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U.S. Military Team Surveys Liberian Capital Amid Chaos

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 8 — Liberian government troops loyal to President Charles Taylor blocked an American military contingent that was heading toward a refuge for displaced people on the outskirts of this city today and forced the team to turn around.

Liberia's defense minister, Daniel Chea, explained that he had requested the Americans to make a courtesy call to his office before proceeding to the camp, and he insisted that he did not force the group to stop.

The American convoy, which included American marines and military specialists who had arrived here on Monday to inspect the worsening humanitarian situation amid a deepening rebel conflict, swung by Mr. Chea's office before continuing their tour.

There was no immediate comment on the incident from the United States Embassy.

Elsewhere in Monrovia, the capital of this West African nation, the Americans encountered chaotic street scenes as thousands of residents happily mobbed the convoy and chanted slogans denouncing President Taylor.

"No more Taylor!" the protesters shouted. "We want George Bush!" Several people tried to scramble on top of the vehicles traveling in the convoy. A boy was injured in the crush and was treated by American officials from the United States Embassy.

Another tense encounter between the American envoys and Liberian troops unfolded shortly after midday. As a crowd pressed tightly against the convoy and filled the streets, Liberian troops fired guns into the air to disperse the throng. In response, the American marines scrambled out of their vehicles and pointed their weapons in the direction of the gunfire.

Then the commander of the Liberian force ordered his men to pursue the protesters. "Beat them!" he yelled, as the mob scattered, the Liberian soldiers gave chase and the American convoy sped away.

Last week, Mr. Bush called for Mr. Taylor's resignation as part of the solution to an intractable rebel conflict.

In comments to reporters today in Senegal, part of his five-day tour of Africa, Mr. Bush repeated his demand that Mr. Taylor step down.

"Charles Taylor must leave," the president said in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, where he arrived early today.

Mr. Taylor has said that he plans to go into exile but that he will not leave office until an international peacekeeping force has arrived to assume control of the country. Mr. Taylor said on Sunday that he had accepted an offer of asylum in Nigeria, where he would presumably be protected from prosecution on the war crimes charges, since Nigeria has no law compelling it to extradite anyone to a war crimes tribunal.

The White House has been considering whether to send American troops as part of a peacekeeping force, but Mr. Bush said today that his administration was still trying to decide what role the United States would play in Liberia.

"We're in the process of determining what is necessary to maintain the cease-fire and to allow for a peaceful transfer of power," he told reporters.

Mr. Bush's comments came a day after Mr. Taylor, in an interview with The New York Times, accused the United States of supporting Liberian rebels and pressed Washington to prove its commitment to Liberia by sending peacekeepers. Mr. Taylor also added a surprising coda to his promise to step down, calling his exile a brief "cooling-off period" before a return to Liberian politics.

Asked about his legacy, Mr. Taylor, who was indicted on 17 counts of crimes against humanity for "bearing the greatest responsibility" for mutilations and rapes in neighboring Sierra Leone, said he wanted, above all, to be remembered as "the man that brought peace to Liberia." "I think it's expedient at this time for Charles Taylor to sacrifice," he said of his departure. He said he was prepared to leave in the "shortest possible time" after international troops arrived. Otherwise, he said, there would be bedlam.

"If we high-tailed out of here without an international force, don't you think there would be a free-for-all?" Mr. Taylor wondered aloud.

Early on Monday, a team of 15 American military specialists accompanied by 15 rifle-toting marines touched down in helicopters at the heavily fortified American Embassy here to assess Liberia's needs for security and assistance.

Mr. Taylor said on Monday that he planned to use his time in Nigeria to look through his presidential papers and write. He said he planned to return to political life back home after a transitional government had settled in.

"I'll be here to serve my people if the Liberian people want me in the future," he said. Asked whether he planned to seek re-election, he offered, "I don't see that in the very near future." In a wide-ranging interview in the presidential mansion, Mr. Taylor at once took on the United States government, but was careful not to offend. The grandchild of an American settler in this country that was founded by former American slaves, Mr. Taylor, educated in the United States, said he rued being misunderstood and maligned by his country's closest cousin.

"My regret is that they never understood me, they never gave me a chance," he said of the Americans. "I'm at a loss. I harbor no anger. I harbor no animosity. I want to work with my people and hope the United States sees me in a different light."

He said he was particularly pained because he enjoyed no support from Washington, even after winning an election many international observers described as legitimate.

In the war crimes indictment, Mr. Taylor was described somewhat differently: in the Sierra Leone war, it said, "victims were routinely shot, hacked to death and burned to death." The indictment also noted that "mutilations included cutting off limbs and carving" the initials of rebel groups on the victims.

Mr. Taylor originally was a rebel warlord in his own country and his accusers say that when he came to power he formed alliances with groups in neighboring countries, including Sierra Leone, where he was accused of supporting a war on civilians that left upwards of 200,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands maimed or raped in the late 1990's.

Mr. Taylor escaped from an American prison in 1985 while awaiting extradition to Liberia on embezzlement charges. Starting in 1989 he led a seven-year insurgency against his predecessor, the military dictator and onetime American ally named Samuel K. Doe, before being elected president in 1997.

Liberia's standing in the world has fallen precipitously since then, and Mr. Taylor has been singled out for spreading chaos throughout West Africa. Accused of trading arms for diamonds with the rebels in Sierra Leone, his regime is under United Nations Security Council sanctions, barring his government from buying arms, selling diamonds and prohibiting him and his aides from traveling abroad. Sanctions against timber, a lucrative export, kicked in on Monday. The Liberian capital bears the scars of war and devastation. There are no working street lights and no reliable running water. Public hospitals have degenerated. And since the latest rebel incursions into the capital, abandoned buildings have turned into dirty squats of displaced people, where malnutrition and cholera are rife.

Mr. Taylor and his aides say that sanctions, combined with a rebel insurgency, have forced them to spend everything they have on defense. Rebels have made two bloody bids for the capital in the last month alone. A fragile cease-fire has held for the last 10 days.

Mr. Taylor on Monday described the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, commonly known here as LURD, as Islamic extremists who should be a source of worry to the Bush administration. At the same time, he contended that both LURD and its allies, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia — Model for short — enjoyed the blessings of the American government.

As evidence, Mr. Taylor said his forces had captured rebel soldiers who said they were trained by American troops in Guinea, a staunch American ally whose autocratic president, Lansana Conté, is among Mr. Taylor's chief adversaries.

He called the two groups "covert fighting forces of the United States government." He clarified the statement by saying that perhaps the American government was unaware of the rebels' extremist tendencies. "America has been known to unknowingly, for good reasons, support a

cause that turns around to haunt them."

The American government denies supporting the rebels.

Mr. Taylor said he would welcome American troops in the country and step aside as part of "an orderly transition."

He made clear, however, that he had no intention of answering what he called a baseless and "politically motivated" indictment, nor appearing before a court in a foreign country.

"I don't think anyone should deal with a politically motivated indictment," he said. "That's a nonstarter."

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