

July 22, 2003

U.S. Resists Entreaties to Send Peacekeepers to Liberia

By CHRISTOPHER MARQUIS

WASHINGTON, July 21 — The United Nations secretary general and West African countries implored the Bush administration today to send peacekeepers to Liberia as fighting intensified there and the American Embassy came under mortar fire.

But administration officials resisted the appeals, countering that Liberia's neighbors should act first in helping stabilize the country. The administration called on rebels and the government of President Charles G. Taylor to respect a cease-fire.

Even as they balked at taking the lead in peacekeeping, administration officials acted to strengthen the American security presence in Liberia. The Pentagon sent a security team to protect the United States Embassy compound, where fewer than 100 Americans remained. An apartment building in the embassy complex was hit by a mortar round, which officials described as "stray," wounding two; a second round exploded at an embassy annex, killing numerous war refugees, officials said.

In recent days, the Pentagon ordered about 4,500 sailors and marines to move closer to Liberia in preparation for possible peacekeeping or evacuation duty, officials said.

Administration policy makers are torn over how to proceed, if at all, in Liberia. Officials indicated after President Bush's five-day trip to Africa this month that he might be willing to send a peacekeeping force of limited scope and duration. Pentagon officials are the most resistant, while the State Department is more eager to find a solution.

Among the chief reasons cited for the ambivalence: The United States has no vital interest in Liberia; the military feels overextended in Iraq and elsewhere; the last African intervention, in Somalia, ended in a debacle; Pentagon officials, in particular, increasingly chafe at noncombat missions.

Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, pleaded for the United States to intercede "before it is too late" and the best opportunity vanishes. "I think we can really salvage the situation if troops were to be deployed urgently and promptly," Mr. Annan told reporters.

Philip Reeker, a State Department spokesman, said today that the administration remained in close consultation with Mr. Annan and West African leaders who brokered a cease-fire, but he said no decision had been made to send troops.

Instead, Mr. Reeker strongly condemned the rebel group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, for "their continued reckless and indiscriminate shelling" of the capital, Monrovia.

Advocates of American action said the administration's failure to lead in Liberia was unconscionable.

"There is a major humanitarian crisis on the horizon here," said Princeton N. Lyman, a former American ambassador to Nigeria and South Africa. "For the U.S. not to come in, I think, this would be a significant moral blot — right after the president's trip to Africa."

Over the weekend, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld dispatched a three-ship amphibious group from its position off the Horn of Africa into the Mediterranean Sea. From there, it would take the vessels another 7 to 10 days to get to Liberia, officials said.

The amphibious group, led by the assault ship Iwo Jima, includes 2,000 marines and 2,500 soldiers. Only the marines, and perhaps only some of them, would probably go ashore as part of any American mission, the defense officials said.

The American reluctance to send even a token number of peacekeepers comes just weeks after Pentagon officials signaled that planning had begun for the deployment of 500 to 2,000 peacekeepers. Since then, however, the administration has faced growing difficulties in Iraq, sapping the appetite for a new undertaking of undetermined scope.

Some Africa experts say the administration is risking a historic chance to end the ruinous rebellion that surged in 2000 in a population exhausted by war. The disintegration of the cease-fire two weeks ago was an indication that time was running out, they said.

"A U.S. intervention at this point would be practical and possible and well received," said Joseph Siegle, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, who spent years as a relief worker in Liberia.

James Phillips, a research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a research institution with ties to the White House, said he opposed sending troops to Liberia. The military, he said, is already overcommitted, with half the Army in Iraq, and training missions elsewhere.

"To undertake another peacekeeping operation would make things worse," he said. "There's going to be a very unsettled situation."