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Liberian President Resigns as Peacekeepers Enter Capital

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 7 — President Charles G. Taylor handed his resignation to the country's Congress today as the first Nigerian peacekeepers entered the capital, flashing peace signs to throngs of well-wishers eager for them to secure this battered, hungry city.

Mr. Taylor's long-awaited move still left open the question of his departure from the country, however. Today his aides said that he would quit Liberia, but that a timetable could not be released for the sake of his security. Mr. Taylor said in an interview with CNN today that he would leave within a week, though he has often amended such pledges.

The tenuousness of Liberia's situation was underscored by the arrival early this morning of a shipment of ammunition for Mr. Taylor's government, apparently flown in on a Boeing 707 chartered in Libya.

The West African troops who began securing the airport earlier this week impounded the cargo but said nothing publicly about what they would do next. The Taylor government and the rebels seeking to oust him are under a United Nations Security Council arms embargo, stemming from Mr. Taylor's support of rebels in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Liberian government officials initially denied the existence of the shipment. "Not true, not true," Defense Minister Daniel Chea told reporters as he drove into town from the airport around midday.

But by day's end, with typical aplomb, Mr. Taylor's aides acknowledged the arrival of the shipment and insisted that they had a right to buy arms to defend their country. "The Liberian government is Liberia's government, and we have arms in many places," Reginald Goodridge, the information minister, said.

Last weekend, Mr. Taylor announced that he would step aside on Monday, Aug. 11, but declared today that he was leaving office because of an "international conspiracy" against him; he cited the arms embargo as an example.

He has also been indicted for war crimes, and he recently hinted that any decision to leave the country would wait until the indictment is lifted.

At about 12:15 p.m., when the Nigerian peacekeepers' personnel carriers could be seen driving in from the airport, hordes of people ran out of the Samuel K. Doe Stadium, home to some 30,000 Liberians displaced by the war. Tens of thousands then packed the streets to welcome the Nigerians, the first of a planned 3,250-strong West African force.

A convoy of four tanks, three cargo trucks and several white jeeps were met by shouting, cheering mobs. Children ran alongside, stamping their plastic flip-flops in rhythm, chanting, "Eh, oga, we like you, eh oga." In the Yoruba language of Nigeria, oga signifies boss or big man.

Women came running out of their houses with babies at their hips. They took off their head wraps and swept them along the road, in a gesture of welcome. Others lined the streets, waved with both hands in the air, and the nimblest came rushing up to the tanks, eager for a high-five or a handshake with the Nigerians.

One little boy kept leaping up, in a vain effort to touch a Nigerian soldier's hand. For a few minutes, armed checkpoints melted away; government forces waved, smiled and shouted hearty welcomes.

Ragged government militia members, still toting their rockets and Kalashnikovs, yelled from a pickup truck, "New Liberia! New Liberia!"

"No more looting!" the civilians yelled back, a clear reference to the government troops who rob and rape ordinary people at night.

The convoy passed schools and gutted buildings overflowing with desperate people trying to seek refuge from the fighting. The vehicles rolled past a group of women, praying for peace, as they do every day, near the side of the road. Two men waved a white tablecloth from the side of the road. Nuns waved from the balcony of their convent.

Downtown, the peacekeepers drove through roadside markets without food. Then they inched through the crowded street in front of the United States Embassy. Marines stood sentry on the rooftops. One man yelled into the car of an American journalist, "Where's the American troops?"

The Bush administration today repeated its call for Mr. Taylor to quit the country but said nothing about if or when American troops would join the peacekeepers on the ground. The Pentagon has authorized up to 20 marines to provide logistical support to the West African troops. A warship carrying 2,300 American marines is moored offshore.

The most pressing question on the streets seemed to be when the so-called interposition force would venture out to secure the Free Port of Monrovia, the capital's lifeline for food, fuel and all other essentials. The port is now in the hands of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, the rebel outfit pounding the city in three separate attacks over the last two months.

The rebels have said that for them to quit the port, Mr. Taylor would have to not only resign but also leave the country, though they, too, have vacillated in their demands.

Meanwhile, the government-held side of the capital has been cut off from the port. Prices of everyday staples has shot up, with cornmeal going for 8 to 10 times its normal price and a gallon of gas costing \$30.

"We want Free Port," the crowd chanted in unison.

Then, plainly, "We want eat."

It could hardly be said that the West African force deployed in town today. After a two-hour spin, the convoy pulled into the Lebanese Al-Nahda Social and Culture Club, an empty seaside complex that will serve as a base for the troops.

By the time they got there, at least one armored personnel carrier had a flat tire, and the convoy had apparently run out of fuel.

Lt. Col. Amos Nudamajo explained the point of this afternoon's exercise this way: "To tell the people that we are here," he said with a broad grin. "We've gone round. You've seen the expectations of the people."

Asked when his forces would go to the port, he said only, "At a proper time." All told, 776 Nigerian soldiers were due on the ground by the end of the day. Another battalion, trained and equipped by the United States, is expected to arrive later this week from Sokoto, Nigeria.

Mr. Taylor has been offered a haven in Nigeria, and his aides have said a house has been found for him in that country.

The Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, as well as his counterparts from Ghana and South Africa, John Kufuor and Thabo Mbeki, have been invited to come to Liberia next Monday, for the official transfer.

Mr. Taylor has said he will officially resign at 11:59 a.m. on Monday, and that in keeping with the Liberian Constitution, the vice president, Moses Blah, will take over at noon. A veteran Taylor ally, Mr. Blah was accused and then pardoned in a coup attempt two months ago.

Mr. Blah's candidacy has been opposed by some in the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy. Earlier this week, the rebels called Mr. Blah part of "the criminal gang of Charles Taylor."

The president's spokesman, Vanii Passewe, said in response, "We know the rebels can't be trusted."