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Equatorial Guinea

Oil Rich Equatorial Guinea - Time For Another Coup?

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The long prison sentences passed on Simon Mann and Nick DuToit, leaders of a failed coup attempt against the regime of President Teoboro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea, highlight the role of mercenaries in this oil rich state. Mann is a former SAS officer, who on leaving the army moved into the security and mercenary business. He set up Executive Outcomes in the 1980's and Sandline International in 1995, which were involved in the mercenary business in Africa. Nick DuToit is a South African, arms dealer.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/mercenaries-in-court.jpg>]

Simon Mann and fellow mercenaries in court

In Mann's trial in Zimbabwe prosecutors alleged that Equatorial Guinea's Spanish based opposition leader, Severo Moto, offered Mann and his fellow mercenaries \$1.8m and oil rights to overthrow President Obiang. Obiang who himself seized power from his uncle in a coup in 1979. Mann was arrested with 64 suspected South African mercenaries, who had flown from South Africa into Harare in March 04 in a Boeing727. Mann admitted trying to order assault rifles, grenades and anti-tank rocket launchers from Zimbabwe Defence Industries. Mann was sentenced to 7 years imprisonment for attempting to possess dangerous weapons and the 64 suspected mercenaries to 16 months imprisonment for violating immigration laws.

DuToit's was tried together with 14 other mercenaries and several Equatorial Guineans in Malabo in August 04 and admitted giving logistical support to the coup attempt. However, in the closing days of the trial he withdrew his confession, claiming it was made under torture. A member of the group imprisoned with DuToit, a German, died in prison. Amnesty International suspected the death was due to torture.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/thatcher.jpg>]

Mark Thatcher

Sir Mark Thatcher, Lady Thatcher's son, was arrested in Cape Town in August 04 over accusations that he helped finance the attempted coup. Crause Steyl, a former crack mercenary pilot, who was convicted in Dec 04 of violating South Africa's foreign military assistance act for his role in the botched coup in Equatorial Guinea, will be a star witness in Thatcher's trial. In his plea bargain deal, Steyl is reported to have given details of Sir Mark's as well as his own role in the plot.

He revealed that he was recruited by Simon Mann, who asked him to look into the acquisition of a helicopter to be used for the coup. He first met Sir Mark, together with Greg Wales, a British businessman at Lanseria Airport, north of Johannesburg in Dec.03. He was told on this occasion that Thatcher would finance the purchase of the helicopter. Later, Thatcher, who is a trained pilot, tested the helicopter. In the event, the helicopter was not used due to original plans for the coup being stalled. Steyl was supposed to fly Severo Moto to Equatorial Guinea from Spain to take Obiang's place after the coup.

The South African state prosecutor, Michael Donen in arguing that Sir Mark must answer questions about the alleged failed coup attempt said "There is therefore a trend, apparently in Equatorial Guinea and in central Africa where chequebook colonialists hire small groups of former South African Defence Force people and they buy themselves a small African country which has oil". Sir Mark is also charged with violating South Africa's anti-mercenary laws.

U.S. and Britain aware of the plot

Inside and outside the courts there have been repeated allegations about the involvement of the US, British and Spanish governments in the attempted coup against Equatorial Guinea. In September 04, Miguel Borico, the prime minister of Equatorial Guinea in the General Assembly of the UN charged that Spain was involved in plotting a coup against his government. Spain denied the charge.

As regards the US and Britain, Johann Smith, a former commander in South African Special Forces revealed that he had sent separate reports to two senior officers in British intelligence and to Michael Westphal, an adviser to Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defence Secretary, warning them of the impending coup attempt. Britain at first denied all prior knowledge of the coup attempt but Jack Straw, the British Foreign Minister was forced to admit later that he knew about it six weeks before it was supposed to take place. The Equatorial Guinea government complained that neither the US nor Britain had warned it of the coup attempt and it thanked South Africa for informing it of the plot.

Gulf of Guinea Oil vital for U.S.

Ten years after the discovery of vast quantities of oil and gas in its waters by ExxonMobil, tiny Equatorial Guinea now produces 440,000 barrels of oil daily, almost half the yield of Nigeria. Within five years it will probably become Africa's second biggest producer and one of the US's largest providers. According to the IMF, its income from oil and gas is about \$1bn a year based on 1992 oil prices and output. It is more likely that its income from oil is \$3bn.

Large quantities of oil have also been discovered in the waters off the tiny neighbouring island of Sao Tome e Principe, where over 20 oil companies have bid for the right to drill. The U.S. is negotiating with the government of this island to establish a strategic regional base there.

