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Liberians Seek Cover as Forces Vie for Capital

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 20 — Mortar thuds and machine-gun crackle broke out today in several pockets here in this capital, the government's last stronghold.

Throughout the day, government and rebel forces swung back and forth for control, all the while driving thousands more civilians into foul encampments of displaced people.

Reports from witnesses in several neighborhoods suggested that the rebel army, whose only stated goal is to oust President Charles G. Taylor, tried first to come into the city's center from the north, then from the east. The day's fighting wounded dozens of civilians, swelled the temporary camps to bursting and risked a breakout of disease. Fighting continued late this evening.

As Liberia descended further into chaos, peacekeepers promised by other West African countries had yet to arrive. President Bush, who has offered assistance to those peacekeepers, said last week that he was considering sending in American troops for a mission of limited scope and duration, provided that Mr. Taylor stepped aside. Liberia, which has historic links to the United States, has been unstable for many years.

[In Washington, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld ordered 41 additional troops to the United States Embassy in Monrovia, according to a news release issued by the Pentagon on Sunday. The troops, based in Rota, Spain, will join a security force that is already stationed at the embassy. Pentagon officials were not available to further comment on the deployment.]

"We don't see any sign of the fighting stopping," said Prince Jallabah, stranded in his apartment on one side of a bridge leading to the city center. Bursts of gunfire and shelling sent other people dashing through the streets for cover.

Stray bullets punctured the windows of a Roman Catholic school compound that now houses hundreds of displaced Monroviaans. "One every half hour," Sister Barbara Brilliant, an American nun who runs the school, said this evening. "That's why we are on the floor."

By evening, rebels appeared in control of the port, while the government held the airport, on the city's outskirts. Downtown remained in government hands, and this afternoon, forces loyal to Mr. Taylor took advantage of that by going on a looting spree. Witnesses described armed men, as well as civilians, grabbing prizes: one had a kerosene stove, others had shoes and toys.

Bizarrely, a statement by the rebel group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, said it had no intention of capturing Monrovia. Later, a rebel figure, Kabineh Janeh, said by

telephone from Ghana, where both sides said they remained in peace talks, that the advance was simply to stop assaults on rebel positions outside the city. "We are asking our troops to exercise restraint," Mr. Janeh added. "We do not wish to take over Monrovia."

Mr. Taylor, elected in 1997 after waging a guerrilla insurgency lasting eight years, promised to step aside but has refused to leave until peacekeepers arrive. Mr. Taylor, widely denounced for worsening the region's troubles, has been accused of providing aid to rebels in Sierra Leone in exchange for diamonds.

The violence made most of the city impassable today. Wounded civilians, most carried in wheelbarrows and on people's backs, trickled into makeshift clinics run by international aid agencies in the southernmost point of the city; by the end of the day, roughly 220 had been treated for bullet and shrapnel wounds.

The already jam-packed, unhealthy shantytowns of people displaced by the fighting swelled once again, and a dwindling water supply, combined with a dearth of toilets, threatened to send cholera spinning out of control. "We've got drugs, we've got staff, but if we can't get water in here, it will get really nasty," said Magnus Wolfe Murray, country manager for Merlin, the agency that runs health clinics and builds toilets at Greystone, a jammed compound owned by the United States Embassy and situated across from the chancery.

At Greystone, the population doubled in the last day to more than 20,000, the agency estimates. There was no tarpaulin left to cover the bamboo frame tents wedged into the field. Stray bullets entered a tent for cholera patients, as well as the embassy grounds across the street.

The rebel assault, the third in six weeks, was described by residents and aid workers as the fiercest and most sustained of the three.

In a statement, the mediator of Liberian peace talks, a former Nigerian military head of state, Abdulsalami Abubakar, called for an end to the fighting. "The international community will not tolerate power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means," he said.

Mr. Taylor's information minister, Reginald Goodridge, accused the insurgents of thwarting peace talks.

West African countries that have promised to deploy troops first have not said when they will come.