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Security Council Supports a Liberia Force

By FELICITY BARRINGER

UNITED NATIONS, Aug. 1 — The Security Council late tonight approved a United States resolution for a multinational force to quell the violence and keep peace in Liberia while a new government is formed.

The resolution also specifies that the United Nations send its own peacekeeping troops in to take on these tasks by Oct. 1.

Despite the apparently universal wish of Council members to give an unambiguous United Nations mandate to such an intervention, first called for by Secretary General Kofi Annan a month ago, a single paragraph in the final text of the resolution prompted three abstentions.

The disputed provision would give officials and troops of the United States immunity from prosecution by any country but their own, should they be accused of crimes while in Liberia. Nigeria has begun to send peacekeepers into Liberia and the United States has positioned marines offshore, but has made no specific commitment to deploy troops.

France, Germany and Mexico vigorously objected to the paragraph. The representatives of all three nations said that they supported the deployment of troops but that they could not support the disputed provision, which they said was superfluous and flouted basic provisions of their own legal systems or international law.

The passage of the resolution was greeted with relief here, but the long delay and the political battle lent a sour aftertaste to the diplomatic expressions of gratitude to the United States for taking the lead on the measure. Scores of civilians have died in fighting in Liberia in the past three weeks.

Speaking to reporters after the 12-to-0 vote, Mr. Annan said, "I hope this implies a new political will, a will that, I think, has been absent among the international community." And while explaining his objections during the meeting, the Mexican envoy, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, noted pointedly that "this resolution comes late."

In his remarks to the Security Council, the United States representative, John D. Negroponte, underscored the conditions of the Bush administration's approach to Liberia: that the deployment of the multinational force will be limited, that it will be swiftly replaced with United Nations troops, and that the Liberian president, Charles G. Taylor, leave the country.

"The multinational force and a follow-on United Nations peacekeeping operation go hand in hand," Mr. Negroponte said, referring to these vanguard troops as "a crucial short-term bridge" between the current chaos and the arrival of United Nations forces.

Mr. Negroponte said after the meeting that the disputed paragraph, which some envoys had argued undermined the standing of the International Criminal Court — a body whose jurisdiction is not recognized by the United States — was "not at all unusual." He added that the normal bilateral agreement providing such protections could not be made with a nonexistent Liberian government.

It was unclear tonight just how fast a United Nations force could be assembled to relieve the forces of the Economic Community of West African States and any other troops that join the Liberia mission.

"It's certainly hard to explain why bureaucrats in New York can't get some blue helmets into the region" by Oct. 1, one American official said today, referring to the light-blue headgear worn by United Nations troops. "We think October first is a realistic deadline."

In his remarks after the meeting, Mr. Annan said, "we borrow the troops from the governments."

"They have to indicate their willingness to provide the troops," he said. "The troops have to be prepared and ready with the equipment to deploy. And normally, when deploying these troops from around the world, it does take time."

He pointed out that since the Nigerians had committed troops to Liberia nearly three weeks ago, they have been negotiating how to get there and who will sustain them with food and equipment once they arrive. "We are going to try and do our best but we also have to be practical," Mr. Annan said.

Nothing in the resolution commits the United States to provide troops to the multinational mission, and President Bush has thus far resisted the pressure from Mr. Annan and Liberian citizens to commit American troops to the multinational force.

Last week top American military leaders expressed grave reservations about such a deployment. Nonetheless, 2,300 marines in warships are moving toward Liberia.

A battalion of 774 Nigerian troops, which had been part of a peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone, is expected to be the vanguard unit of troops on the ground. The United Nations has committed to airlifting that battalion and a second Nigerian battalion coming from Lagos, at an estimated cost of \$8 million to \$10 million. The United States also has committed \$10 million in logistical aid, including vehicles, food, water, tents and communications equipment.