

Liberian Forces Push Back Rebel Thrust Into Capital

By Karl Vick
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MONROVIA, Liberia, July 20 -- Militias loyal to Liberian President Charles Taylor held off a rebel assault on Monrovia today, pushing the invaders back from the two main bridges into the capital during a day of sporadic but fierce fighting.

Government forces, who had retreated steadily before a rebel advance Saturday, made the most of the cover provided by the concrete landscape of Monrovia's mildewed downtown, which overlooks the strategic bridges. Militia fighters in shorts and T-shirts charged down the spans repeatedly today, firing automatic rifles toward a bank of warehouses until the rebels fell back in early afternoon.

The rebels' retreat may have been tactical, however, as they appeared intent on entering the city by another route.

The rebel force, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, or LURD, is trying to remove Taylor, who has been indicted by a U.N.-backed court for war crimes related to interventions in neighboring countries. Taylor has promised to step down, but not before a peacekeeping force arrives from other African states, and perhaps from the United States. But on Saturday the Liberian president vowed to "fight to the last man" for the capital.

President Bush has promised U.S. involvement in a "stabilization force" for the country but has not said whether that means sending combat troops. Blaming the delay of peacekeepers' arrival for the fighting, Taylor declared, "I say to the United States, blood is also on your hands."

At least 120 civilians have been wounded in two days of fighting, according to aid agencies operating medical facilities in just one area of town. Most of the injured had shrapnel wounds from mortar rounds that had fallen on the city.

No organization claimed to know the death toll, though hundreds of people were killed in Monrovia during two rebel offensives last month.

Mortar rounds rained for part of a second day onto the diplomatic neighborhood dominated by the sprawling U.S. Embassy, which Liberians continue to regard as a refuge. Thousands have found shelter in the embassy's former residential compound, despite its vulnerability to shelling, which killed 21 people there during an attack last month.

Only foreign nationals and international television crews were allowed refuge in the nearby embassy compound itself. Just outside, a Liberian guard at the embassy was shot and wounded, apparently by a stray bullet.

U.S. Marines stood guard on roofs inside the compound. A 32-member U.S. military team that arrived two weeks ago to report on the situation here was hunkered down behind the embassy's reinforced concrete walls.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Philip T. Reeker said the fighting "will have dire consequences" for Liberia and urged the warring parties to support regional peace efforts.

Monrovia, which in years of civil wars has proved notoriously difficult for rebels to take, is built on a peninsula defined by lagoons and the Atlantic Ocean. Its north-facing flank is abutted by Bushrod Island, named for a nephew of George Washington who played a leading role in creating this republic settled for freed American slaves.

The bridges leading from Bushrod directly into downtown present the most direct access to the capital for any force attacking from the north, as LURD did Saturday. But, as the rebels learned, that approach also leaves attackers exposed to defensive fire from the city center.

When part of the rebel force at the bridge fell back, another group of rebels pushed to the east, witnesses said. The second rebel force fought its way down a highway that eventually circles around to the base of the peninsula, which could be cut off from the south. If the rebels are not halted, Taylor and his forces will be bottled up.

Liberian Defense Minister Daniel Chea claimed tonight that government militias had halted LURD's sprint and were preparing to push them back.

Each side accused the other of starting the fighting. LURD said Taylor tried to move into rebel territory to bury his mother, who died last month, in her home village.

Chea denied this, but was also agitated by rumors that she had been laid to rest over the weekend at Taylor's Monrovia residence.

"That's the mother of the president," the defense minister said. "We are going to push LURD from out of Monrovia and we are going to bury the president's mother in grand style, I'll tell you that."