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Taylor Went To Libya For Arms, Sources Say

No Confirmation From U.S. Officials

By Karl Vick
Washington Post Foreign Service

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 7 -- President Charles Taylor flew to Libya last week during a pitched battle for this capital city and returned with a cargo of ammunition and arms, according to individuals in Monrovia with knowledge of the flights.

On both legs of his trip, Taylor changed planes in the capital of Burkina Faso, according to those who knew of the trip. Bad weather in Ouagadougou delayed Taylor's return, causing him to cancel an Aug. 1 meeting with West African foreign ministers to discuss peace efforts.

U.S. officials in Washington said tonight that they could not confirm either that Taylor had gone to Libya last week or that arms had been shipped into the country. Officials added that it would be unusual for the Libyan leader, Moammar Gaddafi, to take such a risk while he is trying to mend relations with the United States.

Aides to Taylor, who was supposed to discuss his promised resignation from office and departure from Liberia with the diplomats on Aug. 1, had said initially that he missed the meeting because he was traveling to the battle front in Liberia's second-largest city, Buchanan.

Taylor's trip and the weapons shipment raised new questions about his stated intent to leave Liberia -- as President Bush and other world leaders have insisted. Last month, Taylor accepted an offer of asylum from Nigeria, but he is reportedly also considering exile in Chad or Libya.

Taylor has said he will resign at noon Monday. He has not, however, set a date for leaving the country and some of his aides have laid down added conditions for his departure, including the dismissal of a war crimes indictment by a U.N.-backed court.

A second plane carrying arms, reportedly from Libya, landed early this morning at Roberts International Airport outside Monrovia, according to news services. By then, Nigerian peacekeepers had established a base at the airport, saw the plane arrive at about 2 a.m. and intercepted the cargo.

Sales of arms to Liberia are banned by a U.N. Security Council resolution. Taylor is also under a U.N. travel ban.

Angered that the cargo on the second plane had been confiscated, militias loyal to the president briefly blocked the road from the airport to Monrovia, delaying the peacekeepers' first foray out of the airport and into the capital. When the Nigerians were finally allowed to pass, tens of

thousands of Liberians cheered the 100 commandos, who waved white flags and blew kisses from atop a number of white armored personnel carriers.

A Liberian source said the flight that arrived this morning included rocket-propelled grenades, bazookas and missiles. "Those were some things that were left out from the first flight from Tripoli," the source said.

Taylor's flight on Aug. 1 carried mainly AK-47 ammunition and mortars, which his forces used in a counterattack against rebels the following day, an unsuccessful effort to seize Monrovia's seaport "at all costs," commanders were told.

The Liberian president has a long relationship with Gaddafi. In the late 1980s, Gaddafi provided vital support to Taylor's insurrection against the Liberian government. Gaddafi had been assured of Taylor's revolutionary credentials by Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaore, a close ally of Taylor.

The Liberian president appears to have found the friendship with Compaore useful in his current crisis. Sources said Taylor and an entourage traveled by commercial charter to Ouagadougou, where they boarded a Libyan Arab Airlines flight that carried them to Tripoli.

Taylor was scheduled to return in time to receive a delegation from the Economic Community of West African States, the regional bloc that on July 31 authorized the deployment of peacekeepers on Aug. 4. But bad weather stranded him in Ouagadougou.

Taylor aides initially told reporters that he missed the meeting because he was in Buchanan. In a second explanation offered to business associates, the aides said he snubbed the ministers over what he considered a breach of protocol.

Taylor, who faces an indictment before a U.N.-sanctioned court for war crimes related to his support of rebels in Sierra Leone, previously acknowledged defying the U.N. weapons embargo in the name of self-defense. A U.N. panel of experts reported that he even provided them with a list of weapons purchased from a Serbian company in 2002, including Kalashnikov assault rifles, grenades, missile launchers and land mines.

The Liberian president, who has promised to step down on Monday, today sent a letter to the country's congress blaming his departure from office on "an international conspiracy" that produced the travel ban and arms embargo.

"This orchestration has prevented me from carrying out my constitutional responsibilities of defending the country and providing essential social services for the people," Taylor wrote. "Therefore I as president of this noble republic can no longer preside over the suffering and humiliation of the Liberian public."

Taylor also said that Vice President Moses Blah, another veteran guerrilla commander, would assume his office on Monday. The statement merely confirmed the line of succession dictated by Liberia's constitution, which is closely modeled on that of the United States.

But in a country that has scarcely had rule of law for more than a decade, Taylor's announcement qualified as news. Two months ago, the vice president was in jail charged with treason.

Blah, who was later released, had made the mistake of preparing to assume the top job the first time Taylor said he would step down, during June peace talks in Ghana. The announcement came the same day a U.N.-sanctioned court in Sierra Leone indicted Taylor for war crimes.

The group that controls much of Monrovia, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, has said it will reject Blah as president.

Staff writer Dana Priest in Washington contributed to this report.

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