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## **U.S. Is Said to Back an Increase in U.N. Peacekeepers for Congo**

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 — The United States will support Secretary General Kofi Annan's recommendation to increase the United Nations peacekeeping force in Congo by 2,100 troops, Security Council diplomats said today.

France and many African nations have backed Mr. Annan's call for a larger peacekeeping force with a more robust mandate, but the United States has been reluctant to agree. The mandate for the present force was extended until the end of July to try to reach an agreement.

The Council diplomats, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the United States had not yet decided on strengthening the peacekeeping mandate.

The American decision came as President Bush was on his first trip to Africa.

Three weeks ago, John D. Negroponte, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, said the Bush administration believed that the key to restoring peace in Congo was "the political will among the parties in the Congo and in the neighboring countries," not more peacekeepers.

But today, an American official speaking on condition of anonymity said Washington was willing to increase troop numbers but wanted to ensure they were equipped to deal with the violence in eastern Congo.

Since a 1999 cease-fire, most fighting in the country has stopped, except in the resource-rich east. Congo's president signed a decree on June 30 setting up a power-sharing administration of rebels and the current government. Aid groups estimate that about 2.5 million people have died in Congo's conflict, most from hunger and disease spread by fighting.

Mr. Annan has called for the Security Council to raise the number of peacekeepers in Congo to 10,800 from 8,700. United Nations troops there are allowed to fire only in self-defense and have not intervened to stop violence. On May 30, the Council authorized the separate deployment of a French-led emergency force to the town of Bunia in northeastern Congo to protect refugees, aid workers and the airport.

The 1,500-member French force can shoot to kill to defend civilians but does not have a mandate to disarm tribal fighters.

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