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Mediators Work on Liberian Peace Deal

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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MONROVIA, Liberia (AP) -- International mediators worked Monday to wrap up a peace deal for Liberia, while calm settled into the capital and shopkeepers opened for the first time in a month.

Drivers filled the streets, and residents and refugees poured out in search of work and food, reassured by the absence of gunmen and by the expanding presence of West African peacekeepers.

"Today is better than yesterday, the gunmen are going away -- it's coming on, gradually," said Johnson Saryee, an unemployed truck driver among thousands gathering at Monrovia's port in hopes of finding work.

The last time Monrovia saw such calm was July 19, during a break in fighting between government forces and rebels who had besieged the capital since early June.

Food markets were open for the first time in a month Monday, but many of the crowds were out of money after selling all their belongings to buy food during the attacks. When the cash ran out, they and their families lived on bristly flower leaves and snails.

"I want to go and beg for food," said Ethel Weah, a gaunt 32-year-old trudging in from Monrovia's outskirts. "There's food in town, but I can't buy it -- no money."

The small, welcome signs of peace come a week after President Charles Taylor resigned Aug. 11 and flew into exile in Nigeria, forced out by West African and U.S. pressure and 10 weeks of rebel attacks on his capital.

In Accra, Ghana, negotiators said they hoped Liberia's government and two rebel movements could sign a power-sharing deal by 6 p.m. (2 p.m. EDT). An interim government is slated to take over from Taylor's successor, Moses Blah, in October, and would run Liberia until elections are held in two years.

The peace talks, sidelined by repeated violations of a June 17 cease-fire reached in Ghana, saw a breakthrough Sunday when the leading rebel movement dropped its demand for one of the top posts in the interim government.

Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy had sought the vice chairmanship. West African mediators had threatened to suspend talks for a month unless the rebels yielded on that point.

``We want to prove to the entire world that this whole thing is not about LURD wanting power," said George Dweh, a leader of the rebel delegation, announcing the concession on Sunday.

Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, the former Nigerian junta leader mediating the talks, said he hoped ``all the parties will sign a comprehensive peace agreement" Monday.

Abubakar said it was still possible that LURD might be given an additional three days to sign, saying it still had ``minor issues" to resolve.

In Monrovia, Ghana Col. Theophilus Tawiah, chief of staff of West Africa's two-week-old peace mission, said foreign troops had taken up positions on the Po River outside the capital and were easing armed rebels out of the city center.

More troops were expected to arrive Monday as the force grows. There will be 3,250 foreign troops when it is fully deployed.

``Things are improving everyday," Tawiah said. ``It's much better than it was."

In a week, ``the situation is really stabilized here," said Staff Sgt. Jacob Reiff of Oshkosh, Wis., among about 200 Marines and other American troops sent onshore to back up the West African force.

The calm is far from secure, however.

Both sides have kept their AK-47s, grenades and rocket-launchers, although most of the armed insurgents have pulled out. The U.N. envoy for Liberia, Jacques Klein, on Sunday announced the United Nations would donate \$50 million to help demobilize fighters and restore water and electricity, both knocked out by Liberia's 1989-1996 civil war and never repaired under Taylor

One rebel, claiming to be 18 but looking far younger, walked Monrovia's streets Monday with only an AK-47 clip. His commander had taken his weapon away.

Residents said only the days were calm in Monrovia -- with fighters taking to the streets again when dark fell.

``During the day they put the guns away -- but at night, 'Bang, bang,'" said Louis Teah, a 26-year-old driver.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Associated Press writer Kwasi Kpodo in Accra, Ghana, contributed to this report.

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