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Pentagon Leaders Warn of Dangers for U.S. in Liberia

By **CHRISTOPHER MARQUIS** and **THOM SHANKER**

WASHINGTON, July 24 — Two days after Secretary of State Colin L. Powell called for the speedy deployment of troops to Liberia, the top two American military officers warned today of significant dangers facing United States military involvement there and called for a clear mission and a strategy for its successful end before any troops are sent.

The anarchy and violence in Liberia, they predicted, would not yield to a quick solution.

"It's not a pretty situation," Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said during his reconfirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "It's not going to give way to any instant fix. Whatever the fix is going to be is going to have to be a long-term fix."

Two days ago, Mr. Powell acknowledged his frustration with the slow pace of the administration so far, telling *The Washington Times* that "we do have an interest in making sure that West Africa doesn't simply come apart."

Pentagon officials and military officers have for several weeks described the complexities — and dangers — of American involvement in trying to separate warring factions in Liberia, which was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. But the comments today by General Myers and Gen. Peter Pace of the Marine Corps, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, were the most sobering public analysis to date of the risks.

"It is potentially a very dangerous situation," said General Pace, who was appearing for his own reconfirmation hearing. "If we're asked to do something militarily, we need to make sure we do it with the proper numbers of troops and that we be prepared for the eventualities of having to take military action."

General Pace cited an ominous precedent, the failed relief mission to Somalia, which included the deaths of 18 troops in a 1993 firefight in Mogadishu. After the raid, later made famous in the book and the movie "Black Hawk Down," General Pace was sent to Somalia as the second-ranking officer of the task force that reinforced American troops, and then withdrew. The generals faced insistent questioning from Senator John W. Warner of Virginia, the Republican chairman of the Armed Services Committee and a former Navy secretary. He called the situation in Liberia "very tragic," but said, "In my judgment, it is a situation that poses great personal risk to forces, such as our forces, that could be injected into that very fast-moving and volatile situation there in Monrovia and the greater Liberia."

In a closed session with the House International Relations Committee today, Mr. Powell reiterated his support for an American role, citing it as a moral imperative.

Representative Donald M. Payne, a New Jersey Democrat who is the ranking minority member of the panel's Africa subcommittee, said afterward that Mr. Powell was "sympathetic to sending in troops."

As for the Pentagon, he said, "There's no question, they don't want to go near Liberia." A member of the Congressional Black Caucus, Mr. Payne said bluntly that the reluctance was racist. "It's because they're African, and they're black, and they don't count," he said.

General Myers laid out the military's broad requirements for potential deployment to Liberia, using a formulation paralleling the so-called Powell doctrine, which Mr. Powell laid out when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs from October 1989 to September 1993.

"I'm concerned, like you," General Myers said, "that whatever we do, that we have a very clear mission, we understand the mission we're asked to do; that we have an idea of when the mission is going to be over — in other words, when can we come out of the mission? And that we have sufficient force to deal with the security situation."

President Bush is expected to decide soon whether to send as many as 2,000 American troops to back up two peacekeeping brigades to be deployed from Nigeria.

The Economic Community of West African States has committed two Nigerian battalions, which may be followed by a battalion drawn from Mali, Senegal and Ghana, a United Nations official said today.

In Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, where one of the Nigerian battalions has just finished a tour of duty, Gen. Martin Agwai, asked by reporters today about the timing of the deployment, hedged, saying: "What is better: to rush in and make a lot of mistakes, or to really make sure everything is done right, and once we get there, we deliver?"

At a closed meeting of the United Nations Security Council this afternoon, the American pledge of \$10 million to support the Ecomog mission was welcomed. But when the question of a possible troop commitment came up, the United States ambassador, John D. Negroponte, said: "We are not in a position to make a commitment at this time. We are not ruling it out. We are just not ruling it in."

Afterward, Jacques Klein, the United Nations special envoy to Liberia, told reporters the plan for sending in the Nigerian forces would be finished Monday.

Some advocates of swift intervention argue that a United States-backed force could quickly pacify a nation already exhausted by war. President Charles Taylor, who has been indicted for human rights crimes, has said he would leave the country for exile in Nigeria only after the Americans arrive.

Congressional action is not required for the president to send in peacekeeping troops, but Mr. Warner urged Mr. Bush to define clear national security interests before ordering troops to Liberia.

He insisted that before American troops are committed, "there be a clear and identifiable strategic interest, security interest of this country," adding, "That, to me, remains somewhat to be defined in this situation."

Fighting for Port in Monrovia

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 24 (Reuters) — Liberia's rebels and government troops engaged in heavy fighting today for the seaport here.

The port stands between the rebels and President Charles Taylor's downtown stronghold. Warehouses there hold the city's main food supplies and are now in rebel hands, cut off from a refugee-crowded city desperately short on food and water.

Despite the fighting, rebels said they were trying to put into effect the cease-fire they promised on Tuesday.

"We don't want to take the country by force," said a rebel leader, Charles Benney. "We want to do it by negotiated settlement. A military takeover isn't in anyone's interest."