

Annan Requests U.S. Peacekeepers in Liberia

By Colum Lynch
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, July 2, 2003

UNITED NATIONS, July 1 -- For a second straight day, U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan urged the United States today to lead an international peacekeeping force in Liberia as the Bush administration came under increasing pressure from Britain, France and some West African countries to send U.S. troops to the country to halt a worsening civil war.

U.N. officials estimate that as many as 5,000 troops, including 2,000 Americans, would be required to restore order in Liberia.

"We need a country with capacity, a military capacity, that can deploy a robust force," Annan told reporters in Bern, Switzerland, before calling Secretary of State Colin L. Powell to discuss Liberia's fate. "Many are expecting the U.S. to lead that operation. . . . The Liberian population has also asked for that."

President Bush, who leaves Monday for a trip to Africa, met with his top national security advisers at the White House to consider Annan's request. The participants did not agree on whether to send U.S. troops into the West African country, said an administration official familiar with the discussions.

But White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said the administration is not ruling out the possibility of sending U.S. troops as part of a Liberian peacekeeping force. "The president is determined to help the people of Liberia find a path to peace," Fleischer said. "The exact steps that could be taken are still under review."

At the White House meeting, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld resisted an appeal from Powell to consider Annan's request, U.S. officials said.

Officials said the Pentagon believes that the U.S. military -- which has 11,500 troops in Afghanistan and 150,000 in Iraq -- is too stretched to undertake a new peacekeeping mission in a country that is not central to U.S. national security interests. The State Department has contended that announcing a limited U.S. role in a Liberian force would shore up Bush's standing on the eve of a major tour of Africa, the officials said.

Bush asked his senior foreign policy advisers to present him with more information on U.S. options in Liberia before he makes his final decision on U.S. involvement, said an administration official familiar with the discussions. The official said the president is hoping to decide by Thursday.

U.N. diplomats, citing Britain and France's decision to send troops to stem violence in their former West African colonies in Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast, said the United States has a

special responsibility to restore stability to Liberia, which was established in the 19th century by American abolitionists and former slaves.

Liberia, a nation of 3.4 million, has been ravaged by civil war and misrule since 1989, when Charles Taylor led an armed insurgency against the former Liberian government. Taylor, who has backed insurgencies in neighboring Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast, was recently indicted by a U.N.-sponsored war crimes tribunal in Sierra Leone.

He is facing the greatest threat to his rule. Rebel groups backed by neighboring Ivory Coast and Guinea, including the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, have laid siege to Monrovia, the capital, as a cease-fire agreement unraveled. A Security Council delegation, which is seeking to secure an end to the fighting, today canceled a visit to Monrovia because of the continued fighting.

Bush last week called for Taylor to relinquish power. Nigeria has offered to grant political asylum to the Liberian president if he steps down peacefully and makes way for a transitional government. The offer, which is being promoted by a Security Council delegation in West Africa, would have shielded Taylor from surrender to the U.N. war crimes court. But one senior Security Council diplomat said that Taylor had rejected the offer.

"We don't believe Charles Taylor has any place in a future government of Liberia," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

The council decided Monday to put off discussion on a peacekeeping role until the Security Council mission headed by Britain's U.N. ambassador, Jeremy Greenstock, returns on Saturday. The Economic Community of West Africa, which has participated in peacekeeping missions in the region, will meet on Thursday to discuss a proposal to deploy peacekeepers in Liberia.

Staff writer Michael Dobbs in Washington contributed to this report.

© 2003 The Washington Post Company