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President Orders Troop Deployment to Liberian Coast

By ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON, July 25 — President Bush gave orders today for a naval amphibious force that includes 2,300 marines to sail from the Mediterranean and nearby waters to a position off the coast of Liberia, but left vague what its specific mission would be.

The timing of the announcement caught Pentagon officials off guard, and sent them scrambling to explain that three ships carrying the marines could be off the Liberian coast within a week or so, in position to support 1,300 Nigerian peacekeepers who are committed to enforcing a cease-fire and delivering aid to victims of the civil war there.

Mr. Bush, speaking to reporters at the White House, said he had ordered American forces a step closer toward intervening in the long-running war that has left hundreds dead in recent months because conditions in Liberia were deteriorating rapidly.

"We're deeply concerned that the condition of the Liberian people is getting worse and worse and worse," he said. "Aid can't get to the people. We're worried about the outbreak of disease."

Mr. Bush's decision is an important symbolic move, but falls far short of actually sending American troops ashore. It appeared to be an effort to walk a careful line between the Pentagon's reluctance to put American lives at risk and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell's argument that the United States must not appear to be sitting on its hands.

"We do have some obligation as the most important, powerful nation on the face of the earth not to look away when a problem like this comes before us," Mr. Powell said earlier this week.

Mr. Powell's aides say the United States and the United Nations may have missed their best opportunity two weeks ago, before the attacks on Monrovia, the capital, began.

One aide said, "The president is convinced that we need to be in position should the opportunity present itself again."

Before he traveled to Africa earlier this month, Mr. Bush demanded that Liberia's president, Charles G. Taylor, step down before any American troops go in because he is the central, polarizing figure in the war there. His failure to leave has angered the president, aides say, and has acted to paralyze Washington's Liberia policy. Mr. Bush met with his top national security aides today to end that impasse and step up pressure on Mr. Taylor, Bush aides said.

"It is very important for Charles Taylor to leave the country," Mr. Bush told reporters today during a White House Rose Garden appearance with the Palestinian prime minister, Mahmoud Abbas.

Mr. Bush said the Pentagon would determine exactly how the American forces would help the African peacekeepers. But the timing of his remarks and a statement earlier from the White House surprised defense officials in Washington and Europe, who plan military missions in Africa. "We were really blind-sided," one defense official said.

Two amphibious ships carrying marines, the Iwo Jima and the Carter Hall, are now in the Mediterranean and could reach Liberia in about a week, defense officials said. A third ship, the Nashville, is several days behind the other two.

The marines aboard belong to the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, based at Camp Lejeune, N.C. Pentagon officials say they want to limit their involvement to providing logistical, intelligence and communications support. But the Marines also bring artillery and light-armored vehicles, as well as transport and attack helicopters that could be used to provide security for peacekeepers.

The White House statement said only that the American military's role "will be limited in time and scope as multinational forces under the United Nations assume the responsibility for peacekeeping and as the United Nations arranges a political transition in Liberia."

Being deliberately vague about the American military role allows Mr. Bush to put more pressure on Mr. Taylor, but also allows him to maintain the flexibility to monitor events in Liberia and determine what help the Nigerian peacekeepers need.

It also allows the president to straddle two competing political camps: conservatives in Congress who are suspicious of sending American troops on a mission that sounds to them too similar to Somalia, and liberals and religious groups who have urged Mr. Bush to address the desperate needs of a nation founded in 1847 by freed American slaves.

"I'm glad they've decided to move closer to Liberia, but I'm disappointed it's taken so long," said Representative Donald M. Payne, a New Jersey Democrat who is a member of the Congressional Black Caucus. "Had we gone in a month ago, we could have been way ahead on humanitarian assistance."

A senior administration official said Mr. Bush's decision was intended to speed action by the Economic Community of West Africa States, which has committed the two Nigerian battalions.

"They weren't moving quickly, and it was clear that the humanitarian situation was moving south," the official said. "We want to fix this — but you have to work with the countries in the neighborhood."

The official added that the West African group seemed to be waiting for a signal from the United States that it was ready to help militarily, "so there was something of a stalemate, everyone waiting for everyone else."

Military representatives from the West African organization, joined by American military attachés, have been meeting for weeks in Dakar, Senegal, but have failed to resolve the final size and makeup of the African peacekeeping force.

Pentagon officials said they were still trying to determine details of any proposed mission, and raised questions about what would happen if Mr. Taylor did not leave or no West African peacekeeping force actually became a reality.

Mr. Bush said today that the United Nations would take charge of Liberia's long-term political and security needs. "Finally, we're working very closely with the United Nations," he said. "They will be responsible for developing a political solution. And they will be responsible for relieving the U.S. troops in short order."

The United Nations secretary general, Kofi Annan, said in a statement today that he was "very pleased" about Mr. Bush's decision.

Dozens Die in Monrovia Battle

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 25 (Reuters) — Mortar shells pounded Liberia's capital today in fighting that killed 23 people and wounded about 200. Afterward, rebels declared an immediate cease-fire but vowed to defend their positions.

The fighting today represented an escalation in the seesaw battle for the capital. Mortar shells struck a school where hundreds of refugees had sought shelter and hit near a medical treatment area.