

# While Liberia Burns

Thursday, July 31, 2003

AS LIBERIA'S capital has been overtaken in the past few days by street-to-street combat, with hundreds of civilians killed and tens of thousands threatened with starvation and disease, a Bush administration strategy toward that poor West African country is emerging: The president is giving the appearance of responding to the United Nations' desperate pleas for U.S. military assistance without actually providing any. Mr. Bush, who raised hopes in Liberia nearly a month ago by promising help just before a showy tour of Africa, last week belatedly ordered three ships carrying some 4,500 troops to deploy off the West African coast. By all accounts, the U.S. forces could quickly put a stop to the fighting among Liberia's ragtag militias, saving many innocent lives in a country that has strong bonds with the United States.

Yet when asked yesterday whether U.S. troops would intervene, Mr. Bush merely reiterated a set of paralyzing preconditions. In order for the United States to act, he said, the fighting must stop, a cease-fire must take hold and President Charles Taylor, the dictator who is the source of the trouble, must leave the country. In other words, once the crisis passes and Liberians are no longer in mortal danger, America will be ready to help -- but even then, Mr. Bush quickly added, "I want to remind you, I also said the troop strength will be limited, and the time frame will be limited."

Administration officials argue that this position is not as ludicrous as it sounds. The United States is working, they say, to broker a cease-fire between Mr. Taylor's loyalists and the rebel forces besieging him. It is also offering to support a more immediate intervention by a force of 1,500 Nigerians, eventually supported by other West African troops. The prospect of that intervention is to be used to coax rebels to withdraw from the parts of the capital, Monrovia, that they control. Mr. Taylor, for his part, has said that he will leave the country once peacekeeping forces arrive -- though it is doubtful he will keep his promise unless the outside force is a formidable one.

So far this unmuscular strategy isn't working. Though the United States introduced an authorizing resolution yesterday at the U.N. Security Council, the Nigerian troops have not gone anywhere -- partly, officials said, because the Bush administration has agreed to contribute only \$10 million of the estimated \$100 million cost of their deployment. Meanwhile, fighting is intensifying on the streets of Monrovia; according to reports, shells rained down on the tin-roofed shacks of one poor neighborhood yesterday, killing and wounding both adults and children, while bullets flew in the neighborhood near the U.S. Embassy. Relief officials said 52,000 displaced persons were crammed into a 35,000-seat stadium and were facing starvation. No food rations have been distributed in the capital since July 18.

Mr. Bush could put an end to this misery; he chooses not to. Instead, as Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo pointed out to the BBC in London, he is like the person who arrives at a burning house and "says, 'Here I am, I have my water, my fire engine. Now, when you put the fire out in your house, I will come in.' " Mr. Obasanjo added: "I wonder what sort of help that is, with all due respect." Americans who recently heard Mr. Bush proclaim his administration's commitment to Africa should be asking the same question.

© 2003 The Washington Post Company