

U.N. Chief Urges Force for Liberia

Multinational Effort Needed To 'Prevent Major Tragedy'

MONROVIA, Liberia, June 28 -- U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan urged the Security Council today to authorize a multinational force for Liberia to end fighting between government and rebel forces that has killed hundreds of civilians.

In a letter to the council, Annan said the deployment was necessary "to prevent a major humanitarian tragedy and to stabilize the situation in that country."

Monrovia, Liberia's capital, was calm today for the first time in five days. Thousands of Liberians who had taken shelter around the U.S. Embassy, for protection through proximity to the U.S. Marines there, streamed home -- only to find their homes had been looted by government soldiers and others.

"I went home this morning only to see that everything is gone," said Martin Weah, 37.

Meanwhile, Liberia's government said it was talking to foreign countries, including the United States, about deploying a force to stop the fighting. "This government is interested in working with Washington on resolving this problem in the continued promotion of democracy," President Charles Taylor said.

The Bush administration has not decided whether to send a force to Liberia, a key Cold War ally of the United States that sees itself as having special ties to the United States because it was founded by freed American slaves in the 19th century.

"There are at least talks of further intervention. Whether that's necessary or appropriate, I don't know at this point," the State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, said Friday.

In Ghana, President John Kufuor, current head of the West African leaders' bloc, and France's foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, urged both sides toward a real cease-fire. When that happens, Kufuor said, West Africa will send a force of at least 5,000 peacekeepers.

The sudden offensive this week brought the rebels close to capturing Monrovia before government troops beat back the attempt. The four days of fighting left approximately 500 civilians dead.

The rebels control most of the country and are seeking to overthrow Taylor, who was indicted by the United Nations this month for war crimes in neighboring Sierra Leone. Taylor is also blamed internationally for fomenting wars across West Africa since he launched Liberia into civil war in 1989.

Taylor, who made a victory tour of Monrovia today, gave no sign he would step down, despite his past pledges to yield power in the interest of peace.

"The peace that I seek should be a soft landing, where there will be a cease-fire that will be monitored," Taylor told Liberians in a radio address. "I will make absolutely sure that this kind of murder and mayhem . . . will not come upon you if and when I am not on the scene."

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