

August 3, 2003

Liberian Leader Sets Date, and New Terms, for Exit

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 2 — President Charles G. Taylor, defying a deadline imposed by West African officials and imposing what appears to be yet another condition for his departure, announced today that he would leave office in nine days, but demurred on what is arguably the more crucial test of peace: when and how he would leave the country.

His departure is a condition for any American military involvement in peacekeeping in this country, roiled by 14 years of on-and-off-again war, first with Mr. Taylor as a rebel leader, then as its president.

Today, Mr. Taylor refused to answer questions about his long-awaited exit, leaving it to his spokesman, Vaanii Passewe, to say it can be addressed only after the lifting of a war crimes indictment, lodged by a United-Nations-backed tribunal over what it says was his role in fomenting war in neighboring Sierra Leone. Mr. Taylor has said in the past that the only condition for his departure was the arrival of peacekeepers.

"He will only leave Liberia as a free man," Mr. Passewe said this afternoon on the steps of the Executive Mansion.

Across town, government forces began their heaviest counterattack in days on rebel attackers, spraying the neighborhoods around the Free Port of Monrovia, a strategic post now in rebel hands, with heavy machine-gun fire. Civilians, including at least two children, were hit by stray bullets.

The latest announcement on Mr. Taylor's future contrasted with what seemed, just two days ago, like a firm demand from the West African regional bloc. On Friday, West African diplomats announced that they would send the first group of peacekeepers starting Monday, and that Mr. Taylor would have to leave within three days after that.

Today, arriving at Mr. Taylor's office in rumpled clothes after he stood them up the day before, the officials with the Economic Community of West African States, or Ecowas, said the first of 1,500 Nigerian troops would still arrive Monday. But they made no mention of their previous three-day ultimatum.

"We will cross each bridge as we come to them," said the Ghanaian foreign minister, Nana Akufo-Addo.

His aides then shooed aside reporters. He entered his car, dialing on his cellphone the number of the American ambassador, John W. Blaney.

A few minutes later, a beaming Mr. Taylor walked out to greet reporters. Asked about his departure, he offered a question in return: "What did the Ecomog guys say?" He added, "I'm not going to say."

He would say only that he would convene a special session of the Liberian Congress on Thursday, followed by an official transfer of power to his chosen successor at midday the following Monday.

"The most important thing is everything we've said about resigning and leaving will happen," he said.

His promise did not impress the rebels today. "Charles Taylor is playing with the minds of the Liberian people," said Maj. Gen. Sekou Kamara, assistant chief of staff for the rebel group called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy. "Taylor must step down. If he steps down, there will be no more fighting."

The latest twist is not entirely surprising from a man who has amended his views on the subject many times. But it potentially invites even more bloodshed here after 15 days of a blistering attack by the rebel force. The next two days could be crucial as both the government and rebel forces try to take as much territory as they can before peacekeepers arrive.

As the diplomats met in the Executive Mansion, Monrovia experienced some of the heaviest fighting in days, as government forces made a two-pronged push for the strategic port.

Residents near the port reported heavy machine-gun fire. Its echoes could be heard downtown, on the edge of two crucial bridges leading to the city center. Government soldiers, in firm control of the bridges today, sped across in pickup trucks mounted with machine guns.