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Liberia's Second-Largest City Is Captured by Rebel Soldiers

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 28 — Rebels captured Liberia's second-largest city today, defeating President Charles G. Taylor's embattled forces on a new front and depriving him of his last significant port outside the besieged capital.

Deliberations on a peace mission for the West African nation showed no sign of progress.

The captured city, Buchanan, 60 miles southeast of this capital, fell before nightfall to the rebel group Movement for Democracy in Liberia, said Gen. Benjamin Yeaten, a commander in the Liberian government. He said government troops remained on the city's outskirts and were planning a counterattack.

Mr. Taylor's forces took off running as rebels advanced into Buchanan, said John Mensah, a resident reached by telephone there, who added that the rebels were "now in complete control of Buchanan."

During the rebel takeover, the Buchanan office of the international relief group Merlin was looted, according to the group's office here.

Liberia's leading rebel movement, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, pressed its nine-day-old siege of Monrovia, in fighting that has killed hundreds.

Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, warned rebels that they were likely to be barred from any future leadership role in the country because of their reckless attacks on civilians. He also said that those who caused suffering to the Liberian people would be held accountable for war crimes.

Rebel forces now hold more than 60 percent of Liberia, grinding down Mr. Taylor's forces in their three-year battle to oust him.

The Movement for Democracy in Liberia, which until recently had largely heeded cease-fire pledges, said government forces had provoked the offensive on Buchanan with attacks on rebel positions outside the city in recent days.

A rebel official, Boi Bleaju Boi, pledged that insurgents would open Buchanan, a port city, to peace forces.

Tens of thousands of refugees from the capital had flooded into Buchanan in recent days, desperate to escape the shelling, grenade blasts and machine-gun fire of Monrovia.

Today, many took flight again, picking their way back along the coast toward Monrovia.

The Liberian defense minister, Daniel Chea, contacted by telephone, told The Associated Press that rebels of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy had also taken the northern town of Gbarnga, Mr. Taylor's base during a ruinous seven-year civil war that began in 1989.

Mr. Taylor is in his seaside mansion here. His forces in the capital are battling to turn back rebel drives toward downtown, the heart of Mr. Taylor's government.

Rebels hold the port here, and with it food and vital aid for this desperate city of more than 1.3 million and its surrounding refugee camps. The port reverberated with machine-gun fire and grenade blasts today as government forces fought off two rebel pushes over bridges linking the port to downtown, General Yeaten said.

On Friday, President Bush ordered troops to take up position off Liberia's Atlantic coast in readiness for any peace mission.

Disputes over financing have helped slow deployment, however. Nigeria — West Africa's military power — has asked for more aid from the United States.

Nigeria is ready to send about 1,500 peacekeepers to Liberia, but needs outside help before it can deploy them, President Olusegun Obasanjo said today, according to Reuters. "It is in our backyard, it is our problem. But it is not our problem alone," President Obasanjo, on a visit to London, told BBC television. "We accept responsibility within the limit of our resources."