

July 30, 2003

Oh, if Only the G.I.'s Would Come Marching In

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia — Before he became a priest, Michael K. Francis wanted to be a soldier. A G.I., to be precise, one of those American boys in uniform whom he admired so much as a little boy. They came marching up the streets of Monrovia during World War II singing "When the Saints Come Marching In."

Now Liberia's Roman Catholic archbishop and an outspoken voice for peace, he stood up from his chair one day not long ago and belted out a verse. He laughed at the memory.

That distant memory goes a long way to explain the craving of Liberians for American intervention as well as their dismay at any comparison with Somalia, that iconic African theater of anarchy and symbol of peacekeeping perils.

Many people in the world look for an outside hand more powerful than their own petty despots to come to fix their problems. But there are few, in the minds of Liberians, to whom the idea of America is so mythic, the ties so deep, and the case for American help more compelling.

Liberia was created by the United States with a peculiar alliance of slaveholders and abolitionists in the anxious decades before emancipation and founded on the ideals of American-style democracy.

In truth, for much of its history, it functioned as a plantation society, where the high-caste descendants of freed slaves ruled over the "Africans" and held an abiding loyalty to America, from whose rib their nation was formed.

Consider the frayed oil painting that still hangs on a wall in the now shuttered National Museum on Broad Street, in Monrovia's ravaged downtown. It is a historical montage featuring William Tolbert, the Liberian president from 1971 to 1980, seated in the company of J. J. Roberts, the founding president of the republic, along with two famous Americans: Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy.

Consider the elation when a small team of American soldiers landed here in early July to conduct what they called a "humanitarian assessment." Liberians poured into the streets to thank their lucky stars. "Eh, marine, we like you, oh, marine!" they sang.

Consider, too, the spectacle of the weeping men and women who came to lay their dead before the gates of the American Embassy on July 21. That morning, as part of the third rebel attack on the city, a mortar shell had fallen on an encampment of displaced people across the street from the embassy, killing nearly two dozen civilians.

The living came to display their dead. They came in rage at what they saw as American indifference. And they came as though to remind the Americans of the creation myth that was given this land 150 years ago. "The love of liberty brought us here," reads the slogan on the Liberian seal, courtesy of the Americans who founded the republic in 1847.

But Liberian expectations have been built around more than just the idea of America. During World War II, Liberia joined the United States in declaring war against Germany — a principal Liberian trading partner at the time.

Later, the country provided Firestone with the world's largest rubber plantation, aiding American dominance in the auto industry.

Liberia served as a solid partner to the United States in the cold war years. It supported American resolutions at the United Nations and provided a home for a Voice of America radio tower, an indispensable weapon of the cultural cold war.

So, the archbishop and others argue today, it is high time for a payback. "Because of our relationship," the archbishop maintained. "And because of what we did."

Finally, the American explanation for its invasion of Iraq, where illegal weapons have yet to be found, has raised expectations all its own. It baffles Liberians that American soldiers would interfere where they are not wanted, and stay away from where they are.

"Mr. President, you have repeatedly said that the civilized world cannot sit idle while dictators and rebel groups brutalize innocent people," wrote George Kun, 27, a Liberian who went to the United States as a refugee in 1996, in an open letter to Mr. Bush.

These expectations, however deeply held, fly in the face of American inaction for over a decade. The United States had a chance to nip the Liberian mayhem in the bud 13 years ago, Liberians note, when Charles G. Taylor, the president that Mr. Bush now demands step aside, began his guerrilla insurrection.

Then, as now, Washington (at the time, Mr. Bush's father was in office) ordered American troops to park off the Liberian coast, and encouraged a West African peacekeeping force. The warship with 2,500 American troops bobbed in the water for several months before turning back. The Liberian war continued for six more years.

The West African peacekeepers became a part of the problem: they looted and allowed the sitting president to be captured and executed by a particularly vicious rebel leader named Prince Johnson. The entire ordeal was videotaped. (It is one of the reasons why the world does not hear much about an "African solution" to the current problem.)

Once again, there is talk of Washington intervening. Liberians wonder if they are watching a replay.

The myth of the American G.I. notwithstanding, what difference would an American intervention make? Is there any guarantee that if American soldiers come, the warring factions will put down their guns?

The short answer is no. The only guarantee, it seems, is that without intervention from somewhere more misery lies ahead.

Relief workers told the American team that landed in early July that things would get much worse unless security could be established. They did. Two weeks later came the third and most sustained rebel attack on the capital.

Since then, a waiter at the hotel where many foreign journalists stay lost his grandmother and three members of his family in a mortar attack. Three weeks before, his sister died of cholera. He told his story in passing one morning as he served pancakes for breakfast.

Liberia is about the only country in West Africa where you can get pancakes for breakfast. It is among the enduring legacies of its peculiar relationship to the United States.