

August 8, 2003

U.N. Maps Goals in Liberia

U.S. Support Sought for Ambitious Reconstruction Effort

By Colum Lynch
Washington Post Staff Writer

UNITED NATIONS, Aug. 7 -- The United Nations is preparing an ambitious new plan to overhaul Liberia's key governing institutions, rebuild its ruined infrastructure and create a force of about 15,000 U.N. peacekeepers with a mandate to pacify the country's warring factions and arrest President Charles Taylor if he fails to leave the country in the coming weeks.

The chief U.N. envoy to Liberia, Jacques Paul Klein, met today with dozens of potential troop contributors to outline U.N. requirements for the West African country. Klein has also been in regular phone contact with Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage to build support for the plan in Washington and to persuade the United States to lend the United Nations a team of foreign service officers and military logistics specialists to help run the mission after U.S. forces leave the region.

The United Nations' plans for Liberia go beyond what the United States believes is necessary. While U.S. officials have advocated the speedy deployment of a U.N. mission in Liberia by Oct. 1, they say they envision a more limited role for the United Nations.

"I think that [Klein] is way out ahead of the game," said one administration official. "It's going to cost a lot of money and the United States would have to pay a large portion of it."

The new U.N. mission would begin moving into Liberia as early as November, replacing a U.S.-supported West African force that began sending troops to Liberia on Monday to end the country's civil war and help resume the delivery of humanitarian aid. It would expand and fan out across Liberia, reaching its full level in February.

A senior U.N. official said "there will probably be a fight" with the Bush administration over the size and the price of the mission, which could cost more than \$500 million, \$125 million of which would be paid by the United States. But the official, who requested anonymity, warned that the United States' failure to back a forceful mission could leave the Bush administration "with a debacle that they would have to come in and fix themselves."

In contemplating a new intervention in Liberia, U.N. officials say they are haunted by the collapse of a U.N. operation in May 2000 in neighboring Sierra Leone, where rebels overwhelmed poorly equipped peacekeepers and took their armored vehicles and weapons. The operation ultimately helped end the civil war after British Marines intervened and the U.N. mission was reinforced with more than 17,000 troops.

"We are working on a fairly sizable operation that will be designed taking into account our experience in Sierra Leone," said Hedi Annabi, head of the U.N. peacekeeping operations department. "We should not be rushed unduly into deploying a force that is not ready because it will come back to haunt us."

It remains unclear whether Liberia's government forces and its two key rebel factions will cooperate with a new U.N. peacekeeping mission. Potential troop contributors and financial supporters, meanwhile, have expressed reluctance to commit to the mission until they have a clearer sense that a peace settlement will stick and that the United States will continue to remain engaged in the operation once the United Nations takes over.

"It doesn't have to do with firepower, it has to do with evacuation," said a senior U.N. official. "The Dutch said if things get ugly and we need to get out badly, we need to know the United States is there."

Senior U.N. officials say that they will not know the full extent of the U.N. undertaking in Liberia until security concerns lessen, allowing a 30-person assessment team to travel to Liberia.

Klein is going Tuesday to Accra, Ghana, where the United States and other regional powers are pressing the warring factions to sign a cease-fire and reach a peace settlement that would end the war. If Taylor has left the country, Klein will go to the Liberian capital of Monrovia while he is in the region.

But Klein and other senior U.N. officials have outlined a preliminary concept of operations for a U.N. mission that would require a far-reaching reconstruction component and a U.N. peacekeeping force that is at least as ambitious as its Sierra Leone mission. "Liberia has been destroyed over the last 15 years," said another senior U.N. official. "It's ground zero."

Klein said Wednesday that the United Nations would like to establish a government of technocrats with a "sprinkling of international civil servants" to run the country for as long as two years before "free and fair elections" could be held.

He said that the United Nations should demilitarize the armed factions, recruit a new police force and pay their salary for up to two years. He said international bureaucrats would step in to help restructure the banking system, overhaul the foreign ministry, conduct a census and rebuild Liberia's railroad from Monrovia to Guinea.

U.N. observers say that Klein's ambitious strategy reflects in part his own preference for big operations. In the absence of a firm directive from the United States, Klein, the former head of well-funded U.N. operations in the Balkans, is seeking to raise expectations so high that it would be politically risky for Washington to deny him what he needs.

"Maybe he's not going to get everything he is asking for, but at least he is putting things on the table that he needs, and if you don't ask you're never going to get them," said Kathy Ward, a former State Department specialist on Africa who serves as the deputy director of the

International Crisis Group's Washington office. "If you don't put enough in you'll have to pay more down the road."

"It's a typical U.S. reaction to a new U.N. operation to say that the cost is too big, let's not make it too expensive," said Princeton Lyman, an assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs from 1996 to 1998. "The result is we tend to under-fund and under-equip U.N. responses to these situations. We have to face the fact that if we don't want this to happen again, we have to spend the resources to do it right."

© 2003 The Washington Post Company