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Advance Peacekeepers Assessing Liberia

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 31 — The shelling subsided and children poured into the streets today for the first time in 13 days, as 10 unarmed West African soldiers, here to assess conditions for the deployment of a peacekeeping force, drove around the city and brought a glimmer of hope to a capital without much.

From nearby Ghana, the headquarters of the Economic Community of West African States, came the news that 1,500 Nigerian peacekeepers would arrive by Monday and that within three days after that the Liberian president, Charles G. Taylor, would leave. Mr. Taylor's ouster is the principal goal of the rebels who have been attacking the city.

Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the executive secretary of the West African regional block, known as Ecowas, said tonight that the first batch of troops would assist in the departure of Mr. Taylor and provide a smooth transition to his successor.

Initially, the peacekeepers would be authorized only to secure the capital, Mr. Chambas said, and stand between the warring government and rebel forces. All sides have agreed to abide by a cease-fire once the peacekeepers arrive, he said.

"The expectation is none of them will challenge the force," he added. "If they do, they have the right to defend themselves and robustly."

Some 2,300 American troops are to arrive close to shore in the coming days to support the West African peacekeepers. It remains to be seen whether they will come on shore. Washington has set Mr. Taylor's departure as a condition for any direct military involvement.

For his part, Mr. Taylor allowed his spokesman to say tonight that it was not yet clear when the situation would be stable enough for him to leave. For the last seven weeks, Mr. Taylor has said that he would step down and leave Liberia, if necessary, but he has amended his views several times.

Mr. Chambas, who is scheduled to come to the capital on Friday to meet with Mr. Taylor, said, "We have no reason to doubt he won't do exactly what he has promised."

Among the greatest threats facing Mr. Taylor is an indictment charging him with crimes against humanity in connection with his role in the war in neighboring Sierra Leone.

The latest attacks on Monrovia began shortly after Mr. Taylor's indictment was unsealed in early June. Since then, a rebel group calling itself Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, has made three advances for control of the capital.

The last one, by far the most threatening for civilians, has gone on nonstop since July 19. Food and water are in short supply. Overcrowding and poor sanitation have led to a cholera outbreak. There is no escape from mortar shells and stray bullets. The death toll is impossible to calculate. Cease-fires have been called and broken quickly by the loud thud of rockets.

Earlier this week, a second rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, opened a new front in the war when it attacked the port city of Buchanan east of here, effectively cutting off the only other source of food and goods from outside.

In the capital the densely populated diplomatic quarter, which for days has endured some of the heaviest shelling, today was relatively peaceful except for bullets that continued flying; at twilight, a bullet pierced the head of a woman outside a gate at the American Embassy. Fighting continued between government and rebel forces in the eastern suburbs and at bridges leading to the center of the city.

Monrovia enjoyed one of the quietest nights in two months, The Associated Press reported, with sporadic gunfire but no rocket or mortar volleys. Hungry families took advantage of the quiet to hunt for food.