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## Food and Peace Just a Memory in Liberian City

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MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 3 — The last time Monrovia knew war like this, back in 1996 when President Charles G. Taylor was a rebel leader making his last push for the capital, the people ate boiled grass to curb their hunger.

"This time," said Sister Barbara Brilliant, an American nun who has lived through Liberia's 14 years of on-and-off war, "they can't run out and go look for grass."

Fighting between Mr. Taylor's loyalists and rebels seeking to overthrow him is showering this city with bullets and mortar shells. That has made foraging for food too treacherous even for the most daring Liberian civilians, who are no strangers to hunger after years of suffering under despots and warlords.

With rebel groups holding two ports — one here, the other in the southeastern city of Buchanan — the food supply is dwindling to dire levels in the government-held parts of the capital. Malnutrition in children is climbing. Hospitals are scrambling to feed patients. The few street markets that function, and those only on the quiet days, offer little more than palm nuts, hot peppers, salt, cassava and potato greens. A cup of rice, the Liberian staple, is like gold dust — rare and out of reach for most. People everywhere rub their bellies and put their hands to their mouths, the universal gesture of hunger.

This in a lush, wet country that can easily grow enough rice to feed itself.

The other day, government soldiers were fighting each other over a few sacks of rice. A hungry man, named Prince Jallabah, watched them from his home. He and his neighbors were eating cornmeal for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They were bartering for salt and oil. They were plugging up their windows with cushions and praying for protection from stray bullets.

For more than two weeks, in the third and most bruising attack in less than two months, the capital has been pounded by Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, a rebel group that demands Mr. Taylor's ouster. For more than two weeks, Mr. Taylor has promised to step aside, but has remained barricaded in the Executive Mansion. For more than two weeks, the United Nations, the United States government and West African heads of state have promised to help end the bloodshed, but peacekeepers have yet to arrive.

The first West African troops — about 100 — were due in Liberia on Monday morning, with a total of 770 expected over the next week.

[In Washington, Pentagon officials said three Navy ships, the amphibious assault ship Iwo Jima, the dock landing ship Carter Hall and the amphibious transport dock Nashville, have continued to steam toward Liberia carrying about 2,300 marines as well as combat and communications equipment. But it remains unclear whether, or how, the troops will be deployed in Liberia.

[The ships had been expected to arrive off Liberia's coast over the weekend. The Pentagon officials said the Iwo Jima and the Carter Hall had reached the eastern Atlantic, but refused to give exact coordinates. The Nashville, ferrying most of their supplies, was about five days behind, officials said.]

The people living in the government-controlled side of Monrovia have grown hungrier — and as a result, sicker and less able to heal from malaria and cholera and surgery. At a clinic run by the aid agency Doctors Without Borders, a boy named Blessing Robert wailed against his mother's breast today. He was 2 years old and he weighed less than 12 pounds. His limbs were reedy and weak. He was fighting malaria.

"They don't have the reserves to heal," said Gary Myers, a surgeon at another clinic run by Doctors Without Borders. "They don't recover as well as you might hope."

The West African peacekeepers scheduled to arrive Monday had said their first task would be to secure the airport. It remained unclear today when they might be able to secure the port of Monrovia, however. The World Food Program's supplies are stuck at the port and may have been looted. There has been no food distribution since mid-July.

Nor was it clear how much rice, if any, was still left in the private warehouses at the port. Residents of the area said the port had been gutted by rebels. Trucks loaded with rice have been seen traveling north toward rebel headquarters.

"This is an S O S call to the international community to come in and secure the port so the residents of the government-controlled area can have access to the relief items," said Raymond Zarbay, a journalist who lives near the port.

In some parts of town, the lucky ones are able to venture out into the mangrove swamps to collect snails — "kiss meat" in Liberian slang, a reference to the sucking required to pull out the flesh. Some people are starting to eat dogs. "I had to keep my dog in, lock him up all day," said Sam Nagbe, the project director of Oxfam, the British antifamine agency. He had been holed up in his house in an eastern suburb for days, unwilling to dodge bullets on his way to the market. Most supermarkets, still stocked with food, remain shuttered for fear of looting.

Even before the latest assault began on July 19, people were hungry — more just on the outskirts of the city than inside. Residents of the sprawling Saigbeh refugee camp, cut off from food aid since March, had already been foraging in the woods for roots and leaves, traveling across a river to work on cassava farms and often having to turn over some of their provisions to hungry government soldiers at gunpoint.

At the camp, it was not unusual in mid-July to see babies starving to death, nor children with reddish hair, puffed-up bellies and skeletal faces — classic signs of severe malnutrition. Plans to start a feeding center for 500 children at Saigbeh had to be put off when the rebel assault began.

Today, Saigbeh and other camps are beyond the reach of aid groups. It is unclear how many people are still in the camps or what they are eating.

On the government-controlled side of Monrovia, a feeding center run by the French aid agency Action Against Hunger nurses back to health an average of 200 severely malnourished children every day and doles out 600 rationed meals for those who are slightly better off. "In a month's time, they are cured," said Frédéric Bardou, the group's director for Liberia. "They go to a place where there's no food. In one month's time, in two month's time, they will get malnourished again."