

Private armies involved in the Congo war

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Private armies and their associated business backers are playing a central role in the destabilisation of the African continent. Several mercenary outfits are involved in the war in the Congo, according to a report in the South African-based *Johannesburg Mail and Guardian*.

The Pretoria-based Executive Outcomes (EO) is the most notorious group cited in the report. EO was involved last year in restoring the Kabbah regime in Sierra Leone. For 22 months, until the beginning of 1997, it had provided military support to the government and protected diamond mines, for which the company received an average monthly cash payment of \$1.5 million. Three months after EO left, in May 1997, the Kabbah government was overthrown in a coup. It was restored with the support of the US and European governments in February this year.

Seventy EO mercenaries were kicked out of Papua New Guinea in March last year after mass protests built up against their presence. They had been paid \$36 million to put down the secessionist rebellion on Bougainville island.

EO was formed in 1989 with personnel drawn from former members of the South African Security Forces. It is one of a number of firms in the Strategic Resources Corporation group. Whilst EO provides the South African security part of operations, another part is housed in Plaza 107, a London-based service company which gives support to several offshore registered firms. Most of these are mineral operators, including Branch Energy, Diamond Works, and Heritage Oil and Gas. Sandline International, another firm of mercenaries involved in Sierra Leone, also operates from this office. By employing private armies, companies stand to make huge profits from the exploitation of mineral reserves in high-risk areas.

Although mercenaries have been used previously in African conflicts, including the Congo, firms like EO

have only developed over the last seven years. According to David Shearer of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, based in London, this is because 'the UN and Western states have little strategic interest in nations like Sierra Leone and no appetite for military intervention after experiences in places such as Somalia and Bosnia.' Western governments now encourage despotic regimes--like that of Kabbah in Sierra Leone--and corporate mining interests to employ their own private armies.

EO's intelligence officer Rico Visser told South African journalists that the Congolese leader Laurent Kabila was now hiring them to defend the strategic Inga Dam, south west of Kinshasa, the capital city of Congo. Electricity from the dam not only powers Kinshasa but also the key mining region of Shaba (Katanga) in the south of the country.

The *Mail and Guardian* reports that EO has had contact with Kabila for more than a year and has concluded a contract with Kabila's ministers to provide VIP protection, electronic surveillance and air combat support. It also claims that personnel associated with EO have contracts with the Angolan government to supply aircraft as well as fighter jet and helicopter pilots. These are used in 'offensive air reconnaissance operations' against suppliers to Unita, the military faction formerly backed by the South African government and the CIA, which still controls a large part of Angola.

Another report states that EO has been working with the Angolan army since 1993. As the peace deal negotiated between the Angolan regime and Unita in 1994 breaks down, Angola has moved to prop up Kabila to prevent Unita from building a base of support in the Congo.

Another unnamed consortium of air, cargo, transport and military companies from South Africa and Namibia has gained contracts with Kabila, but claim they only

provide 'non-lethal' support. This consortium is reported to have access to strategic airports in the Caprivi strip of Namibia, northern Mozambique, Zambia, Angola and Malawi providing lines of support to key military bases in the Congo.

The report also states that scores of South Africans and over 100 white, French speaking troops arrived in the city of Lubumbashi, capital of the southern region of Katanga. Although it was not known which company hired them, they were defending strategic points on the outskirts of the city, presumably related to mining interests.

As well as operations supporting the Kabila side of the war in the Congo, there are companies supplying the rebel camp. According to the *Mail and Guardian* report, a Johannesburg corporate intelligence company staffed by former military intelligence officers assisted the Ugandan defence ministry in purchasing armoured personnel carriers from the arms manufacturer Reumech. This deal was brokered by a group of former South African Defence Force (SADF) officers who are associated with right-wing circles. They name the key member of this group as Johan Niemoller, a wealthy businessman who runs military supply lines into various parts of Africa. He is said to have been planning a sequence of military revolts throughout central Africa, and is quoted as wanting to 'kick the communists out of Africa and put the white man back in power.' Last year Niemoller began recruiting former SADF soldiers to back the Unita forces in Angola. Niemoller has also struck a deal with supporters of the former ruler of the Congo (Zaire), Mobutu Sese Seko, to recruit hired forces and purchase weapons.

Chief amongst the Mobutuists are former Zairean security police chief General Baramoto, former special forces commander General Nzimbi and former minister of defence Admiral Mavua. They fled to South Africa last year, allegedly taking with them suitcases stuffed with over \$100 million and precious gems, after Kabila's forces took Kinshasa. South African authorities arrested them after they made an illicit flight to the Congo in December last year. In court they admitted that they 'had entered the Congo secretly to attend a meeting to consider whether or not to lend their support to armed resistance to the Kabila regime,' which they claimed to have decided against. According to intelligence sources they were also linking up with

Unita forces in Angola.

Three months ago sections of the Mobutuists began meeting Congolese Tutsis backed by Rwanda and Uganda to plan the present rebellion against Kabila. Baramoto is claimed to have made visits to Kampala and Kigali in recent weeks. Baramoto and Nzimbi are said to have played a key role in the capture by the rebels of the Kitona military base in the west of the Congo, securing support for the Rwandan-backed forces by the former Zairean troops stationed there.

See Also:

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