

Taylor Bids Peace Force to Hurry

Liberian Renews Vow to Leave as Mortar Fire Hits Church

By Alexandra Zavis
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MONROVIA, Liberia, July 26 -- President Charles Taylor today urged international peacekeepers to hurry to Liberia, and he renewed pledges to step down when they arrive. Meanwhile, shelling brought new carnage to the capital.

Taylor's promise -- one he has reneged on before -- came hours after a mortar round slammed into a church harboring thousands of refugees, killing at least three and wounding 55 others. The explosion at Monrovia's Greater Refuge Temple marked the second time in two days that shells have hit public buildings crowded with refugees in this city of 1 million people.

President Bush, who has ordered U.S. troops to Liberia's coast to support a promised West African peace force, has repeatedly demanded that Taylor, a former warlord, cede power as part of any peace deal.

"Let nobody have any concern about 'Will President Taylor step down?' " Taylor said at a prayer rally in a sports stadium packed with 30,000 refugees. "I will step down."

In his first comments since Bush's deployment order, Taylor said: "The presence of peacekeepers in this country is extremely necessary to redeem us and save our people. After they come, we will receive them, and I will turn over my office. . . . I hope they can come sooner, and not later."

Hundreds of civilians have died in a week-old rebel assault on Monrovia, the latest round in insurgents' two-month battle to take the city and topple Taylor. The president faces charges from a U.N.-backed court for war crimes in neighboring Sierra Leone and is blamed for 14 years of fighting in his own country.

Taylor said that more than 1,000 had died in the eight-day rebel attack on the city, a figure that could not be verified.

"Because of you, the people, I can no longer see the bloodshed continue," Taylor said, adding that he would hand over power to his vice president or the speaker of Liberia's House of Representatives.

"They've killed more than 1,000 people. If I were not here, there would be bodies all over the city," said Taylor, besieged in a country founded for freed American slaves.

Fighting raged today at Monrovia's port. Witnesses said five shells fired from rebel-held turf crashed into the ground around the church at 4 a.m. A sixth hit the church directly, exploding among the refugees bedded down for the night.

Fragments hit a young woman lying beside her baby, killing the woman but sparing her month-old infant.

"Terrible, terrible, this war," said Konah Macgee, whose uncle was killed in the barrage. "Our people are just dying day and night. Rockets are falling. Innocent people are dying."

Neighbors, contacted by telephone, said they counted 15 dead at the church. The Rev. Michael Chea, the pastor, later said three people had died -- two whose bodies were still lying in front of the church and one who died later at a hospital.

About 55 people were wounded, 14 seriously, Chea said.

Elsewhere, in soil next to Monrovia's rocky Atlantic beaches, aid workers buried some of the dead from the previous day's assault -- a mortar attack on streets, homes and a public school packed with refugees -- that killed at least 26 people.

Wearing white masks, workers of Doctors Without Borders, the French medical aid group, hauled the bodies of two women in white body bags and a baby wrapped in a white shroud over a rubbish dump.

They placed the bodies in graves marked by stakes, identifying the dead for reburial when the city's cemeteries, blocked by fighting, open again.

"We are just like chickens in a poultry farm," stretcher bearer Francis Woeh Toe said as he tended to the three. "Anybody can kill us at any time."

After weeks of hoping for rescue, Monrovia's people reacted with disbelief, even bitterness, at news that Bush ordered deployment of U.S. troops to Liberia's coast.

Bush said Americans would have only a limited role in what will be a West African-led peace force. The force's planners have not announced a firm deployment date.

"You see, everybody is looking to George W. Bush," said Bill Jacobs, a Monrovia resident. "But I think it's only God can solve our problem right now."

Meanwhile, government and religious leaders declared today a day of prayerful fasting -- a move resented by many ordinary people struggling to survive in the disease-ridden and hungry city.

"Everybody is already fasting, because there is no food," said Boaki Kiate, who has lived for two months in the squalid sports stadium, where refugees have been sleeping on the concrete floors of old locker rooms and corridors.

Ragged refugees largely ignored the finely dressed crowd of 5,000 gathered in the bleachers above to hear Taylor. He apologized for the suffering of refugees at the stadium but took no responsibility for it.

Dignitaries, clerics and security forces with AK-47 rifles listened to a choir robed in red, white and blue.

"I'm a Christian. I can pray myself," said Paul Digen, a teacher whose sister died of cholera at the stadium last week. "I'm going to find food."

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