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African Envoys Try in Vain to See Liberian

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 1 — The saga of President Charles G. Taylor's long-awaited departure took another turn today as arriving West African diplomats were met not by the president, but by a swirl of contradictory and unverifiable reports of his whereabouts, and fresh clashes dashing the calm of the day before.

Mr. Taylor, the former rebel leader whose ouster is the chief stated goal of the rebels attacking this capital, has repeatedly said he will step down and leave the country. He has also repeatedly amended his promise, lately saying that he will leave as soon as peacekeeping forces arrive.

Officials from the Economic Community of West African States, or Ecowas, as the regional bloc is known, came here today to discuss the details of that deployment and lay the groundwork for Mr. Taylor's safe passage out of the country.

Officials of the bloc said on Thursday that 1,500 Nigerian soldiers would arrive on Monday and that Mr. Taylor should leave within three days after that.

This afternoon they said they had been told that the president was in the southeastern port city of Buchanan, where government and rebel forces clashed earlier this week.

Later there were reports that he had not left the capital, that he might have been in his official residence the whole time and that he was annoyed that proper protocol had not been followed to inform him of the official visit. There was no response from the president or his aides about the three-day deadline.

As diplomatic procedures were being considered, mortars pounded the heavily populated diplomatic quarter of the capital once again after a brief respite on Thursday. Downtown Monrovia was deserted again by midday, and the capital once again became a city of dread. This was the 14th day of a blistering assault on the capital by the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy. At least 12 civilians were killed in the fighting today, The Associated Press reported.

The executive secretary of Ecowas, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, took pains to point out that Mr. Taylor's representatives in peace talks in nearby Ghana were fully aware of the delegation's visit.

Asked whether he believed that Mr. Taylor was in Buchanan, as a presidential aide had said, Mr. Chambas turned up his palms, shrugged and smiled, saying nothing.

The delegation, which included cabinet ministers from Ghana, Nigeria and Togo, stayed at a hotel not far from Mr. Taylor's office and said they planned to meet him in the morning.

"He will not refuse to meet with us," Mr. Chambas said. "We will wait."

Mr. Taylor's spokesman, Vaanii Passewe, told The A.P. that the president had not been officially notified of the delegation's plans and that he had been occupied by prior engagements, including directing the war effort. He would not discuss Mr. Taylor's whereabouts, except to say that the president was still in the country.

The day's drama deferred peace for another day. By midmorning the familiar thud of mortars broke through the steady rain. The bridges leading to the city center were fiercely fought over once again. Stray bullets flew through the air. Food and fuel supplies continued to dwindle.

On Thursday there was a brief lull, coinciding with the arrival of an advance team of West African troops to assess conditions for their future deployment. Today it left. As if on cue, gunfire broke out across Monrovia.