

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP - MEDIA RELEASE

Liberia: ICG urges U.S. to lead a robust multinational force

Washington DC/Brussels, 16 July 2003: The International Crisis Group called today for speedy decision and action by the Bush Administration to respond to the crisis in Liberia by committing the United States to leading the deployment there of a robust multinational stabilisation force (MNF).

ICG President Gareth Evans said:

-Every day that passes without a full commitment by the United States government to support the ceasefire in Liberia with military force on the ground increases the chances of further bloodshed. It also allows additional time and space for Charles Taylor to find a way of staying in power. He has decimated and demoralised his own people, sown instability throughout West Africa and he must go now.

President Bush has been home for days since his African trip. Two U.S. military assessments have been conducted. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has spelt out how the pieces come together- US involvement, regional African involvement and Taylor's departure. It is time for Washington to take speedy and decisive action.

The critical need is for the U.S. to provide visible leadership for the multinational force. Logistic and financial support alone are insufficient. The U.S. will need to put "boots on the ground," as did the UK in neighbouring Sierra Leone, and the French in Cote d'Ivoire. Virtually all parties in Liberia not only have expressed their readiness to accept U.S. troops in their country but have been vigorously urging that role, given the historic identification of the country with the United States.

To accommodate various US sensitivities, the sequence of events could be as hinted yesterday by Kofi Annan. A West African (ECOWAS) contingent of 1000-1500 would hit the ground first. Taylor then would leave for Nigeria, hopefully voluntarily. U.S. forces, with their logistics, communications, and command and control capacity, would arrive almost simultaneously- not necessarily in large numbers, but in sufficiently large numbers to be effective and visible. That force would then be augmented by several thousand more West African soldiers to verify the standing down of all rebel and government forces and the stabilisation of the situation throughout the country. As the situation calmed, blue-helmeted UN peacekeepers would take over the military role from the US-led multinational force.

Taylor's promised departure is an essential requirement for ending the bloodshed in Liberia. If he doesn't leave voluntarily for Nigeria, as he has promised he will, he will have to be made to go: the Security Council should give the Sierra Leone Special Court,

which has indicted Taylor for crimes against humanity, Chapter VII enforcement powers, enabling him to be arrested, detained and removed to Sierra Leone.

The US military role in Liberia would have the following key components:

- to provide overall command and control for the MNF;
- to help as necessary to provide security in and around Monrovia, particularly the airport and ports;
- to provide the logistics capability to spread the security umbrella of ECOWAS's West African troops to regional strategic points, including sites for disarmament and reintegration (DR) and border crossings;
- to establish a joint peacekeeping planning process with ECOWAS and with the UN (through the Secretary General's Special Representative, Jacques Klein) to deal with DR issues, the process of transition to an interim government, meeting humanitarian needs and supporting the UN in dealing with refugees and internally displaced people: the object being to manage the transition to a formal blue helmets UN peacekeeping operation as early as possible.

Military intervention on its own of course is not enough. A UN-led political transition must also then follow - to an interim government, reconciliation, and the rebuilding of national institutions, infrastructure and the economy.

ICG's West Africa Project Director, Comfort Ero said: There is a universal cry from every voice that matters, within Liberia and internationally, for the United States to lead an effort, once and for all, to end the disastrous disintegration of Liberia and the destabilisation of the entire region to which Charles Taylor's destructive leadership has contributed so much.