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Rebels in Liberia Attack Capital; Shell Refugees in U.S. Annex

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, June 25 — Fighting between government and rebel factions for control of Monrovia, the Liberian capital, erupted today, and people ran frantically through the streets in search of safety.

An unknown number were killed or wounded while seeking shelter in an American Embassy annex.

Whatever hopes had been nurtured by a cease-fire agreement brokered last week by United Nations officials in nearby Ghana were dashed.

Today, the rebel groups said they would not stop fighting until they had seized the capital, while President Charles Taylor, who last week had said he might step down in the interests of peace, urged his supporters to "fight on."

"Your survival is my survival, my survival is your survival," Mr. Taylor said over the radio, according to an Associated Press report.

President Bush is to make his first visit to Africa next month. He does not plan to visit Liberia, but his trip has raised the question of American intervention in the conflict. Liberia, a small West African country bloodied by two decades of civil war, was founded by freed American slaves 150 years ago.

"Certainly there's a perception in the region that expects American involvement," a senior Bush administration official said in an interview this afternoon.

The British ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, called today for such action, on the eve of a Security Council delegation to West Africa.

According to a Reuters report, Sir Jeremy, referring to the United States, said, "If there were a lead nation that was prepared to take action in Liberia, then I think that would be very broadly welcomed internationally."

Two rocket-propelled grenades landed inside a United States Embassy annex, which is perched on a ledge overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It had been opened to those fleeing the fighting, and thousands had crowded in, eyewitnesses said, only to be shelled this afternoon.

A State Department spokeswoman said two embassy employees were killed. Neither was an American citizen.

An American aid worker, speaking via satellite telephone from the capital, described seeing people filing up and down the streets this morning, "almost confused as to where to go," with mattresses and cooking pots on their heads.

A hospital operated by Doctors Without Borders, the international medical aid agency, had to be shut down for a second time in two weeks.

Analysts of the region have long pressed for American intervention in Liberia, pointing to what the British have done to bring peace to their former colony, Sierra Leone, and the French have done in neighboring Ivory Coast.

"There is a compelling argument on humanitarian grounds for U.S. intervention," John Prendergast of the International Crisis Group, a research and advocacy group in Washington, said today. "If we are seen to be doing nothing when the killing spree is unfolding in Monrovia, it will, to say the least, put a damper on President Bush's trip to Africa.

"Like it or not, the general perception throughout the world at this point is that given the French leadership in Côte d'Ivoire, the British leadership in Sierra Leone, U.S. leadership is required and expected in Liberia."

Publicly, Bush administration officials have said only that they are weighing a number of options.

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