

Bush administration divided over intervention in Liberia

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The Bush administration in the United States has been locked in an internal dispute over the last week on whether to intervene militarily in the civil war in the West African country of Liberia.

Latest news is that a small US military “assessment” team of experts will be sent to the country to work with the Nigerian dominated military front, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the United Nations to “ascertain what their [ECOWAS’s] capabilities are, to determine how best to most effectively keep peace,” according to White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.

ECOWAS has agreed to provide an “interpositional force” of 3,000 troops in Liberia but has requested that a US military force of a further 2,000 troops lead the intervention. Fleischer said that President Bush would decide from the assessment team’s report whether to send troops and how many, but said it was up to the Pentagon how long the investigation would take.

Senior officials told Associated Press that Bush’s senior security advisers were divided and unable to reach a consensus and were presenting conflicting advice.

Mid June an American amphibious assault ship, the *Kearsage*, with more than 2,000 marines on board was diverted from returning to the US from Iraq. It was reported that marines would be deployed to protect civilians, the justification initially used by the British and the French to send troops into neighbouring Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. In both of these countries civil war, brutal attacks on civilians, and humanitarian disasters have provided the rationale for military intervention by imperialist powers into former colonies. However, the US administration appeared to drop the idea of intervening. The *Kearsage* was returned to the US and not replaced.

According to the *Washington Times*, in the discussions last week Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and the top two generals of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were opposed to sending 2,000 troops. Whether they were opposed to sending any troops at all was not made clear though apparently Rumsfeld made contingency plans available. The report indicates that the State Department the previous week had proposed sending a smaller number of troops for a limited period. One perplexed White House official told the *Times*, “The President could do

anything.”

Anonymous Defence Department officials told Associated Press that the US military commander in Europe had been ordered to begin planning for a possible US intervention in Liberia, giving his estimate of how the situation could be handled.

Before the announcement this weekend that the team of experts would be sent, rumours had circulated that Bush would be prepared to send a smaller team of 500 to 1,000 troops and Fox News reported that a “fast team” of 50 to 75 marines would be sent to the Liberian capital of Monrovia.

Rumsfeld declined to make clear his personal views to reporters on an American intervention, saying the administration was “looking at a range of options”—although he suggested that African nations with troops trained by the US could best manage their own affairs.

Last week hundreds of desperate Liberians demonstrated outside the US embassy in Monrovia calling for a US peacekeeping force. They even dumped corpses left from the fighting in the capital outside the embassy. Although there is now a temporary ceasefire, the recent escalation of the civil war with rebel forces temporarily entering the capital has resulted in a sharp deterioration in the humanitarian situation. Most aid workers have fled and the few that are left report that tens of thousands of refugees face dwindling food supplies, dirty water and an outbreak of cholera.

Bush had appeared ready to use the humanitarian situation as a justification for an intervention, saying July 3, that Liberia has a “unique history” in relation to the US. National security adviser Condoleezza Rice pointed to “important US interests” in West Africa, presumably referring to the large oil resources, and also referred to the special history of Liberia in which she said the US had an obligation to act with regional powers to prevent “humanitarian disasters.”

It was widely expected that a firm decision on a Liberian intervention would be made before Bush’s trip to Africa this week. But Ari Fleischer announced instead that President Bush would not be bound by the “artificial deadline” of his Africa visit.

Little explanation of this disarray in the Bush administration has been offered, especially given that Liberia’s President

Charles Taylor, though built up by the western media as the evil force behind all the civil wars in West Africa, has at most a few hundred lightly armed troops that would remain loyal to him under serious military opposition. Taylor's other military support is from irregular and unpaid militias that rely on looting the local population. Similarly the rebel Liberians for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) forces, which controls much of the country and mounted the recent attacks on Monrovia, are ill-disciplined irregulars, many of them children. None of these forces would be any match for US troops.

One suggestion is that the experience of Somalia in 1993, when 18 US soldiers were killed in the "Black Hawk Down" incident, has made the US military wary of interventions in Africa. But according to one official quoted by the *Washington Post*, the discussions in the Bush administration last week discounted the Somalia comparison. "These guys [Taylor's forces] aren't like [Somali] warlords," said the official.

Other reports refer to the US military being "overstretched" with more than 200,000 troops in Iraq, the rest of the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan. This points to the most likely explanation. Liberia is a tiny country in comparison to Iraq, but the continuing military attacks on US and British forces there and the worldwide opposition to the colonial occupation have clearly made the Bush administration extremely wary of getting bogged down in West Africa as well.

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For the time being there has been nothing but support reported in the media for a US intervention. As well as repeated requests from African leaders to give a military lead and financial support to the ECOWAS forces, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has also strongly requested a US military presence.

Editorials in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have called for a US-led peacekeeping force, suggesting that in addition to humanitarian considerations it could give a "longer-term future" to US interests in Africa and that the US could claim it was "prepared to use its power for more than narrow self-defence."

Both the British and French governments have pressed for a US military intervention. Britain has several hundred troops in Sierra Leone backed by a 13,000-strong UN contingent. It has effectively re-colonised the country with British officials in key administrative positions. France has 4,000 troops in Ivory Coast and now that a ceasefire has been imposed is also attempting to build a colonial administration. Whatever their concerns about US rivalry on the African continent, both Britain and France are worried that in the short term the civil war in Liberia could spread and threaten the stability of the whole of West Africa.

Officials have leaked concerns in the US administration that a political settlement should be effected in Liberia before troops are committed. But US policy in the region has been disastrous. The LURD forces are backed by Guinea, a country that the US

has looked on favourably as providing a counterweight to Charles Taylor's regime. Expert assessments of the LURD show that it is made up of sociopaths and criminal elements that would give rise to as many problems as the Taylor regime. The New York-based Human Rights Watch has documented abduction and forced recruitment of child soldiers as well as the use of forced labour, assault and sexual violence against civilians.

Bush's only consistent pronouncement on the Liberian civil war is that Taylor should go. He told CNN he was confident that Taylor would go peacefully: "I am convinced that he will listen, and make the decision, the right decision, if he cares about his country."

But although Nigeria has offered to give asylum to Taylor he has little incentive to retire because the US has also insisted that he should be tried for war crimes. The UN-backed war crimes court in Sierra Leone has indicted Taylor and the US-appointed chief prosecutor, David Crane, has loudly attacked Ghana for not arresting Taylor when he took part in peace talks there last month. "The unfortunate situation in Liberia is on their shoulders," said Crane.

Meanwhile Taylor has insisted that he should remain in Monrovia and only leave after US troops arrive, saying ominously that his forces were still "capable of carrying out havoc in the city."

Whilst there is no doubt that Taylor is a bloody tyrant, the blaming of one man for the disaster in West Africa is the most banal of explanations. It conveniently ignores the fact that the US put Taylor, criminal record notwithstanding, into power in 1997. More fundamentally it ignores a century long history of western powers milking the area of all its resources, imposing brutal proxy regimes and then finally allowing economic decline to result in "failed states" and wars to be organised by criminal gangs.



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