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Liberia Rejects Cease-Fire Offer as Rebels Pound Capital Anew

By REUTERS

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 29 — Liberia rejected a rebel offer of a truce today as mortar shells slammed into Monrovia's eastern suburbs despite the insurgents' pledge to stop fighting and let West African peacekeepers occupy the battered capital.

The rebels earlier vowed to hold their fire in the city after 11 days of fierce fighting with the forces of President Charles G. Taylor. Hundreds of civilians have died in the battles for important bridges.

Fighting also raged in the nation's second-largest city, Buchanan, seized by rebels on Monday. Liberia's war-weary residents despaired of any cease-fire helping them.

"We are tired of hearing this one word," said William Welleh. "To me, when they say cease-fire it means time to acquire more weapons."

Liberia's top negotiator at stalled peace talks in Ghana said the offer by the rebels of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy was not good enough because they agreed only to pull back to Monrovia's strategic port.

There was no respite for Monrovia today, with fighting reported around the port in a city where food and water are scarce, foraging is dangerous and diseases are rife.

Mr. Taylor's forces went on the offensive today in Buchanan to oust a second rebel faction called the Movement for Democracy in Liberia after it seized that port a day earlier.

The group said that it had told its troops to stop fighting but that government forces were still attacking them.

West African leaders have pledged around 1,500 Nigerian peacekeepers as the vanguard of a larger mission, but they want a truce in place first.

Three American warships are sailing toward Liberia, largely to support the regional force. The State Department has also sent its assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Walter H. Kansteiner, to the region.

The United States has placed an order for a merchant ship to carry ammunition and material from a base in Spain to Senegal, which experts said could be used as a base for a possible American deployment in Liberia. But the military denied the cargo was destined for such use.

Bush Signs Diamond Ban

WASHINGTON, July 29 (AP) — President Bush signed an executive order today that bans the import of rough diamonds used to finance civil wars in Africa.

The order, which goes into effect on Wednesday, brings the United States into compliance with an international agreement prohibiting trade in "conflict" or "blood" diamonds. The agreement creates a paper trail so that rough stones can be traced to a legitimate mine.

Diamond production has financed conflicts in countries including Liberia, Angola, Sierra Leone and Congo. Human rights groups say rebels use forced labor to mine diamonds, then use the proceeds to buy weapons and finance military activity.

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