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## Bush Emphasizes Humanitarian Role in Liberia

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CRAWFORD, Tex., Aug. 6 -- President Bush stressed today that the handful of Marines who went ashore in Liberia have a humanitarian mission rather than a combat one, and he gave no indication he plans to send a larger force.

Bush was standing outside a coffee shop with Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, who declared two weeks ago that the world's only superpower has an obligation "not to look away when a problem like this comes before us." But the Pentagon has resisted deep involvement in stabilizing war-torn Liberia after two months of rebels' bloody attacks on the capital. Ten Marines were ferried from warships into Monrovia by helicopter today, and defense officials said they hope not many more will be needed.

Asked if the landing signaled the start of a larger deployment, Bush said the activity is "all part of determining what is necessary to help" a coalition of West African nations "to go in and provide the conditions necessary for humanitarian relief to arrive, whether it be by sea or by air."

"It's part of what we said we would do," he said.

Pentagon officials cautioned against interpreting the dispatch of the team as presaging the deployment of large numbers of U.S. troops in Liberia. Reflecting the Pentagon's continued reluctance to allow U.S. forces to become embroiled in an unstable Liberia, defense planners said they hope to limit the American military role essentially to offering an emergency backup force at sea should the West African peacekeeping troops run into trouble.

Bush and Powell repeated their demand that President Charles Taylor leave the country, which Bush has called a condition for a peaceful and stable Liberia. Powell said he is pleased with the peacekeeping efforts of the West African coalition -- the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) -- starting with a vanguard of armed Nigerian soldiers that arrived on Monday to intervene between government forces and the insurgents.

"The Nigerians showed up in good order," Powell said. "More forces are arriving, and they're starting to establish a sense of security and, I think, put hope back in the hearts of the Liberian people, and we want to support them and assist them, as the president said."

At the Pentagon, officials described the Marines who landed today as a "liaison element" that could grow into as many as 20. Its primary mission will be to coordinate communications and planning between the ECOWAS force and the rest of the contingent of 2,300 Marines at sea, the officials said.

Accepting the recommendation of Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, Bush authorized the dispatch of the team during a video conference Tuesday from his ranch here.

The Marines are part of a three-ship amphibious force that has been gathering off the coast of Liberia. Today, two of the ships moved to within 40 miles to be better positioned for possible emergency operations, officials said. A third ship, the amphibious transport dock USS Nashville, was due to join the other two in another day.

Much of the U.S. logistical support being provided to the West Africans in the country is coming from Pacific Architects and Engineers, a private contractor hired by the State Department, officials said.

Outside Liberia, U.S. military personnel are playing a central part in organizing, equipping and training two additional peacekeeping battalions headed for Liberia -- one from Nigeria to join the battalion that arrived there this week, the other a mix of troops from Senegal, Ghana and Mali. Plans call for the West Africans to initially serve as a vanguard force that will be followed in October by the arrival of a blue-helmeted U.N. peacekeeping force.

For all the attention today on the arrival of the U.S. liaison team, a considerably bigger force of about 80 Marines has been in Liberia for some time augmenting security at the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia.

Bush, Powell and Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage spoke to reporters after a morning-long strategy session that aides said covered a range of hot spots, from North Korea to Iraq. Bush said the meeting included a discussion of "our obligations as a prosperous and strong nation to help the less fortunate." Vice President Cheney will arrive Thursday for a meeting with Rumsfeld on Friday.

Administration officials said this week that they are looking at the possibility of cutting loan guarantees to penalize Israel if construction continues on a security fence in the West Bank. And Bush said today that the United States is "talking to Israel about all aspects of the fence." He said he has "made it clear I thought the fence was a problem," but he added that he continues to "believe we're making progress."

Several Democrats on Capitol Hill criticized the administration for raising the possibility. House Minority Whip Steny H. Hoyer (Md.) said in a statement from Israel, where he was leading a delegation of 29 Democratic lawmakers, that he would fight such a move because it could "undermine Israel's security needs and possibly impede the peace process."

Neither Bush nor Powell, who appeared with their wives before going inside to eat cheeseburgers with local residents, directly answered several questions about whether Powell would serve in a second term if Bush were reelected. "We'll deal with it at the right time," Bush said. "Listen, this guy has done a fabulous job."

Powell said: "I serve at the pleasure of the president."

Bush was dressed in cowboy duds and Powell, who was raised in the South Bronx, sported tasseled loafers and pleated, cuffed khakis.

"We had a good strategy session, and now we're about to go out and brand some cows," Bush said. Powell recoiled before Bush added: "Well, not exactly."

*Graham reported from Washington.*

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