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An Evolving Idea for Liberia Envisions U.N. Trusteeship

By TIM WEINER

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 16 — Almost everyone here says Liberia is a failed nation, and has been for many years. Until 72 hours ago, no one had known quite what to do about it.

Now a plan is taking shape to turn over control of this powerless, penniless, starving country to a United Nations trusteeship — a kind of world government.

This international group would help run the country, backed by American dollars and foreign soldiers recruited from across the world, until Liberia proves capable of running itself, say international officials, diplomats and aid workers here.

This plan, which has not yet been committed to paper, would entail a global effort to help Liberia build a viable government. The arrival of 200 United States marines here on Thursday helped create a sense of the stability needed for the plan to proceed. The marines came to support an outgunned West African peacekeeping force against gangs of militias and thugs.

In time, if all goes well, soldiers from as far away as the Balkans and Bangladesh would police the country; European, American and Liberian technicians would rebuild the nation's shattered electricity; and water systems and people forced to flee to other parts of the country by the war would return to their villages on paved roads, United Nations officials hope. For the first time in years, Liberia might know a measure of peace.

Today, in Accra, Ghana, the United Nations special representative for Liberia, Jacques P. Klein, is to meet with representatives of the three warring forces that have ripped Liberia apart — the government and the two rebel militias that hold perhaps 80 percent of the countryside.

Mr. Klein, a career American diplomat and retired Air Force major general, has been in a similar position before, serving as Secretary General Kofi Annan's coordinator of United Nations operations in Bosnia — once a classic example of a failed state.

If things go according to plan, the three Liberian factions would agree that they would not fight political or military battles, and that they would call off an election tentatively scheduled for October. The warring parties would put away their weapons and agree to offer whatever technical expertise they possess to support an international effort to rebuild Liberia from scratch.

Under this blueprint, several thousand additional West African peacekeeping forces would help secure the country in coming weeks. They would supplement 770 Nigerian peacekeepers now here, who are supported by the 200 newly arrived marines but are still outgunned by thousands of armed men and boys.

Then the United Nations Security Council would resolve to put Liberia under trusteeship, a rarely used form of world governance generally intended to administer former colonies in Africa and the Pacific judged incapable of self-rule.

The additional peacekeepers would be sought mostly from nations in Central Europe, Southwest Asia and Africa and would be used to help police this lawless land.

The nations sending peacekeepers may be comforted, officials said, by the presence of three American warships now bobbing within sight of Monrovia's harbor, and the more than 2,000 United States marines aboard them.

All of this will take time, money, luck and patience, officials said. "It won't be tomorrow," said Teah Wesseh, a director of the Christian Children's Association of Liberia, here in Monrovia. "But life will come back."

The effort will also require the support of the White House and Congress, as well as of the Liberian people.

On the streets of Monrovia, people seem to overwhelmingly favor an international role in a transitional Liberian government.

"I think the interim government should be headed by the international community," said Peter Toe, 52, an engineer trying to repair a ruined state-run electrical plant. "The guns that liberate should not rule."

Solomon Zeekkeh, 20, a student who said he was wounded by a stray bullet on Monday, the day the former President Charles G. Taylor resigned and went into exile in Nigeria, put it more plainly: "Without the international community, there would be nothing good done in this country."

Mr. Klein said in an interview here that he had spent part of July in the United States reminding senators, representatives and senior military officers that the United States had a moral and political debt to pay to Liberia, founded by Americans in 1847 as a homeland for freed slaves. But there is a bit of subsequent history involving Liberia and the United States that is known to very few Americans.

"During World War II," he said, "when the United States and the Allies needed an airfield in Africa, Liberia provided it. Liberia produced most of the rubber used by the Allies in the war after the Japanese seized the rubber fields of Asia."

During much of the cold war, he added, Liberia provided the biggest base of operations in Africa for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Other officials noted that the present site of the United States Embassy here in Monrovia, in fact, used to be that C.I.A. station.

"In some ways, the United States is the godfather here," Mr. Klein said. "You don't let your godchild down — especially when your godchild has come through for you."

This argument may have moved some hearts and minds in Washington, along with efforts by the United States ambassador here, John W. Blaney, to put Liberia on the American radar screen at a time when roughly 170,000 American troops are in Iraq, Afghanistan and, significantly, the Balkans, where they have been stationed for about seven years.

The business of rebuilding failed states is something President Bush vowed he did not want to do — before the Sept. 11 attacks and the realization that failed states like Afghanistan could be breeding grounds for violence far beyond their borders.

But that special relationship between the United States and Liberia, which now ranks 174th out of 175 nations on the United Nations' global ranking of health and living conditions, may move Washington to back the idea of United Nations trusteeship.

"It's a state that has collapsed," Mr. Klein said. A trusteeship could provide the political and military architecture for rebuilding the fractured framework of society in Liberia, including the police, hospitals, schools and government itself.

Trusteeship, now rarely used, is a form of world governance that was employed after World War II to administer former colonies in Africa and the Pacific that were deemed unready for self-rule.

Past cases include the nations now known as Somalia and Western Samoa. Somalia became independent in the early 1960's, though it eventually deteriorated into chaos.

The only relevant example from recent history may be East Timor, where a United Nations trusteeship oversaw peacekeepers who moved in when the Timorese sought independence from Indonesia in 1999.

A different example might be the United Nations effort to establish a transitional authority in a region of the former Yugoslavia called Eastern Slavonia.

In 1996 and 1997, Mr. Klein, as a United Nations representative, oversaw 5,000 peacekeeping forces from Argentina, Belgium, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Poland, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Those troops helped demilitarize the area, allowed refugees to go home and, in time, created peace — the very things Liberia desperately needs.

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