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AIR RAIDS ON LIBERIA INTENSIFY

By Karl Maier

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GREENVILLE, LIBERIA -- Blood-stained sheets and mattresses are all that is left at F.J. Grante Hospital in this Liberian ghost town. Doctors, nurses and patients -- along with most of the 15,000 residents here -- all fled after a deadly air raid by Nigerian warplanes.

The sheets and mattresses fill the emergency room where the staff had tried to save victims of Greenville's most intense bombing raid March 18. The town's flight into the bush began the following day, triggered by fear that the jets would return.

"All the port workers, merchants, the people have left," said the Rev. Hamilton Ross, pastor at the First United Methodist Church.

"Women and children were killed. All we can do now is pray."

While the world's attention has focused on death and destruction elsewhere -- in Bosnia, for example, or across the African continent in Somalia -- 15,000 foreign troops in Liberia have aggressively stepped up a campaign to defeat the rebel National Patriotic Front (NPFL) army led by Charles Taylor. Greenville was the latest of several targets that a five-nation West African expeditionary force known as Ecomog had identified as Taylor strongholds.

The Ecomog force, commanded and dominated by soldiers from regional power Nigeria, has been fighting in Liberia since West Africa's bloodiest and most protracted conflict resumed last October after a two-year cease-fire. Besides an estimated 10,000

Nigerian troops, Ecomog includes soldiers from Gambia, Ghana, Guinea and Sierra Leone.

Ecomog's efforts are being closely watched by the United Nations, the Organization for African Unity and a number of nations as a possible model for regional conflict resolution. The United States has provided Ecomog with \$28 million in support, along with more than \$200 million in aid to Liberia, according to reports.

Liberian rebel leader Taylor has refused to disarm his army in accordance with a peace plan sponsored by the 16-nation Economic Community of West Africa, charging that the regional body's cooperation with an interim government it installed violates the peace keepers' professed neutrality.

The community dispatched the Ecomog force to Liberia in November 1990 to halt the civil war, which had raged since Taylor's forces invaded Liberia from neighboring Ivory Coast the previous Christmas Eve. Before a cease-fire took hold upon the West Africans' arrival, President Samuel Doe had been killed by a splinter rebel faction, half the country's 2.6 million people had fled, many into exile, and an estimated 20,000 Liberians had been killed as the conflict degenerated into bloody ethnic massacres.

The peace plan effectively divided Liberia in two, leaving Taylor with the 60 percent of the country his forces had seized and the rest, including the capital, Monrovia, under control of Ecomog and factions loyal to interim President Amos Sawyer. Plans to hold general elections this year have been suspended.

For weeks last month, Greenville was shelled daily by Nigerian gunboats patrolling the Atlantic Ocean coast in an effort to enforce an economic embargo on rebel-controlled areas to press Taylor to disarm.

The March 18 air raid on Greenville lasted 25 minutes and killed at least 15 civilians. The exact death toll may never be known, however, because of the town's near evacuation following the raid. The local rebel military commander, Col. Cooper Say, said 60 people were killed. "I watched two children die, and their mother lose her left arm," Ross said.

Throughout rebel-controlled territory, the air raids have targeted towns and ports, especially places such as Greenville and Buchanan that Ecomog says Taylor has used to break its embargo by trading iron ore and timber for fuel and arms. The Ecomog commander, Nigerian Maj. Gen. Adetunji Olurin, has said his jets attack only military targets.

But international aid agencies and foreign businessmen in rebel areas say the raids have killed dozens of civilians and sparked the flight of thousands of refugees into Liberia's dense tropical rain forests and neighboring states.

The raids, apparently aimed at breaking the rebels' will, appear to be having the opposite effect, not only sparking deep bitterness but also swelling Taylor's military ranks with volunteers. "I know a lot of people who say, 'Give me a gun and let me kill two or three of the Ecomog soldiers,' " said a foreign businessman in Greenville.

Outside Gbarnga, capital of Taylor's self-proclaimed "Greater Liberia," where thousands of refugees have collected, Phebe Hospital was the target of a controversial raid March 10. Olurin publicly denied that his force's planes had struck the hospital, saying they attacked a rebel military convoy instead.

The attack, in which five hospital workers were wounded, occurred at 10:50 p.m., said hospital director W.T. Gwenigale. The hospital compound was lit up that night, unlike the rest of Gbarnga and

rebel-controlled territory, which have been cut out of Liberia's main electrical grid.

Exploding shells slammed into the south wall of the pediatric ward just four feet from a window overlooking 35 sleeping children being treated for malaria and malnutrition. Miraculously, no one was hurt, although Gwenigale said some of the children might have died when everyone fled into the bush after the attack.

"We had painted big red crosses on the roof of the hospital . . . after planes attacked last year, but it did not work," he said. "The doctors and nurses can flee and find work elsewhere, but it is the people who will suffer. They have nowhere else to go."

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