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Nigeria Readies Peace Force for Liberia; Battles Go On

By FELICITY BARRINGER

UNITED NATIONS, July 23 — With Liberians in their besieged capital running out of food and water, and rebel forces breaching key defensive lines, a regional West African group announced today in Senegal that it could send as many as 1,300 Nigerian peacekeeping troops to Liberia within two weeks.

The decision, which came after intense lobbying by the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, means a 774-member battalion will be poised to move to the capital, Monrovia, from peacekeeping duties in Sierra Leone as early as next week, if logistical and financial hurdles can be overcome. Nigeria has also offered a second battalion, of 650 men.

The arrival of a Nigerian vanguard could begin a sequence of events that, United Nations officials hope, would end with the departure of President Charles G. Taylor and a firm United States commitment of peacekeeping troops.

But although the State Department has contracted to provide logistical support for a military force in Liberia, and President Bush has repeatedly said the United States would support a peacekeeping mission, Washington has not committed to sending troops.

Today's announcement in Dakar, Senegal, by a spokesman for the Economic Community of West African States, or Ecowas, cleared the way for Washington to determine what kind of support it will provide, officials said. The administration has insisted that Ecowas take the lead.

"It's important that the West Africans are moving forward to try to help Liberia," said Richard A. Boucher, the State Department spokesman. "It's important that we, the United Nations and others are there to coordinate with them and help support them."

The administration could announce its plans as early as Thursday, when it will meet with Ecowas leaders and the commanders of the Nigerian battalions, he added.

After so much discussion on the issue, Mr. Boucher anticipated the key question today and posed it to himself: "Why don't we just ask outright: 'So the president's going to decide tomorrow on U.S. troops, right?' And the answer is, 'I don't know, not necessarily.'"

He added, "The president will decide at the appropriate time exactly how the U.S. will support this, whether it's equipment, supplies, logistics, communication or troops."

United Nations officials said today that negotiations on a multilateral force had bogged down over who would send the troops, who would pay for them and who would transport them.

Jacques Klein, the secretary general's new special envoy to Liberia, said today that on Friday, United Nations officials had decided that a Nigerian battalion due to be rotated out of Sierra Leone could be transferred to Monrovia, perhaps using the Ukrainian transport helicopters that serve the Sierra Leone force.

The current plan, a United Nations official said earlier this week, called for the Nigerian deployment to be followed by American troops, perhaps as many as 2,000. Mr. Klein said today that the State Department had signed a \$10 million contract with a California company, PAE Government Services Inc., to provide logistical support.

But one of Washington's stated goals — an internationally recognized peace accord — has yet to be announced by negotiators, who are meeting in Accra, Ghana.

"Getting the troops there won't do anything unless they can broker some sort of political agreement to have a replacement for Taylor for the short or medium term," one State Department official said today.

New Doubts on Taylor

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 23 — The question of when and whether President Charles G. Taylor will leave Liberia — an important step in ending hostilities and paving the way for peacekeepers — grew murky again today when his spokesman, Vaanii Passewe, said the latest assault by rebels and "obstruction" by the international community had forced Mr. Taylor to reconsider.

Mr. Taylor has been promising for several weeks to leave. His vacillation makes it impossible to gauge what he really means.

In his most recent pledge, made in an interview on Tuesday night, Mr. Taylor said that he intended to leave within 10 days, and that he would make that intention public at a prayer rally on Saturday with a friend, the Rev. K. A. Paul, an American evangelist.

This morning Mr. Taylor's spokesman, Mr. Passewe, seemed to step back from that declaration, saying, "It's not sacrosanct."

In the past Mr. Taylor has said he would leave only after peacekeepers arrived. He has also said he would reserve the right to return to politics.

Today Mr. Passewe said the rebel attacks that began Saturday, the third in six weeks, rendered Mr. Taylor's promised exit meaningless.

It was impossible to tell by the actions of the government and its rank and file fighters whether Mr. Taylor was getting ready to quit or was planning to stay. Government militias went on looting sprees on their side of town, and there were reports of looting in rebel-held areas.

Liberian customs agents demanded thousands of dollars before food and other emergency aid could get out of the airport, according to a United Nations official.

Several aid workers and foreign journalists left the city today, many of them flying to neighboring Sierra Leone in United States military helicopters.

The same helicopters brought in the rest of a contingent of United States marines who began deploying earlier this week to protect the American Embassy. Their arrival had been delayed because of blistering rebel attacks on Monrovia on Monday.

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