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Bush Team Says It's Weighing Intervention in Liberia's Torment

By RICHARD W. STEVENSON

WASHINGTON, July 1 — The Bush administration said today that it was considering whether to intervene to halt fierce fighting in Liberia between rebel groups and the government of President Charles Taylor. The White House also declared that it had not ruled out sending in American troops as part of an international peacekeeping force.

President Bush discussed the issue this morning at a meeting of the National Security Council after several days of intense discussions involving the Pentagon and the State Department, administration officials said.

The White House later directed the Pentagon to refine the proposals being discussed, especially the possibility of having the United States lead a peacekeeping force that would also draw from a number of African countries, military officials said. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell spoke about Liberia today with Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, the State Department said.

Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman, said the administration was "actively discussing what the next step should be" to help end the fighting in Liberia, a West African country that has had close ties to the United States since its founding by freed American slaves in 1847.

"The president is determined to help the people of Liberia find a path to peace," Mr. Fleischer said. "The exact steps that could be taken are still under review."

Asked if he would rule out American troops going to Liberia, Mr. Fleischer replied, "I'm not ruling it out."

The United States has come under increasing pressure from the United Nations, Britain, France and West African countries to take a more active role in quelling the unrest. Last week Mr. Bush called on Mr. Taylor to make good on a promise to step aside as part of a cease-fire agreed to last month.

Nigeria was considering offering Mr. Taylor asylum if he agreed to step down, though the terms of his possible departure were sure to be complicated by his indictment last month on war crimes charges by a court run by the United Nations and neighboring Sierra Leone.

American officials signaled that they would be unenthusiastic about a deal that let Mr. Taylor escape prosecution.

"We support the court," said Richard A. Boucher, the State Department spokesman.

In London, a member of Mr. Taylor's government told reporters that the Liberian leader, who was elected in 1997 after leading a long rebellion against the previous government, would only agree to step aside after a comprehensive peace deal was worked out.

"You won't have Charles Taylor to kick around any more," the government official, Samuel Jackson, Liberia's minister of state for economic and financial affairs, said in a report by Reuters. "We look forward to working out details of an orderly exit of our government."

Secretary General Annan told reporters in Switzerland that the situation demanded "a country with military capacity that can deploy a robust force — it doesn't have to be very large — that can make a difference on the ground and team up with West African forces."

With Mr. Bush scheduled to visit Africa next week for the first time as president, the administration appeared eager to avoid having him portrayed as standing by while Liberia degenerated further into violence.

Yet former administration officials said there was reluctance at the Pentagon to get involved in a complex and violent dispute that does not involve a compelling issue of national security for the United States, especially when American troops are already deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On Monday, Ambassador James B. Cunningham, Washington's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, told colleagues that the United States could send troops in the event of a peaceful negotiated settlement supported by other countries and on condition that President Taylor step down and turn himself over to the special court in Sierra Leone.

In Abidjan, Ivory Coast, the British ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, told reporters that the Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, was considering an offer of asylum to Mr. Taylor but had yet to announce a decision publicly.

"It is his decision to make public in his own time," Sir Jeremy said. "We understand that is something he is considering."

He said Nigeria does not have a law that would allow it to extradite Mr. Taylor to Sierra Leone to face the war crimes tribunal. The prosecutor for the special court unsealed the indictment against Mr. Taylor last month while the Liberian president was in Ghana for a regional conference on ending the violence.

"I thought the timing was problematic," one West African diplomat at the United Nations said today. "Now he's a man with his back against the wall."

Rather than face trial, the diplomat said, Mr. Taylor might revert to his former role as a rebel commander, leading a guerrilla fight against whatever government replaces his.

At the State Department, Mr. Boucher said that Monrovia, the Liberian capital, was calm today and that an international team made up primarily of representatives from West African countries and a retired American military officer would travel to Liberia on Wednesday to begin implementing the cease-fire.

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