

Liberian Rebels Resume Attacks

Shelling Kills Dozens of Civilians In Compound Near U.S. Embassy

By Karl Vick
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MONROVIA, Liberia, July 21 -- Mortar fire rained on residential areas and killed at least 25 people huddled in a compound across the street from the U.S. Embassy today as rebels pushed their three-day advance into Liberia's capital. Angry Liberians lined up many of the mangled corpses on the street outside the embassy.

With reports of 60 to 90 civilians killed and more than 300 wounded, it was one of the bloodiest days of fighting in the three rebel attempts to take the capital in the past two months.

[Liberian Defense Minister Daniel Chea said more than 600 civilians had been killed as fighting continued for a fifth day on the outskirts of the capital, the Reuters news agency reported Tuesday. Chea said the soaring death toll, which he estimated to be six times higher than what aid workers in Monrovia have calculated, had thrown into doubt pledges by President Charles Taylor to quit once peacekeeping troops arrived.]

Liberians have waited anxiously for promised peacekeepers to arrive, and are especially eager to see U.S. troops deployed here. A group of 21 U.S. Marines landed by helicopter today to reinforce the embassy's security, while more Marines waited at a staging area near Freetown in neighboring Sierra Leone. After their arrival a shell landed in the embassy compound itself, damaging the commissary building, but no one was injured.

The shelling has been concentrated on the diplomatic neighborhood where tens of thousands seek refuge each time the fighting erupts. During a lull of several hours this morning, hundreds clogged the street outside the U.S. Embassy, milling idly at what had been the scene of demonstrations cheering the prospect of U.S. peacekeepers three weeks earlier.

This afternoon the scenes were of enraged Liberians. News photographs showed bodies lined up in front of the embassy, dragged from the residential compound across the street that had been hit with an 81mm shell.

"We're dying here," screamed some in the crowd, as two U.S. servicemen in camouflage watched from behind bulletproof glass, according to the Associated Press. One man held up a hastily scrawled sign: "Today G. Bush kill Liberia people."

Down the hill from the embassy, a small boy lay face-down in the grass -- the victim of a blast just yards away, the AP reported. In a densely populated residential neighborhood, a shell hit a house, killing 18 people in one strike, emergency workers said at the scene.

The source of the shelling could not be determined with authority. But it has been a feature of all three assaults on Monrovia by Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), a rebel group opposed to President Charles Taylor.

"This is worse," said one aid worker. "Last time we still had security in Monrovia. Now the system has started to collapse. They are starting to carry wounded soldiers to the hospital by car. They used to use ambulances, and call in advance. Now it is only the militias."

More than 200 injured people arrived at the John F. Kennedy Hospital in pickup trucks, police cars and wheelbarrows, the AP reported. About 50 others were treated at a Red Cross trauma center and 112 at clinics set up by Doctors Without Borders.

The flow of casualties indicated that fighting was particularly heavy to the east of the city, where rebels Sunday began an effort to sweep to the base of the peninsula that holds the capital, relief workers said. The route leads to a key junction with the highway leading to Robertsfield airport, the main commercial airfield serving Monrovia. A smaller airfield designed for military use is located within Monrovia, near Taylor's residence.

Taylor has been indicted for crimes against humanity by a U.N.-backed court, and has promised to leave office and accept asylum in Nigeria as part of a peace agreement that also calls for international peacekeepers. President Bush has promised to supplement a West African force of several thousand, but has yet to announce whether he will authorize the participation of U.S. troops.

At a joint appearance in Texas with visiting Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Bush noted that the Marine force had arrived to help provide security at the U.S. Embassy.

"We're concerned about our people in Liberia. We continue to monitor the situation very closely. We're working with the United Nations to effect policy necessary to get the cease-fire back in place," he said.

In Monrovia, hundreds of disappointed Liberians stood in the street, many asking when Marines would come to help them, the AP reported. "What we need aren't those that are just coming to mind American properties, but those who will be deployed on the ground to give us the feeling that peace is really coming," said Moses Smith, 32, who stood in a cluster of people following events on a radio, according to the report.

As the first shells exploded over central Monrovia on Saturday, sending thousands into panicked flight, a senior government official denounced international news coverage that had overlooked the rebels' conduct.

"I hope you can report to the world who the damn problem is and stop saying it's Taylor and that he should leave so these brutes can run the country," said Benoni Urey, head of Liberia's powerful maritime commission, which collects fees from shipping concerns that covet the country's flag of convenience.

"The world must take the responsibility for this onslaught that is going on right now," Urey said. "When you put an arms embargo on a country and we're attacked, what happens?"

The U.N. Security Council banned arms sales to Liberia and other warring parties in the region but Taylor has publicly defied the ban, citing a right to self-defense.

Analysts and diplomats dismiss LURD as a legitimate successor to a Taylor government. It is frequently described as a motley assortment of former Taylor loyalists supported by West African governments, especially Guinea.

The State Department criticized the rebel group for "reckless and indiscriminate shooting" and appealed to neighboring African countries to guard against weapons going to Liberia. "If we're to trust them in the future to participate in the democratic governance of Liberia, we need to be able to see them keep their commitments now," said spokesman Philip T. Reeker.

Reeker said the mortar at the main embassy compound did not cause any casualties but a local guard was injured in front of the embassy. Tom Masland, an American who is Newsweek's regional editor for Africa, was hit in the arm by shrapnel in Monrovia's port area.

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman, Lt. Dan Hetlage, said 4,500 U.S. troops on three warships were being moved into the Mediterranean to be in a position for possible use in Liberia, the Reuters news agency reported.