The African Oil Policy Group, a Washington lobbying group, reported to the House of Representatives African Subcommittee in 2002, "the Gulf of Guinea oil basin in West Africa, with greater western and southern Africa and its attendant market of 250 million people located astride key sea lanes of communication, [is] a vital interest in U.S. national security calculations".

The U.S. has used the "war on terrorism" to increase its military presence in Africa. General James Jones, commander of the US European command with responsibility for African operations, on the eve of President Bush's visit to Africa in June 03 stated that the US was trying to negotiate the long term use of a "family" of military bases across Africa. Augmenting these bases would be a strong U.S. Navy and Marine force operating in the Gulf of Guinea off the coast of West Africa "The carrier battle groups of the future may not spend six months in the Mediterranean sea," Jones said "but I'll bet they spend half the time going down the west coast of Africa".

In October 04 the U.S. European Command sponsored a three day Gulf of Guinea Maritime Security Conference, which was hosted by Admiral Gregory Johnson, Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe. Leaders of 17 navies from West Africa, Europe and the U.S. were present. High on the list of subjects discussed was the need to reduce maritime threats to economic development such as offshore oil production.

Wealthy few, majority poor

It is estimated that the giant U.S. oil companies Exxon Mobil, Marathon and others have invested more than \$3bn in Equatorial Guinea, a country with a population of about 500,000 people. According to a government source, the deal the oil companies struck is for the government to receive 15% of oil revenues. The average income is said to have

grown to \$5000 a head from less than \$500, the economy is growing by 65%. A new motorway and a new airport have been built in Malabo, the capital city and the hospital has a new wing.

The social conditions of the majority of the people have not improved and in Malabo 30,000 people live in some of Africa's worst slums. Only a minority of the population have really benefited from the oil wealth. The president, his family and a small elite are very wealthy. In the course of an overall investigation of account transactions at Riggs, an old-line Washington bank, U.S. Senate investigators discovered large payments made by the oil companies to officials of Equatorial Guinea and their relatives. \$700million in accounts and certificates of deposit for the Equatorial Guinea government, its officials and their relatives were held with the Riggs Bank. Using wire transfers some \$35 million was drained from an account that held oil revenues for the country's people and into offshore companies. Riggs was fined \$25million for a "wilful, systemic" violation of anti-money laundering laws.

The corrupt, repressive regime of President Obiang has survived frequent coup attempts. The failed coup attempt in March 04 is not likely to be the last to decide who takes over from Obiang. Until now it appears that his regime has served the interests of the multinational oil corporations. The failure of the U.S. and Britain to give Equatorial Guinea prior warning of the attempted coup begs the question as to whether the imperialists are now looking for an alternative to replace him.

Links between Pentagon and alleged plotter

Links have been discovered between a senior U.S. defence official and the British businessman, Greg Wales, who has been implicated in the coup attempt by the convicted mercenary pilot, Crause Steyl as well as by the Equatorial Guinea government. The former British Home Secretary, David Blunkett acceded to a request of the Equatorial Guinea government to authorise the police to investigate the role of Greg Wales in the attempted coup.

According to the Equatorial Guinea government, when the plot was in its early stages in November 03, Simon Mann paid Wales \$8000. The following January, Wales's firm, the Sherbourne Foundation was paid another \$35,000 by the coup plotters. A few days after the alleged first payment Wales went to Washington to a conference organised by an influential group of U.S. "private military companies", the IPOA(International Peace Operations Association). There he met Theresa Whelan, a member of the Bush administration in charge of African affairs at the Pentagon. He had a further meeting with her a few months later. The Equatorial Guinea government accused the U.S. of backing the coup attempt, which the Pentagon denied, claiming it was Mr Wales who made all the approaches to them.

Ms. Whelan told the IPOA conference that the Pentagon was keen to see private military companies operating in Africa. She said "Contractors are here to stay in supporting U.S. national security objectives overseas". They were cheaper and saved the use of U.S. forces in peacekeeping and training. She added "The U.S. can be supportive in trying to ameliorate regional crises without necessarily having to put U.S. troops on the ground, which is often a very difficult political decision.....Sometimes we may not want to be very visible".

Ms Whelan merely confirmed the practice pursued by successive U.S. governments over many years. They secretly support or approve of private armies and mercenaries in many parts of the world, who serve their interests and disclaim all knowledge and responsibility for their actions when accusing fingers are pointed at them. Whatever the truth behind the bungled plot against the Equatorial Guinea government, U.S. military circles are sympathetic to the coup attempt. One of the officials present at the IPOA dinner said "Ethically you have to want to see Obiang removed.... It's a real indictment of the international community that they've failed to get rid of him".