

August 10, 2003

Vice President of Liberia Prepares to Take Control

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 9 — He was trained as a mechanic and then as a guerrilla fighter, alongside West Africa's most famous warlord, Charles G. Taylor. He served as the disciplinarian in Mr. Taylor's rebel army and then as ambassador to Libya. He was appointed vice president in 2000, but then was imprisoned for 10 days last June, accused of taking part in a coup attempt.

At noon on Monday, Vice President Moses Blah, an unassuming 56-year-old man whose one striking quality is that he drives his own jeep, is expected to become President Taylor's successor. The Liberian Constitution — mimicking the American one, like most everything else in this West African republic founded by Americans in 1847 — provides that the vice president takes over if the president can no longer serve.

Mr. Taylor is expected to hand over the presidency at 11:59 a.m. on Monday, in what could be a crucial step toward restoring peace in this country. He has been under pressure to leave Liberia, but has said nothing about when he might actually do so.

The appointment of Mr. Blah, who has stood alongside Mr. Taylor ever since he began his insurgency to topple Samuel K. Doe from the presidency, has raised eyebrows about whether he will simply function as Mr. Taylor's proxy.

Leaders of the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy oppose his appointment, calling him part of Mr. Taylor's "criminal enterprise." They demand that a neutral figure be appointed to lead a transition government.

Despite their opposition, one military official of the rebel group today promised that Mr. Blah's appointment would not set off a resumption of fighting, only dialogue.

"We will only tell them Moses Blah is not acceptable," said the rebel leader, Gen. Sekou Kamara. "We know our people need peace."

Mr. Blah is a former operator of a plant that produces animal feed and, like Mr. Taylor, is a graduate of Tajura Military Training College in Libya, where he studied from 1985 to 1989, Agence France-Presse reported. He speaks Arabic, along with English, French and his native Dan.

The capital has been quiet for several days, allowing aid workers to deliver medicines Friday to a makeshift clinic in rebel-held territory.

The same is not true, though, of the southeastern front in this war, where another rebel group, Movement for Democracy in Liberia, appears to have punched through the strategic port city of Buchanan and continued to advance toward Monrovia.

Mr. Blah, for his part, has welcomed the rebels as "brothers" who can partake in a new government.

"Let bygones be bygones," he said in an interview with The Associated Press this week. "If there is power, we can share it."

For his part, Mr. Taylor is scheduled to deliver his farewell speech to the nation this weekend and to cede power on Monday, in a ceremony that is expected to draw a handful of African heads of state trying to promote peace in this country — among them Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, John Kufuor of Ghana and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria.

Mr. Obasanjo has offered Mr. Taylor a haven, despite a war crimes indictment that hangs over his head in connection with accusations that he played a role in fomenting civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Mr. Taylor's exit has been said by the United States to be a precondition for any American military involvement in peacekeeping in this country. Three American warships are off the Liberian coast carrying a total of 2,300 marines. Seven marines are here now, coordinating logistics with the first West African forces to land in Liberia.

American officials have proposed to rebel officials that they allow West African and marine peacekeepers to secure the port, which had been controlled by rebels, and to allow the traffic of food and fuel and other aid goods between rebel- and government-held halves of the capital.

As for Mr. Blah's arrest and jailing for 10 days in June on suspicion of conspiring with Americans to overthrow Mr. Taylor, both he and Mr. Taylor now say it was a misunderstanding.

Two deputy ministers arrested at the time died in custody. The circumstances of their deaths remain unexplained.