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Hunger Seizes Liberian Capital

Rebels Hold Port, Control Food Supply; Anger Mounts at U.S. Inaction

By Karl Vick
Washington Post Foreign Service

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 6 -- In a city so preoccupied with hunger that people are hunting dogs for food, the arrival of seven U.S. Marines today elicited none of the rapture that greeted an American military assessment team that touched down on the same embassy helipad a month ago.

Liberians instead expressed creeping exasperation with the U.S. government. Rebels hold the capital's crucial seaport and are expected to surrender it only to American troops. But President Bush has repeatedly said none will arrive until President Charles Taylor has left the country.

Taylor has said he will resign at noon Monday. He has not, however, set a date for leaving Liberia.

"If Taylor doesn't leave, does that mean we should die?" said Joseph N. Kamara, who is sleeping in an abandoned U.N. office building with his wife, three children and more than 1,000 other refugees. "He's just an individual. What about the masses who are starving?"

A third day of calm in this wretchedly overcrowded city of 1.5 million, the focus of heavy fighting for the previous two weeks, has not opened the commercial corridors that feed it. Liberia imports most of its food, notably rice, the country's staple. But all of the ports are in rebel hands, and malnourishment is growing among the hundreds of thousands stranded on the government side.

In the swath of Monrovia controlled by the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, a cup of rice sells for 5 Liberian dollars, known as liberties. That's the equivalent of 10 cents -- half of what the price was before looters broke into storage bins at the captured port.

On the government side, the local vendor dips a tin can into a bowl of rice, pours an extra handful of grains on top and asks for 100 liberties, or \$2.

"Even though the guns are silent, there's nothing to eat," said Sualah Boh, an elderly woman pointing to her stomach. "I have nothing to eat today. I ate nothing yesterday."

She stood outside the razor-wired wall of the U.S. Embassy, on a sloping two-lane avenue that now doubles as an open-air market. Except for a case of Chinese sardines selling for \$2, all the food spread on plastic sheets in the roadway was foraged: Ten cents would buy a handful of the rock-like shellfish Liberians call "iron meat," a bouquet of the tasty foliage of cassava plants or a half-dozen "toilet snails," as locals call the specimens collected in urban areas.

At another market, a woman peddling goat meat clutched the animal's severed head to demonstrate the provenance of her merchandise.

"Sometimes it's really dog," explained J. Lancelot Macauley, Liberia's director of livestock.

Pets are unusual in Africa, but Liberia was settled by freed American slaves, and the dogs of Monrovia have shiny coats and actual owners. Macauley had a collie named Cujo and a mixed breed called Dimension until last week, when the government militiamen who go looting after dark opened fire outside his house and carried them away in sacks.

"I have a couple of puppies I'm trying to bring up," said Macauley, 64. "I keep them in the house. But there's no telling. Maybe they'll knock on the door with their guns and eat them, too."

The economic division of the city was particularly visible this morning at the bridges that served as the front lines when rebels were assaulting the government-held downtown peninsula. With a cease-fire in effect, the spans became points of barter.

Waving white flags, rebels ventured to the government side this morning bearing a 100-pound sack of grain. They returned with a bag of clothes.

"They have all the food, we have all the clothes," said a government militia fighter who called himself Capt. Orlando.

"All the food's right there at that port," said another, who had adopted the name of the late South African anti-apartheid icon Steve Biko. "My people need something to eat."

A block behind him, several hundred civilians watched plaintively. Travel across the bridge remains forbidden until the combatants pull back and U.N.-sanctioned peacekeepers, who began arriving Monday, take up their positions. Officials said that is not expected to happen before the weekend.

"We are trying to get across the bridge," said Patrick Koffa, who lived near the port until the fighting drove him downtown. He craved food he could afford to buy and reassurance that the two sisters he left behind survived.

"Our hearts are hungry, too, because our friends are over there," said Richard Gebssay, 42. "They can't hear from us and we can't hear from them."

Brig. Gen. Festus Okonkwo of Nigeria, commander of the West African peacekeeping force that now numbers about 500 men, said his outfit would have sufficient strength by Thursday for him to send some soldiers into Monrovia, news services reported. The peacekeepers so far have not moved past Monrovia's airport, about 25 miles from the city, partly because they were waiting for essential equipment from Sierra Leone.

The seven U.S. Marines who arrived here today touched down at the U.S. Embassy, but drove out of the gates within minutes and headed for the airport. At a hangar there, Americans and

Nigerians stood surrounded by duffel bags and Nigerian armored personnel carriers, trucks and fuel tankers, conferring and taking notes, the Associated Press reported.

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