

# Civilians Flee as Rebels Attack Liberian Capital

Taylor Government Again in Jeopardy

By Karl Vick  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Sunday, July 20, 2003

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 19 -- Chaos descended on downtown Monrovia today as advancing rebel forces shelled the Liberian capital and government militias joined the torrent of civilians fleeing the front lines.

As dusk fell, the government of President Charles Taylor appeared in jeopardy for the third time in two months. Taylor, a former warlord facing an indictment for war crimes by a U.N.-backed court, has promised to step down to make way for an international peacekeeping force that might include U.S. troops.

But peacekeepers have yet to show up, and Taylor blamed their absence for the fighting and the quick collapse of the capital's defenses.

"The international community does not care about Liberia," Taylor said in an evening radio address. "And I say to the United States, blood is also on your hands. While our people die, you wait out there."

The attacking force, called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, or LURD, advanced quickly, pushing into the outskirts of the city of 1.5 million by midday and dropping 81mm mortar rounds onto the city center roughly a mile away. Two hours later the shells were falling on Mamba Point, where most relief agencies have their headquarters.

Panicked civilians scrambled for cover, several hundred forming a line outside a fortified compound opposite the U.S. Embassy, where Marines took up positions behind sandbags on the roof.

As mortar fire in the embassy area increased after dark, the U.S. ambassador, John W. Blaney, called on LURD to cease fighting and return to the peace talks. "The world is watching the way you conduct yourselves now," Blaney said in a statement. "Any lasting peace must be based on a broad political understanding, and fighting government forces in Monrovia does not change that fact."

Liberia, founded in the early 19th century for former American slaves, maintains an almost reverential regard for the United States.

"They have deflectors on the embassy, and if they put the deflector up, the rocket will go into the sea," said Samson Maximo, 23, describing a defense grounded more in wishful thinking than military technology. "So we need the Americans to put the deflectors up and save Liberians."

A rumor swept across the capital this morning that peacekeepers had arrived at Monrovia's port, and in a spontaneous and stirring mass action, thousands of Liberians picked up palm leaves and marched to the port to greet them.

Chanting "No more war! We want peace!" the civilians proceeded down the main avenue that only an hour earlier had been clogged with people fleeing the other way, many with foam mattresses and other belongings on their heads. Some of the protesters proceeded past the port toward the front lines, saying they would beseech LURD fighters to lay down their arms.

"They want to face the enemy there and tell them they are tired," said James B. Sumo. "We suffer too much in this country. I lost my father in this war. I lost my brother. I lost my sister. In this war. We are tired."

For a half-hour the mass of humanity blocked the pickups loaded with fighters careering toward the front. Then Liberia's defense minister addressed the crowd, breaking the news that the report of the peacekeepers' arrival was "just a rumor, a bad rumor."

Disappointed, the demonstrators outside the port headed back toward town, but some proved more insistent, not turning back until police fired in the air and broke out their bullwhips.

As the protesters retreated quickly, they shouted a new chant: "No soldier! They all want to loot!"

The fighting itself appeared to be relatively light and the rebel advances swift. Taylor relies on largely untrained militias rather than a national army, and the government side surrendered a key bridge at the edge of town almost without a fight. Gunmen in T-shirts and bandannas -- "We are marines," said one -- complained that it had been more than two months since they were paid.

"We don't fight. We want peace," said Brendan Kamara, 23, who wore the dog tags of the Armed Forces of Liberia.

"You can't get power by fighting," said Afri Hilton, from the militia called "Jungle Fighters." Like many militiamen, he carried a New Testament in his front pocket. "The power the politicians are getting is for themselves and their family, not for us."

"You see how we are depressed, huh?" said a fighter who called himself Action Ray. "The international community has to step in."

President Bush promised this week that U.S. troops would "participate" in Liberia but has yet to decide whether that means combat forces or noncombat support for the West African countries that would provide most of a peacekeeping force through the Economic Community of West African States.

But the West African force has been slow in arriving. News agencies reported that Nigeria, the regional power likely to dominate any peacekeeping effort, had an advance team en route to Liberia today. But officials say no troops are expected for at least a week.

Whether U.S. forces would follow remains a central question for Liberians. A 32-member U.S. military team, which is preparing a report for Bush on how peacekeepers could help relief efforts, remained confined to the embassy compound. The sprawling seaside embassy is a relic of the Cold War, when Liberia served as a listening post and regional headquarters for U.S. intelligence.

"Where's America? And the promise Bush made?" said Liberia's maritime commissioner, Benjamin Uray, standing near the bridge leading to downtown Monrovia. The span is where the rebels were turned back three weeks ago.

In violence today, a Time magazine photographer suffered a chest wound in the crossfire. Many people wounded in fighting were taken in wheelbarrows to hospitals run by aid agencies. No reliable count of casualties was available.

Taylor, whom rebels are seeking to remove, said he stood by his pledge to accept asylum in Nigeria. But he emphasized that he would not "move one inch" until peacekeepers arrived "in sufficient quantities that I can no longer worry about how many of you will die."

He also sought to rally the reluctant government militias, who on paper outnumber the rebels more than 10 to 1.

"My life depends on you. Your lives depend on me," Taylor said. "I ask you to reinvigorate yourself. Deepen into your courage. Let's move forward and defeat these forces of evil. Because the international community does not care about Liberia."