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G.O.P. Senator Criticizes Bush on Liberia Case

By ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON, Aug. 1 — With American warships full of marines steaming closer to Liberia's coast, an influential Republican senator criticized the Bush administration today for preparing plans to send troops to that country without making a convincing case to Congress, which has just started a month's recess.

Senator John W. Warner, a Virginia Republican who is chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was clearly upset that the Pentagon had abruptly canceled a briefing scheduled for today on Liberia by senior officers from the military's Joint Staff. He took to the Senate floor to assail the administration for failing to adhere to the doctrine of spelling out the risks and national interest if American troops are sent into Liberia, the West African nation plagued by civil war.

The United Nations Security Council late tonight approved a United States resolution for a multinational force in Liberia.

Mr. Warner, speaking to a chamber left nearly empty by senators who had left for the break, said, "Is this situation following the doctrine in our national security interests?"

He added, "It has not been answered to my satisfaction."

Defense Department officials responded late today, saying the meeting was canceled because Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and two four-star officers briefed several senators, including Senator Warner, on Liberia and other hot spots for more than an hour on Wednesday. But Mr. Warner was seeking a more detailed briefing from operations and intelligence officers, which had been scheduled for today.

Today's remarks by Mr. Warner, usually one of the White House's staunchest allies on national security issues, came as the first two of three Navy ships carrying 2,300 marines were to arrive off the Liberian coast on Saturday. A third ship bearing supplies was about five days behind.

Pentagon officials said President Bush and Mr. Rumsfeld had made no decisions about what role American troops might play in supporting 1,300 Nigerian peacekeepers who are committed to enforcing a cease-fire and providing relief aid. Mr. Bush last Friday ordered the ships, then in the Mediterranean and nearby waters, to move closer to Liberia.

But military officials said today that a leading option is to dispatch 300 marines to provide communications for the Nigerian troops when they enter Liberia, possibly as early as next week. The marines could also provide logistics and intelligence support, and have infantry and attack helicopters.

Pentagon officials also said that Maj. Gen. Thomas R. Turner II, who heads the Army's southern European airborne rapid-reaction force, was expected to oversee any American operation in Liberia. General Turner would bring a small staff from his headquarters in Italy, and set up a command post on one of the ships, the officials said.

The State Department spokesman, Richard A. Boucher, today repeated that a main condition for American military involvement was for Liberia's president, Charles G. Taylor, to quit the country. Mr. Taylor, who has been indicted on war crimes charges, has said he would leave, but his departure date is unclear.

The concerns raised by Senator Warner on the Senate floor pose a new political challenge for Mr. Bush as he seeks to mollify conservatives wary of a Somalia-like peacekeeping mission, and appease liberals and religious groups who have urged the president to address Liberia's desperate needs.

Mr. Warner said that in his 25 years in the Senate, he had never questioned the president's authority as commander in chief to send American forces into harm's way.

But he said he felt compelled to raise the alarm now because he said the administration appeared on the verge of sending marines into Liberia with inadequate Congressional consultation over whether the move was in the national interest and with lawmakers likely to be absent if troops are sent in.

"It is my hope that whatever decision process has to be made in the absence of the Congress will be made, and carefully thought through, if we're going to depart from this doctrine," Mr. Warner said. "If there are geopolitical pressures, if there are domestic pressures, whatever it is, spell it out."

Senator Warner acknowledged that a tragedy was unfolding in Liberia, but he added that the Pentagon and Mr. Bush had failed to make the case for why intervening in Liberia was in the national interest.

Senator Warner raised the specter of Vietnam, Somalia and even the operations in Iraq, when he said it was the president's duty to prepare the American public for possible casualties if troops were sent to Liberia. "Has that been done?" Mr. Warner said. "I fear, in my judgment, it has not been done."

Senator Warner's pique with the Pentagon has a history. After he complained that the Defense Department and the administration were failing to keep lawmakers informed about the risks and goals of possible operations in Iraq, the Pentagon established regular briefings that were widely praised by lawmakers.

On July 8, a briefing team from the military's Joint Staff provided a report to senators on Liberia. With the Senate preparing to recess for the summer and some senators, including him, readying for a visit to several African nations later this month, Senator Warner requested a follow-up briefing.

The uniformed military has tended to be more skeptical than civilian policy makers of sending American forces into Liberia. The military's Joint Staff also is much more involved in the details of mission planning than are policy makers, and can address risks and other areas of concern in different ways than their civilian bosses.

But Senator Warner said the briefing was abruptly canceled today.

The committee's ranking Democrat, Senator Carl Levin of Michigan, agreed, saying in a statement: "I was really disappointed and surprised at the abrupt and unexplained cancellation of the briefing. The checks and balance in the Constitution must have been designed with this administration in mind."

Lawrence Di Rita, the acting Pentagon spokesman, said, "The president has not made any decisions, and when he makes any decisions I'm sure we'll provide any briefings that are appropriate."