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Liberian Says Critics Abroad Contributed to His Downfall

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 12 — Liberia's besieged president, Charles Taylor, who has promised to step aside for the sake of peace, today berated his detractors abroad for contributing to his downfall and called on them to deliver the economic benefits that have eluded ordinary Liberians during his tenure.

"If you can stand up and call upon a legitimate president to step down and leave, the president accepts the challenge," he said before an adoring crowd of about 1,000 at a rally at the headquarters of the governing National People's Party. "But I also advance the challenge: Come and do for Liberia. If you cannot come and bring the good to our people, you will have done the greatest injustice to this republic."

Mr. Taylor did not specify today whom he was blaming. But in the past, he has pointed to the United States for supporting his rebel enemies, at least indirectly, through its West African ally, Guinea.

"I realize that because of exogenous factors that have confronted us, our economy is wrecked," he said at the rally, which had been delayed by torrential rains.

The questions of whether and when Mr. Taylor will actually step aside remain locked in a stalemate. He has accepted a Nigerian offer of asylum, but has repeatedly said he will not leave until an international peacekeeping force is in place. Rebels now control about 60 percent of the country, and Mr. Taylor is wanted for war crimes by a United Nations-supported tribunal in Sierra Leone.

On Friday, the rebel group called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy threatened a firefight if the peacekeepers came before Mr. Taylor left.

About 1,500 West African peacekeepers are scheduled to arrive within two weeks. Officials in the Bush administration, under pressure to intervene in this West African nation settled by freed American slaves 150 years ago, have not yet announced whether the United States will deploy a substantial force to help stabilize the country or simply provide financial and logistical aid to West African peacekeepers.

A team of American military experts now here to conduct what they call a humanitarian assessment has said the survey is intended to assist any peacekeepers who come here.

This afternoon, Mr. Taylor reiterated his pledge to step aside, but said nothing about when or for how long.

"I have decided to make the ultimate sacrifice," he said. "I have decided to be the sacrificial lamb so you, my people, will live."

He reserved his ire for unidentified critics.

"We do not have light because you do not want us to have light; we do not have water because you do not want us to have water," he said. "World, where is your conscience? You have a straight face to say Liberia is a failed state. You have a straight face to say to president of Liberia, 'Leave your country.' "

The hardiest party faithful danced in the mud, and the army band played cheerful songs under the rain.

"Eh, Poppy, we like you, Poppy!" they chanted.

Earlier this week, a variation of the same refrain greeted the American military experts who came to begin their assessment.

"Eh, George Bush, we like you, George Bush!" crowds of ecstatic Liberians chanted to them.