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Bush Keeps Heat on Liberian President

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- As President Bush prepares to leave for Africa, he is keeping the heat on Liberian President Charles Taylor to step aside while leaving the door open to sending U.S. peacekeeping troops to the embattled nation.

Several administration officials said it was unlikely Bush would announce a decision on sending U.S. troops to join a peacekeeping force before he left on a five-day Africa trip Monday evening. One did hold out the possibility.

Continued deliberations would disappoint West African leaders who asked Bush to come with a decision in hand. Diplomats from France, Britain and the United Nations, as well as leaders of both sides in Liberia's years of civil war, have appealed for Americans to lead a peacekeeping force.

Bush has said Taylor must cede power for peace to come to the West African country. Taylor accepted an offer Sunday of asylum in Nigeria but would not say when he would quit power.

The White House displayed little enthusiasm for the potential deal. "What the president has said is Mr. Taylor needs to leave and leave soon. He needs to leave so peace can be restored," spokesman Jimmy Orr said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell had telephoned Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo on Saturday, but details on their conversation were not released.

A team of some 20 U.S. military specialists in civil affairs, accompanied by a 15-member anti-terrorist Marine detachment, flew from Spain to Liberia early Monday to assess the situation.

As Bush awaited the team's report, American lawmakers and officials voiced deep reservations about committing U.S. troops to the West African country.

Both the Republican and Democratic leaders of the Senate Armed Services Committee said Sunday they want Bush to get congressional approval before he sends any U.S. troops to Liberia.

At the same time, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said military leaders would prefer that West African armies take the lead in any effort to end the Liberian conflict and police the peace.

``We're always prepared, in case of U.S. citizens and our folks that are on official duty in the embassy and so forth, to do a noncombatant evacuation of those individuals," said the chairman, Air Force Gen. Richard Myers.

``Beyond that, I think we'd really like to see the states in the region help with this particular problem," he told ``Fox News Sunday."

Sen. John Warner, R-Va., Armed Services Committee chairman, said that because of the chaotic conditions of the past few years in Liberia, ``we've got to think through very, very carefully the insertion of U.S. forces in there."

``It's a presidential decision, but I would say to the Senate leadership, and most respectfully to the president, I would want a vote in the Congress before we begin to commit substantial forces into that region," Warner said on NBC's ``Meet the Press."

The size of the deployment would not matter, he said: ``Whether it's 500 Marines, ... a thousand or 2,000, they're going into harm's way."

Sen. Carl Levin of Michigan, the Armed Services Committee's senior Democrat, concurred, saying, ``It would be wise ... for there to be a vote of Congress before that is done."

Congressional approval could benefit Bush by forcing lawmakers to share the responsibility for such a mission, but White House officials showed no taste for such a vote.

``We're getting ahead of ourselves," spokesman Orr said. ``This presupposes the president has made a decision to send troops. He hasn't."

Bush ``still has to collect additional information, and is not guided by any artificial timetable or deadline," Orr added.

Another White House official noted that then-President Clinton did not obtain congressional approval before sending thousands of American peacekeepers to Kosovo in June 1999.

Clinton insisted that as commander in chief he had authority to deploy troops in peacekeeping missions. Bush, then a presidential candidate, agreed with Clinton's assertion.

Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said "I'd be very cautious about" U.S. military involvement in Liberia. He noted that tens of thousands of American troops are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"If you're going to err, I don't want to send our troops into an area where they're going to become targets under the banner of peacekeeping," Roberts said.

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