

Liberian war restarts

Chris Talbot
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Liberia's capital Monrovia is once again under attack by rebel forces of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Latest news is that they have reached the Gabriel Tucker Bridge on the edge of the city centre. This is the third time that the rebels have attempted to take Monrovia and blows apart the attempts at a US-brokered peace deal being negotiated in Ghana.

Tens of thousands of civilians were sheltering in the diplomatic quarter of Monrovia as the US ambassador pleaded with the rebels to stop fighting. Over the last week and before that during President Bush's Africa tour, the humanitarian disaster in Liberia has been highlighted in the world's media. The BBC has featured a diary of an aid worker in Monrovia and the *New York Times*, accompanying the US military assessment team, revealed the acute situation in towns near the Guinea border. There is little food and safe water, diseases like cholera are rife, and the country's infrastructure has collapsed.

After Bush declared that Liberia has a "unique history" in relation to America, the inability of a divided US administration to decide what action to take there has the makings of a foreign policy disaster. Liberian President Charles Taylor has been demonised by Bush as the man solely responsible for the wars ravaging the region. War has engulfed the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Guinea as well as Liberia. But Taylor has scored something of a propaganda victory by agreeing to leave for Nigeria under US pressure. He is now accusing the US of having "blood on its hands" for attempting to oust him when he is rallying forces to fight the rebels. Latest reports suggest that Taylor's imminent departure has created demoralisation and increased looting among government forces.

A military force organised by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was supposed to arrive in Monrovia this week, as a sequel

to the ceasefire arranged June 17 between the LURD rebels, another rebel grouping and the Liberian government. But even the Nigerian commander of the force and an advance team needed to mark out the frontline between the rebels and government forces have failed to appear.

A transitional regime was to be agreed, following discussions taking place in Ghana between the rebel groups, the government and opposition political parties, that would take over after Taylor's departure. As the 30-day timetable allowed for this process has ended, LURD have recommenced their drive to take Monrovia.

Whilst the US has designs on Africa—especially the oil producing west coast—it would prefer to work through local proxies in ECOWAS such as Nigeria and Ghana where it has been training troops. The State Department, however, views the sending of a small-scale US military force to back up the ECOWAS troops as a useful humanitarian cover that would counter accusations of the US pursuing selfish interests in the Middle East and smooth diplomatic relations with Europe. But the Pentagon is reluctant to commit more troops due to the continuing resistance and what is now called "overstretch" in Iraq.

There is clearly some resentment in the administration over their predicament. In a July 14 comment in the *Wall Street Journal* Charles Krauthammer, a slavish supporter of US war aims, railed against the "left" for opposing the war in Iraq but urging intervention in Liberia. Denouncing those who think that "the US Army is a missionary service rather than a defender of US interests," he was particularly incensed at European demands for US intervention. With British troops in Sierra Leone and French troops in Ivory Coast, the former colonial powers have used the humanitarian issue to press for American forces to bring stability to the region by moving into Liberia.

Krauthammer demanded that if Bush finds pressure to intervene in Liberia “irresistible”, he should tell Europe and the rest of the world, “America will share the burden with them if they share the burden with us where we need it. And that means peacekeepers in Iraq.”

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, backed no doubt by France and Germany, has welcomed the opportunity to work with Jacques Paul Klein, an American appointed as UN special representative in Liberia. Annan is eager to help out the US over its difficulties. Annan, accompanied by Klein, was given red-carpet treatment at his meeting with Bush in the Oval Office last week. According to the *New York Times* Annan told Bush that only a small contingent of US troops was required, and promised, “You won’t get bogged down.”

A US career diplomat, Klein has a wealth of experience in running neocolonial administrations. After being the political advisor to US European Command he was appointed in 1996 as UN Transitional Administrator for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium, moved to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1997 and by 1999 was appointed Coordinator of UN Operations in Bosnia.

When the military investigation team that Bush sent to Liberia during his trip to Africa two weeks ago reported back on July 17 Bush was still unable to make a commitment of US troops. Klein attempted to bully ECOWAS into deploying a “vanguard” force of at least 1,000 troops immediately. Telling a UN press briefing that “ECOWAS needed to move quickly,” he promised that the Bush administration would wait to see the ECOWAS response before making a decision. “The United States wanted to know if there was a serious commitment by ECOWAS. A sufficient number of troops were needed and not just some show of force. Requirements in other parts of the world were drawing down [US] troop levels.”

Klein’s statement was contradicted by a US official—speaking to AP on condition of anonymity—who said that US deployment would not depend on ECOWAS’s commitment and that “the president will make a decision when he is ready.” Klein appears to have failed to get a speedy response from ECOWAS—presumably wary of sending troops into such an unstable situation without financial or military

support from the US being guaranteed.

Whether Klein and Annan can salvage anything of the ceasefire proposals or whether LURD move into Monrovia, in what is likely to be a most bloody battle, remains unclear. Government troops are said to be demoralised and are putting up only limited resistance.

What lies behind the UN attempt to assist the US is most likely the quid pro quo support that America is now giving the European Union in its imperialist ambitions in the Congo. After dropping their opposition to the illegal US war in Iraq, France and Germany have been allowed by the US to pursue their own ambitions in Africa with UN backing. At the special UN Security Council discussion on the Congo last week that followed Annan’s meeting with Bush, Europe’s Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana boasted of the “success” of the first European Union-backed multinational force led by French troops in Bunia. The new government of national unity established in Kinshasa opened up a “window of opportunity” that the EU would provide with a 205 million euro strategic support programme.

Annan recommended that a 10,000-strong UN peacekeeping force be sent to replace the EU troops. John Negroponte, US ambassador to the UN, thanked the EU for carrying out a “dangerous, but important, mission”, thanking “especially the French government for playing the leading role.”



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