

Annan Presses Nigeria on Peacekeepers

U.N. Chief Concerned About Reports of Worsening Situation in Liberia

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UNITED NATIONS, July 29 -- U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, voicing growing alarm at the worsening violence in Liberia, appealed today to Nigeria to accelerate its intervention into the war-afflicted West African country and asked the Security Council to grant him authority to underwrite a greater share of the Nigerian peacekeeping costs.

The moves come as the commander of the Nigerian peacekeeping force, Brig. Gen. Festus Okwonkwo, said that it is unlikely that Nigerian troops would arrive in Liberia before the end of the week. Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo told reporters that Nigerian peacekeepers could be in Liberia in "a few days," but some U.N. officials expressed concern that Obasanjo may be having second thoughts about his country's commitment to send two battalions to Liberia.

"I am deeply concerned at the dramatic deterioration of the situation on the ground," Annan wrote today to the president of the 15-nation Security Council. "It is therefore absolutely essential to accelerate the deployment of the [Nigerian-led West African] 'vanguard force' to pave the way for the early deployment of the MNF [multinational force]."

The debate over foreign intervention played out as forces loyal to Liberian President Charles Taylor launched a new offensive to retake the country's second largest city, Buchanan, which fell this week to rebel forces from the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy. U.N. officials said the ongoing fighting threatens to cause a major humanitarian crisis in the Liberian capital of Monrovia, where a population of 1 million has scarce access to clean water and food.

Annan acknowledged publicly for the first time today that Nigeria's commitment to send about 1,400 troops to Liberia is conditioned on the willingness of the international community to provide "the necessary logistical support." Last week, the United Nations' chief envoy, Jacques Klein, indicated that Obasanjo had made the decision to send troops into Liberia.

The Bush administration ordered the Pentagon to position a limited number of Marines off the coast of Liberia to support the Nigerian-led West African force and pledged to provide \$10 million to cover some costs. U.S. diplomats in New York began circulating to key Security Council members elements of a draft resolution that would grant international peacekeepers authority to use force to restore peace to Liberia.

But weeks of discussions among U.S., Nigerian and U.N. military officials have failed to satisfy the Nigerians that all their needs will be met. "We made it clear from the beginning we needed assistance in their deployment, in terms of logistics, in terms of funding," Nigerian Foreign Minister Oluyemi Adeniji told BBC radio. "All the cards are not in Nigeria's hands."

A complicating factor for the Nigerians is the failure of the United States or any other country to commit to leading a multinational force that could take charge in Liberia once the Nigerians have restored stability and overseen the departure of Taylor, who has been indicted for war crimes and been offered asylum in Nigeria.

Annan wrote that he still envisions that the Nigerians would transfer authority to the leader of a multinational force that would "facilitate the installation of a successor government and the delivery of humanitarian assistance." While he did not identify the lead nation, U.N. officials said that Annan hopes that the United States would agree to be the one.

Annan said a U.N. peacekeeping mission would ultimately be established to take over from the international force, implement a peace agreement and hold "free and fair elections."

The U.N. chief is concerned that the failure of the Nigerians to intervene quickly could jeopardize his long-term plans to restore democracy to Liberia, according to U.N. officials.

In an effort to prod the Nigerians, Annan said the United Nations "stands ready" to transport an initial Nigerian battalion of 770 peacekeepers currently serving in Sierra Leone to Monrovia.

He asked the Security Council to give "urgent consideration" to allowing him to borrow resources from a U.N. mission in Sierra Leone to support the deployment of a second Nigerian battalion from Lagos, Nigeria, and a third battalion of 750 Malian, Ghanaian and Senegalese peacekeepers.