

Residents Seek Shelter From Intense Fighting in Liberia's Capital

Associated Press

Thursday, June 26, 2003

MONROVIA, Liberia, June 25 -- Shells and rockets pounded crowded neighborhoods in Liberia's capital today as rebels pressed home their three-year war to oust President Charles Taylor, wounding hundreds of people and leaving thousands of others cowering in this coastal city.

The fighting shattered a week-old truce and raised the possibility of the deadliest of endgames for Liberia's civil war: an all-out battle among undisciplined armies for the city, now also packed with hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Taylor pledged to live or die with his troops, with rebels on three sides of the city and the Atlantic surf pounding the other.

The U.S. Embassy opened the gates of its residential compound to Liberians seeking shelter, and thousands of them crowded in today, hoping proximity to the Americans would mean safety. Hours later, however, three pieces of ordnance -- believed to be mortar shells or rockets -- landed within the high-walled compound and exploded, sending those taking refuge there running. Survivors helped rush out bleeding victims, some missing limbs.

In Washington, State Department press officer Brooke Summers said a guard and a gardener employed by the embassy were killed. She said there was no indication that any U.S. citizens were killed. The last Americans had recently been moved out of the residential complex to the heavily guarded embassy across the street.

"Everybody in the world is sitting to watch us die," a refugee, Suah Kolli, said at Monrovia's John F. Kennedy hospital, where 200 wounded people brought in by midday overflowed the wards and lay sprawled, moaning and bleeding in slippery hallways.

Defense Minister Daniel Chea said that by afternoon the front was just three miles from the heart of Monrovia.

The French humanitarian group Doctors Without Borders evacuated another hospital overrun by fighting and began treating scores of wounded in its own compound.

Refugees packed schoolyards, shell-gutted houses and the country's main soccer stadium, while many residents simply cowered in their homes. Aid workers had described a humanitarian nightmare even before fighting broke out Tuesday, with cholera and starvation rampant among the refugees.

Taylor's forces have lost at least 60 percent of the country to two rebel groups -- each determined to drive out the president, who is under indictment by the U.N.-Sierra Leone war crimes court for his role in the 10-year war there.

Taylor took to the airwaves of his private radio station today to dispel a rumor that he had fled. "This blatant act of terror will be fought all the way," Taylor declared.

"My life is no more important than yours," he said. "I am here with the men and women in arms, encouraging them to fight on. Because my survival is their survival, and their survival is mine."

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