

Liberian Crowds Cheer U.S. Team

Military Specialists Begin Assessment

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Washington Post Foreign Service

Wednesday, July 9, 2003; Page A18

MONROVIA, Liberia, July 8 -- In a human cascade of welcome and relief, chanting crowds of Liberians swarmed the motorcade carrying a team of U.S. military experts as they ventured into the streets of Liberia's capital this morning to assess the city's humanitarian and security situation for a possible deployment of U.S. troops.

At the sight of Americans they hope have the power to salvage their country after more than a decade of intermittent civil war, residents and refugees burst into song and rambunctious applause at every stop. Mothers led chants of "No more war! We want peace," men praised President Bush and children clutched the visitors' hands.

"You come in here and they all welcome you and touch you," said Cmdr. Gene Smallwood, a Navy medical planner from Damascus, Md. "It actually brought tears to my eyes on my way in. I was glad I was wearing sunglasses, so you guys couldn't see."

As he spoke, a crowd of Liberians cheered the Americans at a soccer stadium where several thousand have been living since civil war pushed them from their villages. More than 100,000 people have fled fighting in recent months between rebels and forces loyal to President Charles Taylor. A cease-fire has been in place since June 17.

"I think it's astounding," said Navy Capt. Roger Coldiron, the team's leader, in the center of a chanting throng in a nearby village swollen by several thousand displaced Liberians. "There's absolutely no word for it."

The exuberant welcome for the 32-member team overshadowed a pair of incidents that marred its first full day in Liberia, but which pointed to the complications that would accompany any U.S. deployment here.

Bush, who is considering dispatching troops to lead an international force to help stabilize the West African nation of 3 million, said his decision would hinge in part on the team's assessment.

After a morning briefing from aid agencies, team members climbed into eight SUVs to visit the makeshift shelters for Liberia's uprooted population.

The Americans stopped first at Redemption Hospital, where aid groups are struggling to provide basic treatment after most international agencies withdrew foreign staff members during last month's rebel offensive. Then the Americans moved to a school sheltering 18,000 refugees, and a chant went up against Taylor, who was indicted this spring on charges of crimes against humanity for his role in arming and training a brutal rebel force in neighboring Sierra Leone. Taylor has said he would step down and accept haven in Nigeria, but has not said when.

"Taylor's wings broke!" the crowd cried. "Bush wake up!"

The first hitch for the team came en route to the next stop, a large camp near a Voice of America broadcast tower outside the capital. Pausing at a Liberian army checkpoint at a strategic bridge, the motorcade was ordered back to town. Defense Minister Daniel Chea, who said the visitors had not paid a courtesy visit before setting off for the day, ordered them turned away.

"It was unfair of them to leave me standing here," Chea told reporters in his downtown office. "They understood my point, they turned around and we had a beautiful meeting."

On the Americans' way there, however, another incident occurred. Chanting crowds had slowed the motorcade to a crawl, and one of the children swarming onto the Americans' SUVs was badly scraped. An embassy worker carried the crying 6-year-old boy into the vehicle.

Moments later, automatic rifle fire erupted from the front of the motorcade. The crowd, which moments earlier had been chanting anti-Taylor slogans, fled in panic. U.S. Marines accompanying the specialists leapt from their vehicles, guns up, until they realized the shots were meant only as a warning. Black-clad Liberian special operations police had fired into the air, apparently trying to disperse the crowd. No injuries were reported.

"That was done mainly to protect the team," Chea said. "You have to understand that our citizens are happy about the Americans coming, but there is always the chance of mischief-makers penetrating the team. . . . We are not taking chances."

The incident illustrated the security risks at the core of the humanitarian crisis here. Two rebel armies control roughly two-thirds of Liberia. And Taylor's hold on the capital region depends on poorly disciplined official militias whose behavior already is the subject of citizen complaints. Many worry how the boys with guns will behave if Taylor, whom they call Pappy, decamps to Nigeria.

"We look at it this way: If he leaves, there will be a power vacuum," said Foday Quaye, a citizen leader of the Wilson Corner camp, which the U.S. team was blocked from reaching today.

After five months without U.N. food rations, camp residents complain as much about government militias as about hunger.

"They knock on the door at night and take your belongings," said Robert Johnson, one of 13,306 residents at the camp. "Sometimes they even beat on the head."

"They rape you," said Mama Gbelley, 30. "They take your food."

Liberian officials say the U.S. team will be free to move about the country as long as their mission requires, which Chea quoted team members as saying they expected to be two weeks.

In the days ahead, the team is expected to break into smaller units, both to cover more territory and to move more efficiently than was possible today in the pandemonium surrounding the motorcade.

"No need to drag your feet," said Richard Konneh, among those at the soccer stadium as the military experts waded through the adoring crowd. "When you drag it, that means more casualties.

"Because you are taking this long, we are already having more casualties."

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