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Haves and Have-Nots Live on Both Sides of Monrovia

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

MONROVIA, Liberia, Aug. 5 — Rebel-held Monrovia's only hospital is inside a brewery. Its operating table is a long wooden desk. The surgeon, who cleans shrapnel wounds, extracts bullets and ties up intestines punctured by gunshots, is a nurse who used to work at a maternity clinic. This afternoon, a patient with a fist-sized wound in his arm was howling in pain. The hospital is almost out of painkillers, as well as medications for its 50 cholera patients.

Divided by a series of bridges, the rebel- and government-held halves of this capital compose a bleak landscape of haves and have-nots.

One side, controlled by the besieged Liberian president, Charles G. Taylor, has little food or fuel, but a sufficient supply of drugs and doctors, thanks to international aid agencies. The other side, held by the rebel Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, has no drugs or doctors but plenty of food and fuel, with the Free Port of Monrovia under rebel control. (Journalists got a glimpse of the rebel half today by walking across a bridge, waving a white T-shirt.)

This afternoon, the commander of what is to be a 3,250-member West African "interposition force" sent here to stop the violence on both sides, crossed over to visit the rebel zone. The commander, Brig. Gen. Festus Okonkwo, said nothing about how quickly his forces would take control of the Free Port. The rebels invited aid agencies to remove their shipments from the port, but said they would not leave it until Mr. Taylor not only relinquishes power, but leaves the country.

"Resign and leave Liberia. Then we'll release the port," said the rebel chief of staff, Maj. Gen. A. Seyeh Sheriff, after meeting with the commander of the peacekeeping force.

Much of the rebel zone was a wasteland today. Grenades and bullets had punched holes in the buildings. Roofs were gone. A dry goods warehouse was still smoldering from a recent rocket attack. A bloated body lay in a puddle on the main road. The wind blew the stench of death.

And yet, at a roadside market in the rebel zone on this day, chicken and beef were for sale, luxuries not seen on the other side. Two cups of rice could be had for 15 Liberian dollars, or 30 American cents. On the other side, even when rice can be found, it costs 10 times as much. Spaghetti, canned meat, toothpaste and sodas — all shipped in to the port — were abundant at the market. On the government side, there is little more than potato greens, cornmeal and hot peppers.

Earlier in the day, as foreign journalists toured the area, people poured out into the streets, shouting and clapping. "We want peace, no more war," they chanted, just as their counterparts on the other side have been chanting.

At the sight of visitors, the rebel fighters could not stop firing their guns in the air.

"They are rejoicing," one of their commanders, Brig. Gen. Sekou Kamara, otherwise known as Dragon Master, said, in an effort to offer solace. He wore a United States Army uniform, with a name tag that read "Hage."

This afternoon, soldiers who had been tossing grenades and spraying each other with machine-gun fire for the last 16 days, met in the middle of the bullet-strewn Old Bridge. They shook hands. They chatted. The rebel boys returned to their side, Kalashnikov rifles dangling from their shoulders, smiles from their lips.

From rebel headquarters, meanwhile, came threatening words from General Sheriff, the rebel chief of staff, a man missing a couple of teeth and wearing a red beret and gold-rimmed glasses. He said he would storm the Executive Mansion if Mr. Taylor, the rebels' sworn enemy, did not leave the country.

"I will move on him," General Sheriff told reporters. "I will attack him militarily."

Bluster aside, his words pointed up the fragility of the so-called cease-fire.

From the rebel point of view, peace depends on what the Liberian president decides to do. Mr. Taylor, who waged a seven-year rebel insurgency before becoming president in 1997, has vowed to step down Monday at midday, but said nothing about when he will leave Liberia.

His aides have suggested recently that he would not leave, unless a war crimes indictment against him was dropped; an independent United Nations-backed tribunal has charged him with crimes against humanity in connection with the war in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Mr. Taylor has already accepted an offer of asylum in Nigeria. The Bush administration, which has allocated \$10 million for peacekeeping in Liberia but stopped short of promising troops, has made his exile a condition for any direct military involvement in Liberia. The Pentagon has sent three ships to the coast of Liberia, but many Liberians, on both the government and rebel sides, have all but given up on American assistance anyway.

Rebel commanders today shepherded visiting journalists through their territory, eager to show off their magnanimity. They brought out refreshments by the caseload and crowded into a small office in their headquarters to present their top officers, among them an assistant chief of staff for planning, a logistics chief and someone in charge of records.

They showed reporters territory that their enemies had claimed to control earlier this week. They tooted their horns as they drove the journalists through busy neighborhoods, and people lined up along the streets to cheer.

"Are we harassing these people?" A. Sekou Fofana, the rebels' deputy secretary general for civilian administration, mused.

Asked about his group's political ideology, Mr. Fofana said simply, "Our intention is to clear the land, remove Taylor."

The rebel commanders said that they had no idea what was in the port and that their job was only to secure it. Curiously, goods normally stored at the port were visible all over the streets, including pickup trucks with United Nations logos, with standard relief blankets piled in the back.

The commanders made a show of disciplining their rowdy rank and file, at one point beating a soldier with the butt of a rifle for firing in the air, at another, trying to punish looters who were carting away cases of food from a shuttered store.

"No monkey," they yelled, issuing orders to behave. (They also politely requested that photographers refrain from taking pictures of child soldiers.)

Tempers ran high. All transgressors, including those blocking traffic or driving too slowly, had guns pointed in their faces.

Food was in abundance and at bargain-basement prices. Virtually nonexistent were medicines and medical staff members to care for the wounded and ill.

Patients lay on relief blankets on the floor of the makeshift hospital at the Monrovia Brewery. Since the July 19 attack by rebels, the nurses running the hospital said, they had treated 189 soldiers and 950 civilians. Fifty-seven civilians and 7 soldiers had been dead on arrival, a stark snapshot of who pays the price of this power struggle.

A new volunteer organization had emerged, buoyed by the idea of swapping food from the rebel side for medicine from the other side. Most had family on the other side, and had only heard the worst about how people were faring there.

"People are dying of hunger, bombs and bullets," said C-Musa Sheriff, a church administrator in the rebel zone. "We can't control the bombs and bullets, but we can do something about the hunger. We can't be complacent."

At times today it was difficult to distinguish the fighters on this side of the bridge from those on the other side. They wore the same clothes, the same wigs. They carried the same weapons. (Fighters on this side have a penchant for spray-painting their guns.) Neither side seemed to have any purpose beyond defeating the enemy. Both sides said they were tired of fighting.

One soldier, Emmanuel Weah, wearing dirty overalls and worn soccer cleats, described how he came to this side of the bridge. Last February, he was captured by government forces and sent to fight. Then he was captured by rebels and sent to a training camp for three weeks and then sent to fight. He said he found his former commander and had him executed.

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