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U.S. Is Considering Troops in Liberia to Monitor Truce

By ERIC SCHMITT and RICHARD W. STEVENSON

WASHINGTON, July 2 — The Pentagon has ordered military planners to prepare detailed options for American troops to join an international peacekeeping force to oversee a cease-fire in the war-battered West African nation of Liberia, two senior military officials said today.

It was unclear tonight what other nations might join this force, and how it would be commanded.

The order and a flurry of other activity, including talks between Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, moved the Bush administration a step closer to its first major international peacekeeping operation.

Officials said they are considering sending 500 to 2,000 American troops, a number that will be determined after a decision is made about the force's precise mission.

The White House said President Bush had yet to decide whether to send in United States forces. But one senior military official and one senior administration official said it was all but certain that American troops would join a number of African nations in trying to restore stability in Liberia, a nation of 3.3 million people founded in 1847 by freed slaves from the United States. Mr. Bush could decide as early as Thursday, the officials said.

"A decision in principle to go has been made," said the military official. "There are some people pushing back on the record, saying there's been no final decision by the president, and that's true. But at this point, it's a decision about what it's going to look like."

A senior defense official said any American troops would probably stay only a few months to stabilize the country.

The final decision — and the shape of any peacekeeping force — are likely to be influenced by a variety of factors, including whether President Charles Taylor of Liberia heeds Mr. Bush's call to step down and whether the tenuous calm that has settled over the capital of Monrovia in recent days seems likely to hold.

"We're looking at all options," Mr. Bush told reporters today. "We're concerned when we see suffering — people are suffering there. The political instability is such that people are panicking. But the good news is there's a cease-fire in place now."

Liberia has been plagued by heavy fighting in recent weeks between rebels and forces loyal to Mr. Taylor, who has been indicted on war crimes charges in a court run jointly by the neighboring nation of Sierra Leone and the United Nations. 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.

Recently Dominique de Villepin, the French foreign minister, called for the United States to intervene, as did Mr. Taylor.

Last week and again today, Mr. Bush pressed Mr. Taylor to make good on a promise to step aside as part of a fragile cease-fire agreed to last month.

Some former American diplomats said joining an international peacekeeping effort in Liberia would be a way for the United States to show the world that it was willing to work with the United Nations and the European allies after the rift over the war with Iraq. It would also be a way to signal that the United States is serious about helping to bring peace and prosperity to Africa as the president prepares to travel next week to Senegal, South Africa, Botswana, Uganda and Nigeria, they said.

Pentagon officials have been reluctant to support sending troops to Liberia, fearing that American forces could get caught up in a complex civil war at a time when the United States military is already stretched thin because of large deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The military, administration officials said, remains haunted by the attempt to bring peace to Somalia, an effort that led to the deaths of 18 American troops in 1993.

Administration officials said the decision would be made solely on the basis of whether committing American troops would be helpful on humanitarian grounds and successful in bringing lasting peace.

"It will not be because of what Belgium or Luxembourg or France thinks about the United States," said one senior administration official.

Susan E. Rice, who was assistant secretary of state for African affairs in the Clinton administration, said she expected the White House to settle on a plan that would primarily involve sending troops into Liberia to provide command, communications and intelligence capabilities to the West African peacekeeping forces on the ground.

While Pentagon officials have voiced their distaste, State Department officials have made a case that American involvement would not only help end the fighting between rebel groups and Mr. Taylor's forces, but would help stabilize the region.

Mr. Bush has long been skeptical about using the military for peacekeeping operations. During the 2000 campaign, he set out specific criteria for judging military deployments, and Ari Fleischer, his spokesman, said today that they remained the president's guiding principles on the topic.

"The mission must be clear," Mr. Bush said during his second debate with Al Gore in 2000. "Soldiers must understand why are we going. The force must be strong enough so that the mission can be accomplished. And the exit strategy needs to be well defined."

Asked whether those standards apply to Liberia, Mr. Fleischer said, "These are difficult calls" and that Mr. Bush would think it through "long and hard."

But the pace of activity seemed to be quickening as Mr. Bush prepared to leave for Africa on Monday.

The Pentagon today directed the European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, to prepare a "planning order," a document that typically offers three options for using military forces of varying size and makeup, one of the officials said. The command has responsibility for American military operations in most of Africa.

Given the urgency of the situation in Liberia and Mr. Bush's coming trip to Africa, Gen. James L. Jones of the Marine Corps, the head of the command, is expected to review the options within the next two days, recommend one, and forward it all to Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In turn, General Myers is expected to send the recommendations, with his own advice, to Mr. Rumsfeld, who will present a final version to President Bush for approval.

A senior defense official said Mr. Rumsfeld was wary of committing large numbers of American forces for a lengthy deployment, given that 230,000 United States forces were on duty in and around Iraq, and 10,000 were in Afghanistan.

"In general terms, there's always a degree of caution in deploying U.S. troops," the official said. He added that, while planners had been ordered to prepare what the military calls "courses of action," the critical next step in refining detailed options did not necessarily commit the forces to action.

"We are doing what we always do: providing the president with options, the best options, should he decide to have the United States participate in the military crisis," the official said.

At the United Nations today, one Security Council diplomat who has worked on the intractable regional conflicts said that without a Liberian settlement, the brittle stability in nearby countries like Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone could fall apart, particularly, he said, "if Taylor goes back to the bush" and his old role as a guerrilla leader.

He added, "In my view, it would be very difficult for the president to go to Africa without a decision" on committing troops to Liberia.