



U.N. Security Council OK's Mission to Liberia

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By The NorthStar News Staff

The United Nations Security Council has unanimously passed a resolution calling for the deployment of a multi-national peacekeeping force to quell the civil war raging in the West African nation of Liberia. However France, Germany, and Mexico objected to a provision that exempts the United States troops from prosecution by any country but the U.S. should they be accused of war crimes while in Liberia. The Council's action follows weeks of lobbying by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and hand wringing by the Bush administration as appeals have been made to the White House to intervene in the conflict. The Defense Department has also deployed additional troops to Liberia's capital to reinforce troops currently guarding the U.S. Embassy as rebel troops maintain pressure on Monrovia. However, questions remain as to whether U.S. troops will come ashore to restore order or protect U.S. property and personnel only.

In the past month fighting intensified in the West African nation as the temporary peace brokered by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has fallen apart and civilian casualties mount, to the point that bodies have been piled on the steps of the U.S. Embassy. The main opposition group, Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), continues to mount a fierce campaign against forces loyal to the President Charles Taylor. The president, who weeks ago had agreed to accept an offer of asylum from Nigeria, has of late sent signals that any surrender of power would be temporary; further complicating efforts to sustain a ceasefire. In recent days Taylor has indicated that he would be stepping down this month. However, his departure has been a moving target that has frustrated efforts to broker a peace agreement.

In the face of growing violence in Monrovia, pressure is mounting on the Bush administration to send the U.S. military as a peacekeeping force to restore order in Liberia. U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan has made repeated appeals to the White House for the U.S. to participate in such a mission as part of an ECOWAS led coalition. In response the White House has insisted that President Taylor resign from office. Annan's efforts to draw American troops into West Africa are complicated by the expectation that the United States may return to the U.N. to seek support in Iraq, giving the White House a trump card to play to force other nations to enter the Persian Gulf. A West African peacekeeping force is expected to arrive in Liberia today.

A Historic Link to America's Black Community

Liberia holds special significance for Blacks in the United States as the West African nation was identified in 1821 as a haven for repatriated slaves by the American Colonization Society. Some 13,000 slaves immigrated to Liberia from the United States. The colony became independent in 1847. The descendants of the nation's original settlers are called Americo-Liberians and they have generally controlled the nation's politics. The country has uniquely American roots; its currency is called the dollar, its government and constitution is modeled after that of the United States, and its capital – Monrovia - is named for President James Monroe. It is the nation that was in the sight of Marcus Garvey who embraced it as the destination for his Black Star Line. Its history is inextricably tied to the United States and it represents, to a large degree in a highly romanticized way, a symbolic homeland for American Blacks.

The current violence in Monrovia challenges the Black community in the United States, often legitimately wary of the motivations of their own government, to determine its posture regarding U.S. military intervention in Liberia. For a number of reasons Africa has never been a political priority for U.S. Blacks despite the work of organizations such as TransAfrica and the highly visible campaign against South African apartheid in the 1980's. The influx of African immigrants in the United States has not changed that dynamic, in some ways it has only further distanced Blacks from their ancestral origins. If the violence persists in Monrovia and innocent civilians continue to die, Black leadership in the United States may be forced to play a much more vocal role in the debate over Liberia's future.

Liberia's Future is Tied to its Past; The U.S. is Key in Both

The civil unrest in Monrovia also poses a significant challenge to Liberia's neighbors. At a time when the leadership of sub-Saharan nations works to forge a collaborative partnership to address the region's many ills, the outbreak of violence in Liberia's capital demonstrates the fragile nature of some governments. Central to the long-term stability of many of these nations is the ability for there to be a consensus borne from self-determination. Liberia has long stood out as a problem as western interests, primarily the United States, have propped up successive rulers while leading the nation into despair. Taylor's predecessor, Samuel Doe, came to power in a violent coup and was buttressed with U.S. aid by the Reagan administration. Doe himself wound up on the wrong end of the stick in 1990 when Taylor's forces overthrew the government and the U.S. government left Doe to be executed.

The future of Liberia may now be inextricably tied to its past, a tenuous relationship with its patron – the United States. Though the Bush administration is still keeping its distance from the internal chaos raging in Liberia, the U.S. may have no choice but to actively intervene. Against the backdrop of its policy of regime change in Iraq, based on what we now know to be faulty intelligence, it would seem unconscionable for the Bush administration to simply do what the first Bush administration did – rescue Americans and leave Liberians at the mercy of the next warlord. From a geopolitical perspective, the United States carries a special burden, along with Britain and France, to make amends for the havoc that its imperialistic tendencies unleashed on the continent in centuries past. Still, all signs thus far appear to indicate that President Bush is willing to watch from the sidelines, encouraging others to take the lead, while the administration concentrates on its own narrow interests.

Black leadership has an opportunity to put Africa on the nation's foreign policy agenda if members of Congress take advantage of the political calendar. The looming 2004 presidential election gives Blacks an opportunity to test the president's so-called "compassionate conservatism" by confronting his rhetoric with his posture on Liberia. The president has already been criticized for failing to put the requisite dollars behind his much publicized global AIDS initiative, touted on his recent tour of five sub-Saharan African nations. In some quarters the Bush administration has also been ridiculed for its efforts to forge alliances with oil-rich West African nations. Its arm twisting and thinly veiled strategy of "votes for aid" in the U.N. Security Council when it was seeking a resolution declaring Iraq in violation of U.N. Resolution 1441 also exposed how little the continent is respected in the highest levels of our government. The Liberia crisis could prove to be a potent political issue in the race for the White House if the Black electorate is sufficiently educated on the plight of sub-Sahara Africa and the Bush administration's tepid response to the plethora of ills plaguing the region.

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