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Liberia's Collapse Cries Out From the Ruins of Its Capital

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, June 29 — The old public hospital here in the Liberian capital stands on a hill overlooking the Atlantic, with a pair of stone lions perched alongside its wide majestic steps. It was once the seat of the health ministry. A generation of Liberians was born in its wards.

Today, it is a hollow cavern offering a grim sanctuary for families displaced by Liberia's unending civil war. Laundry is laid out on the steps to dry.

In the dark, a young girl stands in a doorway, washing with a bucket of water procured from who knows where. The beach out front has become a vast public toilet — running water and latrines having become luxuries for the thousands of Liberians who have crowded in from the countryside.

Up the road, on a promontory overlooking the sprawling city that was named after the American president James Monroe, stands what looks very much like a replica of the White House. It is Monrovia's Masonic Temple, and its tall stone pillars announce the aspirations of a city settled 150 years ago by freed American slaves, looking for their own piece of Africa.

Now, it is dingy and undignified, occupied by hundreds of people chased from their homes by mortars and machine guns, as government and rebel forces dueled for control of Monrovia last week. Head wraps and plastic mats shield the windows, keeping out the rain. The unkempt front lawn does double duty as laundry and lavatory.

With health conditions so poor, many children here have been wheezing, vomiting and falling ill with diarrhea. A nearby clinic, run by the French aid agency Doctors Without Borders, is filling up with cholera patients.

Few are leaving the Masonic Temple, uncertain about how long the latest cease-fire, which was announced on Friday, will hold. "The heart of a man is greatly wicked," roared Nathaniel Morris, a schoolteacher, who fled here last Tuesday. "We only wait."

Liberia's disintegration cries out from the ruins of its capital. Once, there was running water and electricity around the clock. Tens of thousands of foreigners made their living here: the Lebanese who plied their trades had a school opposite the old public hospital. The Indians built a Sikh temple down the road. Swiss, American and Belgian airlines made regular flights to the airport. Through the cold war years, American aid poured into the country, no matter what sort of president was in power.

Monrovia today bears the scars of more than a decade-long string of battles. Its ruined architecture is the starkest metaphor for the collapse of the city's most basic functions.

The health care infrastructure has crumbled. Schools have turned into refugee camps. Militias loyal to President Charles Taylor have become a terrifying de facto police force, accused by ordinary citizens of robbing them in the dark.

At 4 a.m. on a recent day, government soldiers were said to have visited one man, demanding cash and leaving him with a bullet wound to his abdomen.

His sister carried him in a wheelbarrow to seek medical help — there is no ambulance service here. A neighborhood doctor, Keressembe Condé, dressed the man's wounds. In Dr. Condé's clinic, he has tried to perform surgery without the most basic medical supplies — no gauze, no pain killers, no antibiotics.

The doctor said he himself had been threatened by pro-government militias. They came around the other night, he said, demanding his car.

If and when an international peacekeeping force arrives, this is the rubble it will confront. Calls for intervention have grown louder in recent days: the United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, declared on Saturday his urgent desire for a multinational force to be sent here, led by a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Whether the United States will take an active part in that intervention depends on a number of issues that are yet to be resolved, including when and how Mr. Taylor will step down as president.

President Bush has already declared Mr. Taylor's resignation to be essential for peace in Liberia.

The question now is how soon Mr. Taylor could be persuaded to relinquish power or whether sending an international force could simply prolong his tenure. Mr. Taylor has said he is willing to go, but nothing about when.

"We have to make sure that a stabilization force doesn't just stabilize the status quo," the United States ambassador to Liberia, John W. Blaney, said in an interview today. "We want an orderly transition, which includes Taylor stepping aside."

Persuading Mr. Taylor to step aside, officials with both administrations have suggested, could include wrestling with the Liberian president's most pressing challenge: an indictment by a United Nations-backed war crimes tribunal that charges him with crimes against humanity in connection with the war in neighboring Sierra Leone. Mr. Taylor wants the indictment, unsealed earlier this month, to be withdrawn.

As the deal-making goes on, Monrovia sinks further.

Downtown there is a half-finished skyscraper left over from the days of President Samuel Doe; his presidency ended with a brutal videotaped execution.

Not far away, a half-finished bank building houses several hundred families; its ground floor is reserved for those in wheelchairs. Most are refugees dating back to the last war to gut the city, in 1996.

They return to their homes during the good times and come back here when the mortars start flying again. Monrovia's grand old buildings may not do what their architects had in mind, but they serve the citizens well, as homes that can double as bomb shelters.

"When there's fighting this building fills up," said Nathaniel Tamba, who has become a veteran at dodging the fighting. "There's some protection here."

Africans Seek U.S. Involvement

MONROVIA, June 29 (Reuters) — West African countries today urged the United States to join them in sending a force to stop Liberia's war, and a United Nations Security Council mission said it expected support from the world body.

The top official of the Economic Community of West African States regional bloc said in Nigeria that a credible force was needed to separate Liberia's warring sides.

"We can provide the manpower," the official, Mohamed ibn Chambas, said. "But we need material support and participation of some of the members of the Security Council, especially the United States of America."