

Liberia looks for U.S. intervention

Declan Walsh/CNS

BENSONVILLE, Liberia — At first glance, this sleepy town north of the Liberian capital, Monrovia, appears to have one foot in Africa and the other in the United States.

Southern-style houses on stilts, many of them rotting, dot the roadside alongside traditional African mud and concrete dwellings. The accented English of local people has more than a hint of American.

Residents say they are fiercely proud of their historical links with the United States, which stretch more than 150 years back to the days when freed U.S. slaves landed on the beaches here and built a new nation.

"The U.S. is our big brother. We communicate with them and they come to our rescue," said Joseph D. Moulson, a 59-year-old farmer whose grandfather came here sometime in the 1850s after being freed from slavery in Richmond, Va.

Those age-old trans-Atlantic ties have never been so closely examined as they are now.

Rebels fighting to topple President Charles Taylor launched a fierce offensive on Monrovia in mid-July, punching through the city's defenses and heading for its center. Tens of thousands of civilians fled their homes for shelter, making an already dire humanitarian situation worse.

U.S. President George W. Bush, who promised to be "active" in Liberia, has come under intense pressure to send up to 2,000 U.S. peacekeeping troops to stabilize the situation. But he has hesitated, perhaps fearing a repeat of the disastrous peacekeeping mission to Somalia 10 years ago.

Some Americo-Liberians — those



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A teenage government militia soldier mans a checkpoint 10 miles outside the Liberian capital of Monrovia in mid-July. The archbishop of Monrovia said he believes the young fighters loyal to President Charles Taylor would stand down if U.S. troops intervened in the country's civil unrest.

descended from the freed slaves — say they would feel let down if U.S. troops do not arrive.

"First time we looked, America and Liberia were so close," said Moulson's wife, Sarah, whose grandfather also came from Virginia. "But now it's become sour. We are just praying (to) God it will become like before."

Father James Lee, a 79-year-old Catholic priest with 28 years of experience in Liberia, agreed.

"There is a very close relationship. A lot of Liberians have relatives in the U.S., and they have done well there. That's why there is so much pressure to make Bush move and do something," he said.

The close links between Liberia and the United States are still apparent despite 14 years of on-again, off-again violence.

The currency, the constitution and the flag — a star and stripes — are all modeled on those of the United States. The capital, Monrovia, is named after America's fifth president, James Monroe. Place names include Providence Island — where the first freed slaves arrived in 1820 — as well as Virginia and Maryland County.

And American-English terms litter local English — for example the rutted roads leaving Monrovia are referred to as "freeways."

Until the late 1980s the two countries had strong political and economic links. U.S. industrialist Harvey Firestone obtained a million-acre concession for rubber extraction and built a tire empire.

During the Cold War, Liberia was a strategic U.S. ally in Africa, stationing a CIA listening post, a transmitter for the Voice of America radio station and a U.S. Coast Guard Omega navigation station in the small West African country.

"We were like teeth and tongue," said Joseph Saye Guannu, one of the country's minority Catholics who was ambassador to the United States in the 1980s.

Although Catholics are estimated to make up 10 percent of the population — the majority are Muslims, with most Christians following the Baptist or Methodist faiths brought

by freed slaves — the church's social importance far outweighs its numbers.

Many of the schools, hospitals and health clinics still functioning are owned and run by Catholics. In Monrovia alone there are 15 Catholic secondary schools.

"Eighty percent of our pupils are not Catholic. We take anybody," said Archbishop Michael K. Francis of Monrovia.

However the violence has taken its toll on social services — an estimated 75 percent of Liberians are illiterate, and many medical facilities have been ransacked by both insurgents and government troops.

The domination of Americo-Liberians is partly responsible. For the first 133 years of Liberia's existence, Americo-Liberians held a stranglehold on power at the expense of indigenous Africans.

At independence in 1847, native Africans were denied citizenship. Any whiff of rebellion was brutally put down, and some were taken into slavery. As late as the 1930s, a League of Nations investigation found then-President Edwin Barclay guilty of rounding up slaves and selling them to cocoa plantation owners in nearby countries.

Until a military coup in 1980 every Liberian president was an Americo-Liberian. Nearly all were members of the Liberian Freemasons, a shadowy society that combined the secrecy of a men's society with traditional practices that included ritual killings.

"It was an institution of injustice," said Guannu.

That domination ended with the 1980 overthrow of President William Tolbert by indigenous army Sgt. Samuel Doe, who declared himself president.

Since then the lot of ordinary Liberians has gotten even worse, particularly under Taylor's six-year rule.

And the tensions between Americo-Liberians — who make up at most 5 percent of the population — and those of African descent have largely, but not completely, disappeared.

"It's less than before, but it's still there. It borders on a white-black superiority issue," said U.S. Sister Barbara Brilliant, of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary.

If anything, Liberians are united by their suffering, and a burning desire for American intervention. Some feel the close ties make it an obligation.

"We were there for them. Now they owe this to us," said Archbishop Francis.

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