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Enraged Liberians Call for U.S. Help as Rebels Attack

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 21 — United States marines arrived by helicopter this morning to protect the American Embassy and help evacuate foreigners from the capital as it fell under the heaviest shelling to date. Hundreds of enraged Liberians, in a desperate offering before the country they call their "big brother," laid the mutilated bodies of their loved ones by the embassy's shuttered black steel gate.

Embassy guards watched from behind fortified, glass-walled posts as the Liberians, many from a compound across the street that is owned by the embassy, howled, held their heads in their hands and clasped their noses as they put down 18 bodies, already smelling in the steamy heat. At least one child had had his head blown off. Others were blasted beyond recognition. Blood stained the asphalt.

By day's end, reports from hospitals and clinics suggested that roughly 90 Liberians had been killed and more than 360 had been wounded.

The fighting today, the third day of the third rebel attack in six weeks, was the fiercest so far in this capital, named after an American president, James Monroe. The crowd that gathered before the embassy — indeed, most Liberians on the streets today — angrily blamed Americans, who founded the republic 150 years ago, saying they were dithering on how to help restore peace to this ravaged country.

[In Washington, Bush administration officials rejected appeals by the United Nations secretary general and West African nations to take the lead in deploying a peacekeeping force to Liberia. But the Pentagon has moved an amphibious landing force of 4,500 sailors and marines closer to Liberia as a precaution.]

Three weeks have passed since President Bush called on the Liberian president, Charles Taylor, to step aside, and pledged American assistance in restoring security. But there has been no definitive word here on how or when.

"Oh God, oh God, what do we do now?" wailed one woman in front of the entrance to the embassy. "We can't die for nothing."

"I'm begging to you," another woman screamed to the sky. "We're dying here." A man yelled, "Why can't the Americans come in to rescue us?"

The rebel army, called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, has said its goal is to oust Mr. Taylor, a former rebel leader himself. Mr. Taylor, accused by a tribunal created by the

United Nations and Sierra Leone of crimes against humanity in connection with the war in Sierra Leone, has said he will not step down until peacekeepers arrive.

Twenty-one marines, part of the Fleet Anti-Terrorist Security Team, arrived on three helicopters this morning. The helicopters left later for Sierra Leone, carrying 25 Americans and other foreigners who requested evacuation from the city, including some United Nations officials and relief workers leaving behind clinics filled with the wounded.

"We can't move around; we can't do any work," said Eleanor Monbiot, relief coordinator for World Vision, an aid agency, as she boarded one of the helicopters.

Government militias rode through downtown today in two of World Vision's vehicles, which had apparently been stolen.

The three helicopters were supposed to return this afternoon, to bring 20 more marines and take away other foreigners, but the aircraft did not come.

Mortar rounds began pounding the neighborhood of the embassy just before 12:30 this afternoon. One shell landed on the embassy grounds, wounding two. Other shells dropped inside the encampments of displaced people and around a hotel housing several Western journalists. Others fell helter-skelter all afternoon in the ocean and on the roads.

Shortly before 1 p.m., a boy, scampering down a dirt path with a plastic shopping bag full of potato greens, was killed when a mortar round fell next to him; a school card identified him as Lasana Harding, a seventh grader.

One man, his right leg mutilated by the same explosion, was ferried to the nearest clinic on a woven nylon mat.

For the next several hours, men and women streamed down a seaside avenue toward two clinics run by the aid agency Doctors Without Borders. A small boy wailed as he ran, holding a baby on his back. Two men ran, holding their bleeding sides, and a woman carried a bleeding child in her arms.

At least 25 people were killed when mortar rounds fell into the Grey-stone compound, a storage yard that now houses more than 20,000 Liberians seeking shelter from the latest assaults. Among the wounded were two Liberian guards employed by the American Embassy.

It was impossible to determine today which parts of the city were in rebel hands. Fighting resumed for control of two bridges leading into the city center. Government militias fired rocket-propelled grenades across one bridge and sprayed the air with heavy machine guns. At one point, they displayed the head of a man they called a rebel soldier.

Early in the afternoon, a mortar round fell on government forces in what is usually a crowded market downtown. An American journalist for Newsweek suffered minor injuries during that explosion and was in stable condition tonight.

In the middle of it all, one soldier, loading bullets, declared: "I don't know why we're fighting. It's just Liberians fighting Liberians."

The American pledges of help to stabilize Liberia came as little solace today to the crowds that gathered across the street from the embassy when they heard the roar of the helicopters through the rain. "Is it the peacekeeping force?" Mark Williams, a father of three, wondered hopefully.

When he learned why the marines had landed, he dropped his eyes to the ground. "It's good to protect their installations, but we ourselves are feeling the heat, too," he said.

Lewis Saywon, whose family is still behind rebel lines, was enraged. "Helicopters always dropping, but each time what are they doing?" he snapped.

Alexander Lake, 23, who is living in a United Nations building, said: "We think America is a big brother. What do they think of us now? They all want us to die here?"

Less than an hour later the shelling began, and Liberians began dying again.

One young man held up a torn sheet of cardboard, his fury scrawled with a black marker. "G. Bush Killer Liberia," it said.