

August 11, 2003

## On Knife Edge, Liberia Awaits Taylor's Move

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 10 — "Gateway to Liberia's Economy," reads the billboard at the entrance to the Free Port of Monrovia.

Inside, rebel soldiers emptied office furniture from one of the last full shipping containers this weekend, stopping only to bark at journalists who stumbled upon their enterprise. Empty cartons of high-protein biscuits, French-made evaporated milk and mounds of cornmeal littered the grounds in front of the hollowed-out World Food Program warehouses. A body bobbed in the water.

This wrecked port, a strategic prize of unsurpassed value to the rebels who hold it now, could either be Liberia's gateway to fresh bloodshed or its portal to peace after 14 years of on-and-off civil war.

The test will come Monday, when President Charles G. Taylor has promised to step down, and his actions could be the turning point in determining whether Liberians will eat or go hungry, whether they will get a fresh start or continue to dodge stray bullets.

In an internationally televised farewell address this evening, Mr. Taylor called the rebels a "surrogate force" of the United States and blamed the Americans for his ouster. "This is an American war against the republic," he said. "They can call off their dogs now."

"I can say I am being forced into exile by the world superpower," he said. "I challenge George Bush: With due respect, Mr. President, please, you are man of God, do something for our people."

The American Embassy in Monrovia had no comment on the speech tonight.

The rebel group controlling the port, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, enjoys the blessings of neighboring Guinea, which receives military aid from the United States.

The port is the pot of gold that has given the advantage to a ragged band of rebels who wear basketball jerseys and women's wigs and describe their sole objective as the ouster of Mr. Taylor.

For more than three weeks, the rebels have held onto the port, doling out cheap rice and free gas to the people on their side of the divided capital. Meanwhile, they are squeezing the life out of the side controlled by Mr. Taylor, who has also been sapped by an arms embargo and cornered

by diplomatic pressure from Africans and Western countries alike. On his side of Monrovia, ordinary men and women are lucky to find a cup of cornmeal for their one daily meal.

The president's own radio station, KISS-FM, had to hunt for fuel this afternoon to turn on its generators and broadcast his final speech.

Cornered by this fierce, well-armed insurgency, Mr. Taylor, a warlord for seven years and president for six, has promised to give up his office. He has been offered asylum in Nigeria.

But as Liberians peer over this historic precipice, they face an abyss of unanswered questions: how soon Mr. Taylor will leave Liberia, as his rebel enemies demand; and whether the rebels will cede control of the port, as American diplomats urge. There is the matter of whether the military standoff will erupt in yet more fighting, or whether the West African peacekeepers now here can prevent that.

Then there is the question of whether the White House, which has made Mr. Taylor's departure a precondition for any direct American engagement in bringing peace to the country, will do much more in this nation that is a peculiar American creation. It was founded by Americans in the anxious pre-Emancipation days of the 19th century, and it became black Africa's first independent republic in 1847. Three American warships are offshore with a total of 2,300 marines on board, but only seven of them have been sent on shore to help.

"We are all looking to Monday with great expectations that we'll see a breakthrough," said Stanley Bedell, a resident on the rebel-held side of town. "We are more optimistic than pessimistic."

Liberians could hardly endure more pessimism. Monrovia's beaches have become burial grounds; people are foraging for snails to curb hunger; men and women are dying of gangrene and malaria; and mothers are watching their girls being raped. Dignity is the rarest commodity, rarer even than phones, electricity and running water. It is impossible to measure misery here: Liberia does not register on the United Nations Human Development Index, as if it had fallen off the map.

There are no ideological differences fueling the destruction. There is simply a contest for power between armed factions that connect to government and rebel factions in neighboring countries. The governments of Guinea and Ivory Coast are believed to be linked to the two Liberian rebel factions, and rebels in Guinea and Ivory Coast are believed to have had links to Mr. Taylor.

For more than a decade, with a trove of natural resources to fight over, this unending cycle of revenge has spread conflict across West Africa. The International Crisis Group, a research and advocacy organization, has singled out Liberia as the "eye of the regional storm."

