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Peacekeeping Unit Arrives in Liberia

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 4 — The first contingents of West African peacekeeping troops arrived here early today, stirring hopes that months of fighting might soon end.

With American forces offshore in three warships, and President Bush still undecided about sending them in, about 200 Nigerian troops landed in helicopters at the airport but did not venture beyond it. They are the first of an expected force of 3,250 West African soldiers.

All day, Liberians in the government-controlled portion of the capital waited to see the first of the troops sent here to end the terrifying two-month battle for this city. Ignoring the pounding rain, they rushed onto the airport tarmac as the first helicopters carrying the Nigerians landed.

The Liberians cheered and sang songs and thanked God, as they have repeatedly over the past several weeks at every glimmer of hope. They wore T-shirts with a simple blue-stenciled message on the back: "Peace at Last." White flags to represent peace were flying.

Yet there was still the routine crackle of gunfire. Thick black smoke rose from a building in a rebel-controlled area that has witnessed some of the bloodiest fighting in the past 16 days.

Fear was hardly banished. Relief, the people here said, would come when the force, which has promised to get between the warring factions and secure the city, has made its way to the rebel-controlled Free Port of Monrovia, the capital's lifeline for food, fuel and medical supplies.

In Reuters television images, young men could be seen playing soccer on the rebel-held side, across the river from the government-held part of the city, ravaged by hunger, disease and the terror of stray bullets and mortar shells. It has been impossible to assess the relief needs on the rebel-held side, let alone in the rest of the country.

By day's end, roughly 200 peacekeeping troops had arrived, among 770 members of a Nigerian battalion who served as United Nations peacekeepers in Sierra Leone. The rest are expected here in the next few days.

Today men and women lined the main road from the airport, hoping to catch a glimpse of them.

Philomena Jah ventured 50 yards beyond her front door in downtown Monrovia. It was the farthest she had stepped out in more than two weeks. This morning, she bought charcoal, hunted for cornmeal and waited for her prayers to be answered. "We're all waiting to see them," she said of the West African force. "Their presence, you know, will give us some sort of security, some sort of relief."

In Washington, Bush administration officials welcomed the deployment of the peacekeepers. "These developments are a clear sign that the international community is committed to bringing relief to the people of Liberia and to helping them resolve the many problems they face," said Philip Reeker, the State Department spokesman.

The United States has promised to provide logistical and financial assistance to the peacekeepers, but that aid is not scheduled to arrive for two weeks. It remained unclear whether the American troops on the warships would come ashore.

The administration continues to insist that President Charles G. Taylor leave the country. Mr. Taylor, who is accused of crimes against humanity by a United Nations-backed war crimes tribunal in neighboring Sierra Leone, has said he will hand over power next Monday, but not when he would leave the country. He has been offered a safe haven in Nigeria. His safe passage out of Liberia is among the peacekeepers' first responsibilities.

It was not clear when the Nigerian soldiers who landed would cross the front line — effectively, a series of bridges that lead from the port into downtown — nor when they would seek to establish control of the port.

The executive secretary of the regional bloc the Economic Community of West African States, Ecowas, said he hoped the troops would move to the port in "the next couple of days."

The Nigerians' arrival today contrasted sharply with the last time Ecowas dispatched peacekeepers here. At that time, in 1990, Mr. Taylor was the leader of a rebel army who had no interest in seeing peacekeepers in Monrovia. Ecowas troops fought their way in, securing the capital. Later, they earned a reputation for looting and taking sides in the civil war.

This time, both Mr. Taylor's forces and a rebel group, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, have pledged to cooperate.

"The government forces will welcome them and work with them hand in hand," said Teeta Wilson, 29, a policewoman fighting for Mr. Taylor in Waterside, a bullet-strewn neighborhood of the capital. She lifted her black T-shirt to reveal a white one underneath. She said she would shed the black for the white once the peacekeeping forces were on the streets.

Meanwhile, the rebels, who have used the Free Port as their headquarters for the last two weeks and, according to neighborhood residents, helped themselves to its contents, have agreed to pull back.

"We are welcoming the peacekeepers, and we will work with them," said Sekou Damate Conneh, the head of the rebel faction in an interview with Reuters Television in Rome. He also promised to abide by a cease-fire so long as Mr. Taylor leaves office, even if he does not immediately leave the country. "You don't have to worry about the rebel forces," he said.

Around midday, as the first contingent of troops landed at Roberts International Airport, 66 bodies were buried in a nearby field. Soldiers and civilians, they had been piled on top of each other for weeks in a city hospital morgue with a capacity of nine. The burial this morning was a reminder of the human cost of the contest for Monrovia.

From inside the crumbling old hotel, now used as a base by government fighters, one soldier, age 16, said he was tired of soldiering and not eating, and he offered to give up his gun, once peacekeepers took control. "I want to go to school," he said. "Any school."

What would he do in school, he was asked. "Play football," he said.

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