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## 7 Said to Be Killed in Monrovia During Shell Attack on Church

By REUTERS

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 26 (Reuters) — Mortar shells hit a church compound packed with 2,000 refugees today, killing seven people, witnesses said. Liberia's president, Charles G. Taylor, said more than 1,000 had died in the eight days of the latest rebel attack.

Mr. Taylor, addressing a prayer meeting at a stadium in Monrovia to mark the anniversary of Liberia's founding by freed American slaves in 1847, repeated that he was ready to step down if that would bring peace to the country, but he gave no date.

"Because of you, the people, I can no longer see the bloodshed continue," Mr. Taylor said, adding that he would hand over power to either his vice president or the Speaker of the House of Representatives. "They've killed more than 1,000 people. If I were not here, there would be bodies all over the city."

Although Mr. Taylor did not say when he would depart, the Rev. K. A. Paul, a American preacher who has become close to the president, said at the prayer meeting that the Liberian had assured him that he would leave once peacekeepers arrived.

On Friday, President Bush ordered American troops to take up positions off Liberia's coast to support a planned West African peacekeeping mission, but regional leaders have yet to announce a date for such a deployment. Mr. Bush has demanded that Mr. Taylor, who has been indicted for war crimes by a court in Sierra Leone that was set up by the United Nations, leave Liberia. Nigeria has offered asylum to Mr. Taylor.

At the church that was attacked today, the Greater Refuge Temple, the pastor, the Rev. Michael Chea, said three people were killed. Terrified refugees were taking shelter there from the fighting that has raged in Monrovia for eight days.

Fighters on the scene said four other people were killed near the church compound.

Witnesses at the church said the shelling appeared to come from rebel lines. The rebels have repeatedly denied firing mortars at civilian targets, accusing Mr. Taylor's forces of doing so to make them look bad.

The church is near one of three major bridges leading into the costal capital, where fighting between government forces and the rebels has seesawed. Heavy gunfire resounded today around the bridges.

Residents and aid workers said at least 30 seriously wounded civilians had been taken to Monrovia's main hospital from the church compound.

Liberians, who have been begging foreign troops to intervene for weeks, welcomed news of the American deployment but it was not immediately clear whether Washington would put combat troops on the ground in Liberia.

The White House said today that its current position was that the American troops, who are about a week's sailing time away from Liberia, would help West African peacekeepers to deploy. Although regional leaders have not set a date, United Nations officials expect the deployment to start by the beginning of August.

The United States still has painful memories of its last African foray, in Somalia, which ended when warlords dragged bodies of American soldiers through the streets of the capital, Mogadishu.

Liberians say the United States has a moral obligation to save a country that was founded by freed American slaves and has been crippled by nearly 14 years of war in which an estimated 200,000 people have been killed.

At least 23 people were killed and 200 wounded on Friday in mortar attacks on two schools and near a hospital, and the fighting raged on today despite a cease-fire declared by the rebels on Friday shortly after Mr. Bush said American troops were on their way.

With American forces already stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon is thought to be reluctant to put troops into a lead role in Liberia.

"Right now they are there to be positioned off the coast of Liberia so that we can help get in there," the new White House spokesman, Scott McClellan, said today.

Two rebel factions, which have their roots in tribal hatreds inflamed by a civil war in the 1990's, control about two-thirds of Liberia.