Mr. Taylor, 55, has played the starring role during 14 years of civil war, and is scorned at home and abroad.

Blamed for fomenting civil war next door in diamond-rich Sierra Leone, Mr. Taylor is under United Nations Security Council sanctions that bar him from selling diamonds, buying weapons or traveling outside his country.

He has been implicated in the spread of weapons and soldiers into conflicts in neighboring Guinea and Ivory Coast. He is widely blamed for fleecing the country of its natural resources, principally timber and diamonds, for his own enrichment.

In June, an indictment unsealed by a war crimes tribunal supported by the United Nations charged him with crimes against humanity over his alleged role in the war in Sierra Leone. Mr. Taylor has dismissed the charges as politically motivated, and his lawyers have filed a counter-claim in the International Court of Justice in The Hague. In his speech tonight, he called the charges against him part of "a grand scheme of propaganda."

The presidents of Ghana, South Africa and Mozambique, which now chairs the African Union, are expected to attend the transfer of power ceremony on Monday. Nigeria's president, Olusegun Obasanjo, has decided not to come but will send an envoy.

Mr. Taylor's resignation alone would not necessarily open a new chapter in the history of this nation of three million people.

"It's still very fragile," said Dominique Liengme, head of mission for the International Committee of the Red Cross, as she brought medicines to a makeshift hospital on the rebel side on Saturday afternoon. "Everything is conditional on his departure."

The test of peace comes after that, Ms. Liengme pointed out: Will peacekeepers be allowed to secure the port and open a safe corridor to the other side? Will a cease-fire hold? Will aid agencies be able to work?

Naturally, rebel leaders were happy to receive the medicines for themselves, but would not allow aid agencies to divert food and fuel to the other side. They said they were reluctant to let West African peacekeepers open a safe corridor into the city center for fear of infiltration by Mr. Taylor's forces. They also oppose his chosen successor, Vice President Moses Blah, describing him as too close an ally of their enemy.

"I'm afraid if Taylor doesn't leave on Monday, on Tuesday morning, expect an attack," said Andrew Tulay, a nurse at a makeshift hospital inside a brewery on the rebel-held side of the city.

While he spoke, two men, one of them a soldier who had been tortured by his commanders, were dying of gangrene today, lying inside the brewery union office that is now the hospital's intensive care unit. The hospital had no means to amputate their infected limbs. Mr. Tulay expected them both to die in the first few days of a post-Taylor Liberia.

Rebel leaders demand that Mr. Taylor resign and leave the country before they give up the port and allow free movement across three strategic bridges that divide the city.

Mr. Taylor's aides lambasted the rebels tonight for holding the rest of the city hostage by keeping control of the port. "That's a typical human rights abuse," Defense Minister Daniel Chea said.

"Sounds like a crime against humanity to me," quipped Mr. Taylor's minister of state, Samuel Jackson.

Today in this partitioned capital, the tableau of terror continued on both sides.

Armed boys, some barely into puberty, were still breaking into homes and shops and emptying them of anything of value, from tins of powdered milk to cellphones to brand-new Opels, still in the showrooms.

For the rebels, the port and the wholesale district have proven to be particularly profitable. One businessman with goods at the port said he had spent \$20,000 on protection money, though that had not kept his goods from trickling out of the warehouse.

Civilians recalled witnessing one rebel soldier busily writing invoices for the looted goods that he was selling out of a wholesale shop. Those civilians said they were too afraid to identify themselves.

On Saturday afternoon, rebel leaders escorted the American Embassy defense attaché, Col. Sue Ann Sandusky, and members of the West African peacekeeping force on a guided tour of the Free Port of Monrovia. They strolled past the six emptied World Food Program warehouses and the hundreds of pried-open containers.

The rebel troops who were pulling the office furniture out of a container earlier in the day had cleared out by the time the visitors arrived. Groups of boy rebels hovered around the grown soldiers. One of the boys grinned at Colonel Sandusky and stretched out his right hand. The colonel pointed to the gleaming blade in his left.

"Put your knife back," she told the boy, several times before he understood and obeyed. "There you go," she said. "You see how easy that was?" The boy grinned and slinked away.