

August 7, 2003

Small Contingent of Marines Lands in Liberian Capital

By THOM SHANKER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 6 — A small contingent of marines landed in Liberia today to coordinate American assistance to international peacekeepers whose goal is to halt violence in the capital and restore the flow of food and medicine, Pentagon and administration officials said.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld authorized up to 20 members of the 2,300-strong Marine task force to go ashore from their ships now off the coast of Liberia. But fewer than 10 landed by helicopter today to begin their work at the headquarters of a Nigerian peacekeeping battalion, officials said.

About 80 other American military personnel were already in Liberia, officials said, guarding the American Embassy and assessing food and medical needs and security in this West African nation, founded by freed American slaves and bloodied by more than a decade of civil war.

Pentagon officials today cautioned that the Marine deployment was deliberately kept small and should not be seen as the vanguard of an armed American peacekeeping force.

Officially, the task of the Marine contingent is a "liaison mission" to help the initial members of a Nigerian peacekeeping battalion now taking up positions.

One American military officer said they would "be our eyes and ears on the ground, helping us understand what the international peacekeeping force needs."

In particular, the marines will help coordinate the efforts of contractors to provide logistical help to foreign troops as they build up their forces. The marines will also coordinate work like reopening the port when the violence ceases, officials said.

President Bush, speaking today with reporters at his Texas ranch, said the small force of marines was "all part of determining what is necessary to help" the international peacekeepers. In turn, Mr. Bush said, that international force is "to go in and provide the conditions necessary for humanitarian relief to arrive, whether it be by sea or by air."

The president emphasized that a primary condition for a broader deployment of American troops — the departure of President Charles G. Taylor — had not been met. In the past, Mr. Bush has also said that a cease-fire must be firmly in place before American peacekeepers would be deployed. Cease-fires have been repeatedly declared, only to be broken.

About 500 members of the Nigerian peacekeeping battalion have arrived in Liberia, administration officials said.

In addition, a second battalion from Nigeria was being readied for deployment, assisted by American contractors hired to help equip and train those forces, in particular to prepare their armored vehicles for duty, another administration official said.

Together the two battalions are expected to secure the airport and the port in the capital, Monrovia, in order to allow shipments of food and medicine to resume.

Other nations that belong to the Economic Community of West African States, known as Ecowas, are also expected to assign troops to the multinational interim force.

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, who joined President Bush in Texas today, said he was pleased at the progress of the West African peacekeeping force.

"The Nigerians showed up in good order, and more forces are arriving," he said. "And they're starting to establish a sense of security and, I think, put hope back in the hearts of the Liberian people."