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A War America Can Afford to Stop

By CHESTER A. CROCKER

WASHINGTON

The news that peacekeeping troops from Nigeria and other West African countries will head into Liberia next week and that Charles Taylor, the country's thuggish ruler, may go into exile at that time is to be cheered. But it should not become an excuse for the United States to delay or decide against sending ashore its own forces to ensure Liberia's return to security and political stability.

Liberia is not just another African country. It is an American creation, founded by former slaves 150 years ago, reflecting our image and legacy. American leaders have been ducking the Liberia challenge since Mr. Taylor launched his rebellion in 1989. But President Bush (in word if not yet in deed) appears anxious to break with tradition. Nonetheless, a fierce debate continues within his administration, hampering America's capacity to lead and to bring relief to Liberia's suffering people.

Skeptics make a number of arguments. They argue that, with plenty of work ahead in Iraq and Afghanistan, America's military is severely stretched and that another commitment of scarce combat units is the last thing it needs. Some fret about the possibility of getting sucked into a morass and make allusions to Somalia and the hideous imagery of "Black Hawk Down."

In addition, these doubters, hoping to avoid action, have knowingly set the bar of conditions for American deployment too high — insisting not only that West African forces precede us and that Mr. Taylor depart, but also that a stable cease-fire be in place among the Taylor loyalists and the two major rebel groups.

But their main criticism has been that Africa simply doesn't matter — that it is not, as candidate Bush put it in 2000, part of America's "national strategic interest." In other words, let the other Africans and the postcolonial Europeans deal with it — even in a nation whose capital, currency, flag and political structure all bear an American imprint.

Some of these arguments make more sense than others. Yes, American forces are stretched — but if they are too stretched to spare the few thousand marines President Bush has already put on ships headed to West Africa, then the time has come for a major reassessment of America's readiness for global leadership. If we worry about being able to keep the peace in Liberia for a few months, we should worry even more about the conclusions being drawn from this uncertainty by our rivals and allies alike — particularly the Chinese, the North and South Koreans and the Japanese.

As for the Somalia analogy, it is simply a red herring. Liberians are not warlord-controlled Somalis — they are not spoiling for a fight, especially with the country they have always looked to for partnership and even salvation. For a better comparison, consider what happened in neighboring Sierra Leone in 2000. Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain showed how 1,200 well-trained combat troops, through a skilled, time-limited intervention, could resuscitate a floundering United Nations operation and bring political stability.

Most important, the Liberia crisis does, in fact, affect significant United States interests. Our efforts would restore order not just in Liberia but throughout a troubled region whose stability affects American interests in combating terrorism and promoting good governance. Liberia is a specific example of the broader challenge posed by failed states everywhere, which we are (slowly) grasping are the incubators of almost every hostile challenge to American interests and values around the globe. And if Washington wants other countries to help in sharing security burdens that fall on its shoulders in the future, it is essential that it play a lead role in Liberia today. Finally, this is about stopping, relatively quickly, a humanitarian disaster at reasonable cost.

In some ways, the intervention has, in effect, already begun. The American ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte, is working on a resolution to give the organization's authorization to the peacekeeping forces of the Economic Community of West African States and any other members of a coalition of the willing. This resolution would also call for a follow-on, blue-helmeted United Nations peace operation to shepherd the country through reconstruction and political transition.

In addition, the American 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit will be in position to act within a few days. America has committed \$10 million for military logistics and support to the African countries' initiative. A seasoned American diplomat and former Air Force major general, Jacques Klein, has been tapped by the United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, to run its Liberia transition effort. American interests are represented by a gutsy, experienced ambassador, John Blaney, who has put the heat on Liberian factions to rein in their gunmen and kept the American flag flying in Monrovia, the capital, despite pressures from some in Washington to take it down and look away.

President Bush needs to recognize that the African nations' decision to send in troops is our chance to act — that making our role contingent on verified cease-fires or on Mr. Taylor's confirmed departure would risk losing the momentum gained this week and only encourage mischief among the leaders of Liberia's armed factions, whose control of their own forces is uncertain.

Liberians, at this point, are not capable of finding their own way back to peace. They want American troops — not just African neighbors — on the ground to ensure even-handedness. A self-confident American administration should not hesitate to have its forces deploy alongside African troops to ensure that Liberia's 14-year nightmare will finally end.

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