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Liberian President Defies Call by Bush to Give Up Post

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, June 27 — A day after President Bush urged him to step down for the sake of peace, a defiant President Charles Taylor, still reeling from a rebel attack on his capital, called for the United States "to do everything in its power to help Liberia and Liberians out of this mess."

In a radio address delivered late this afternoon, Mr. Taylor said that while he remained open to negotiations to end the war in his country, he would not abandon power before international troops arrived to guarantee the peace. Though he indicated this month that he would step down, Mr. Taylor has more recently said that he plans to finish his term, which runs until the end of the year. Peace talks mediated by West African officials in Ghana were temporarily suspended this morning.

In his address, Mr. Taylor depicted himself as the guardian of innocent Liberians. "I share your every desire for peace," he said. "What I am not prepared to do is to leave you in the hands of these kinds of murderers."

The "murderers" to which he referred are insurgents who choked the capital but were unable to seize it in a set of fierce battles with government forces two weeks ago and then again this week. In the most recent fighting, government officials said 200 to 300 people had been killed in the capital alone. Today, the chief rebel faction, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, appeared to have retreated beyond the city limits, and Mr. Taylor pledged to hunt them down. He also promised to start paying his soldiers; they have not been paid for over a year.

The capital was quiet but explosive today. There were no reports of active fighting in the city. Few cars plied the roads, except for a parade of pickup trucks loaded with pro-Taylor militiamen. Checkpoints were tense, with soldiers in various states of drunkenness demanding to know the nationalities of foreigners.

It was not a good day to be an American in Liberia, a country founded by former American slaves that has had historically close ties to the United States.

This afternoon, an incendiary, war-weary mob crowded outside the gates of the high-walled United States Embassy, angry at Washington's failure to stop the latest killings. Under a downpour, they stamped their feet, held up hastily made placards calling for peace, and exploded with equal parts rage and ardor toward Washington.

"We want peace!" the crowd shouted. "We are dying," a sign read. "A rocket killed my brother," said Coocoo Brumskie, 16, tugging at a reporter. Her family was in the landing path of a mortar

that fell on an American Embassy annex where thousands had sought refuge earlier this week. "My friend died," screamed Christopher Dabweson, 28. "We need America's help now, not tomorrow."

"We want troops to be here," said Muhammad S. Jalloh, 18. "Americans are our big brothers."

The crowd paraded along the street, waving tree branches and singing, "George Bush — We liiiiike you."

"He's a world president," Abu Kamara, 26, explained. "He's powerful."

On Thursday, in a speech previewing his first visit to Africa next month, President Bush urged the Liberian president to resign.

Bush administration officials said this week they were considering a number of options on Liberia, including financial support for an international peace-keeping force. At issue is whether the warring parties in Liberia would abide by a cease-fire deal they agreed to 10 days ago. Embassy officials in Monrovia have encouraged all American citizens to leave.

Late this afternoon, Mr. Taylor toured the city in a convoy of armored cars with heavily armed bodyguards. Thousands of Monrovia residents stepped aside to watch his motorcade pass but there were neither cheers nor jeers for the president, only chants of, "We want peace."

In the radio address today, Mr. Taylor rebuked the international community for failing to sufficiently condemn his rebel enemies, whom he accused of having violated international human rights laws.

"We regret that the level of condemnation that ought to be heard is not coming out," he said.

Mr. Taylor is wanted on charges of crimes against humanity in connection with a war in neighboring Sierra Leone. A United Nations-backed war crimes tribunal unsealed an indictment against him earlier this month.

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