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U.S. Ambassador to Liberia Urges Rebels to Leave Capital

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 27 (AP) — Explosions rocked this capital city today as rebels and government forces battled at crucial crossings leading to President Charles G. Taylor's downtown stronghold, and at least 16 people died late Saturday and today when mortar shells hit their homes.

The United States ambassador to Liberia appealed to insurgents to lift their eight-day siege of Monrovia and withdraw — even as government commanders and residents reported that the rebels were stepping up their drive into the city.

Rebels are pressing forward in their third effort in two months to take Monrovia, an isolated and disease-ridden city of at least 1.3 million hungry residents and refugees. Their goal is to drive out Mr. Taylor, a former warlord behind nearly 14 years of ruinous conflict in this once prosperous West African nation.

The main rebel movement "needs to show that they have regard for the people of Liberia, that it is not indifferent to the great human suffering that is taking place here," Ambassador John Blaney told reporters at the heavily guarded American Embassy.

The ambassador urged the rebels, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, to pull back to the natural boundary of the Po River, six miles outside the capital. The withdrawal would open up the port and camps outside the city for urgently needed food and aid.

Mr. Blaney said Mr. Taylor had agreed to the proposal, and the ambassador urged the rebel movement to do the same. "If they want to get to a post-Taylor era, this is the way to do it," he said.

Sekou Conneh, the rebels' civilian chairman, said they would retreat only when peacekeepers were in place.

"We agree to fall back, but we want the peacekeepers to come," Mr. Conneh said. "We don't want to hand over the port to Charles Taylor."

Under international pressure to intervene, President Bush has ordered American ships to take up positions off the coast of Liberia, ready to support a West-African-led peace force, which has been delayed amid debates over financing.

Mr. Bush has demanded that Mr. Taylor, who is indicted for war crimes in neighboring Sierra Leone, step down. Mr. Taylor says he will do so, accepting an asylum offer in Nigeria, only when peacekeepers arrive.

Fighting has focused on the port and bridges leading to downtown. Insurgents overnight bypassed the Stockton Bridge, which leads from a rebel-held island to mainland Monrovia, government field officers said.

At daylight, after a night of combat, rebels were in what had been a government-controlled suburb around the bridge, saying they were in control.

"This morning we saw fighters coming in, telling us not to panic," said one resident, reached by telephone, in the New Georgia neighborhood. Gunfire and booms echoed behind her. "I'm scared," she added, saying she was too fearful to give her name.

Taking northern neighborhoods around the bridge would give the rebels a foothold on the mainland, from which they could battle their way toward the government-held downtown. New bombardments also crashed into neighborhoods. One round landed before dawn today on a tin-roofed shack near the embattled Old Bridge, killing four people, according to aid workers collecting bodies in the area. Another fell on a nearby house, killing two people.

A shell that had fallen close by late Saturday killed an entire family — eight adults and two children, aid workers said.

Mr. Taylor said on Saturday that as many as 1,000 people had died since rebels began their latest effort to take the capital. Aid workers put the week's toll at about 400.

Government and rebel officials have traded accusations of blame for the shelling in densely populated neighborhoods. Witnesses in areas closest to the fighting said today that some mortar rounds fired by the government were landing short of their rebel targets, killing residents on their own side.

Elsewhere, the Liberian defense minister, Daniel Chea, said his forces were repelling an advance by Liberia's second, smaller rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, in the southeast. Insurgents of the group had advanced in recent days to within 30 miles of Buchanan, Liberia's second-largest city and home to an important port.

Rebels said to be backed by the governments in neighboring Ivory Coast and Guinea control at least 60 percent of Liberia, a country founded by freed American slaves in the 19th century.

West African leaders have pledged to send two Nigerian battalions to Liberia within days — the vanguard of what they say should be an international force of 3,250 to bring peace to the devastated nation.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz said on the television program "Fox News Sunday" that American forces were "going in when there is a cease-fire, when Charles Taylor is leaving, has left."

Mr. Wolfowitz also said the United States' role was to assist the United Nations and West African countries "to stabilize the situation, to avert a humanitarian disaster."

"As part of that, it's necessary to get Charles Taylor to leave the country and for the U.N. to begin a political process," Mr. Wolfowitz said.

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