

**June 25, 2003**

## **Latest Peace Hopes Thwarted on Africa's Battlefields**

**By SOMINI SENGUPTA**

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, June 24 — Today was supposed to mark a new beginning for Bunia, a northeastern provincial town in Congo that has become the centerpiece of international efforts to bring some semblance of peace to that country.

A French force was on the ground with orders from the United Nations Security Council to restore security. The daily parade of machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades along its streets was to disappear. Bunia was to be a gun-free zone.

But the promise of a peaceful night's sleep was deferred for the people of Bunia. A spokesman for the multinational force, Col. Gérard Dubois, announced that the deadline would be extended for another day, saying more talks were necessary with the militia that now controls the town. "The ultimatum was pushed back by 24 hours so that everything can be well understood," Colonel Dubois told reporters in Bunia, according to a Reuters report. "It's preferable to be absolutely clear before declaring a 'Bunia free from arms' than to deal with misunderstandings and incidents later."

Nor is Congo the only place in Africa where international efforts to bring peace have been frustrated.

In Liberia, which the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs in Washington calls "a western African country that is suffering from continuing instability and war," a cease-fire deal struck only last week was on the verge of unraveling today.

The chief rebel group, which calls itself Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, announced that it would boycott peace talks until its enemy, the Liberian president, Charles Taylor, stepped down. There were reports of renewed fighting near Monrovia, the capital, prompting yet another exodus of terrified civilians.

"Taylor and his militia groups have uncorked lethal options," read a rebel statement released today.

The cease-fire agreement, which was brokered by United Nations officials, had envisioned a transitional government in Liberia.

President Taylor, who is under indictment by a United Nations war crimes tribunal, had indicated his willingness to step down — in the interests of peace, he said. Then later he said he would not do so, meaning that the country's most recent war, which has lasted three years, will likely drag on.

Next week a delegation from the United Nations Security Council will travel to West Africa. Led by the British ambassador, Jeremy Greenstock, Council members will visit Congo and are also scheduled to visit Liberia.

It will be the Council's second visit to the continent in as many weeks, but it is not clear what the United Nations can or will do to ease the suffering of the Congolese or the Liberians.

Secretary General Kofi Annan has proposed fortifying the United Nations peacekeeping forces on the ground. The French and British concur. The Americans have been the reluctant party, arguing that strengthening a military force alone would be insufficient.

President Bush is scheduled to begin his first trip to Africa on July 7, visiting South Africa, Botswana, Uganda, Niger and Senegal.

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