the capital, and in recent days calls have grown louder for an international force to be led by the United States, including an appeal from the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan.

The women on this field, church ladies joined by their Muslim sisters, have taken their vigils to Mr. Taylor's office and to the gates of the Guinean and American Embassies; Guinea, an American ally, is accused of supporting one rebel faction.

This morning, as the rain kept pouring, a few more of them trudged through the mud and joined in. With knees bent and palms upturned, they stamped one foot lightly, then the other, in a soft dance in the mud. Their wet skirts clung to their skin. Their toes squished in the wet sand. Occasionally a car honked.

Leading them in song was a woman dressed in brown, one of her arms severed at the elbow from a car accident.

She called, "Liberian mothers thank you."

They called back, "Thank you, Jehovah, God, thank you."

She called, "Thank you for intervention."

They called back, "Thank you, Jehovah, God, thank you."

Then they all sang "We Shall Overcome."

U.S. Considering Action in Liberia

WASHINGTON, June 30 — Administration officials said today that they were considering whether to evacuate Americans from Monrovia and whether to take part in any international peacekeeping operation in Liberia.

At a news conference, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said President Bush had not made a decision about how to proceed.

A senior military official said a National Security Council meeting was scheduled for Tuesday to discuss Liberia. Earlier this month, more than 2,000 marines aboard the amphibious assault ship

Kearsarge were off the Liberian coast to prepare for the possible evacuation of Americans, but the Kearsarge has returned to the United States and has not been replaced.

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