

Liberian Forces Fight to Retake Rebel-Held Cities

By Alexandra Zavis
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MONROVIA, Liberia, July 29 -- Charles Taylor's forces battled today to retake key cities captured by rebels in fighting that had the Liberian president threatening to hang onto power despite his pledge to resign.

Aid workers tending to emaciated babies here in the capital said the new combat cut the city's last aid lifeline. Desperate refugees, crossing paths as they fled one embattled Liberian city for another, said there was no place left to turn.

"All over, fighting now," said Hadija Kabah, 54, who was caring for more than a dozen children and grandchildren at a makeshift camp outside Monrovia. "There's no place safe to go in Liberia."

"People are fighting this side. People are fighting that side," said Norman Anderson, a businessman who arrived at the camp from Buchanan, Liberia's second-largest city, where Taylor's forces launched a counterattack today. Anderson pointed up the road, then in the opposite direction.

Referring to promises of an international peace force, Anderson said bitterly: "You all are making fun of us."

Arguments over funding were believed to be delaying deployment of a peace mission, pledged by West African nations with assurances of U.S. and other international assistance.

Nigeria, West Africa's military power, has offered two battalions but says it needs help with what it expects to be a multimillion-dollar daily tab. After meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in London, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo told reporters that peacekeeping troops might enter Liberia in "a few days."

Liberia's main rebel group is pressing two months of sieges of Monrovia, a city of 1 million people overflowing with hundreds of thousands of refugees. Rebels hold the port and have cut off food and other vital aid for the capital and nearby refugee camps.

Holed up in the capital, Taylor's government reacted angrily to the spread of fighting to new fronts outside the city. A spokesman said the attacks had made Taylor rethink ceding power, a pledge he has repeatedly hesitated to fulfill since the rebel siege began last month.

The rebels read the pledge to step down "as weakness," said Vaanii Paasawe, Taylor's spokesman. "In fact, it has escalated the war."

"We are of a different opinion now in the government about the validity of the overtures of the president to step down," Paasawe said. "So if you start hearing differently, you shouldn't be surprised."

Insurgents have fought a three-year war to capture Monrovia and topple Taylor, a Boston-educated, Libyan-trained guerrilla fighter who launched Liberia into 14 years of near-perpetual conflict in 1989.

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