

More British arms to Africa

Blair government intervenes in Republic of Congo

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After being exposed last year for exporting arms to Sierra Leone, the Blair Labour government is again involved in a military operation to restore an ousted African president. This time in the Republic of the Congo (formerly Congo-Brazzaville).

The former president of this small country on the west coast of Africa, Pascal Lissouba, was ousted in a five-month civil war in 1997. He has been given asylum in Britain for the last year and is now plotting a coup to return to power. According to the *Daily Mirror* newspaper, Lissouba has a shopping list for £40 million worth of arms, and has the "tacit approval" of the British Foreign Office to organise a 2,000-strong mercenary force to regain power. Just as in the Sierra Leone intervention, Britain is using the fact that Lissouba came to power in elections as justification. Baroness Symons told the *Mirror* that the military dictator General Denis Sassou Nguesso, who ousted Lissouba, had been told that, "Britain wanted democracy back with a role for Lissouba."

After being told of Lissouba's plot by the Liberal peer Lord Avebury, the *Mirror* was leaked a six-page document listing 385 items of military equipment Lissouba was seeking to buy--from MiG fighter aircraft to missiles, guns, mortars and rockets, and including clothing and bedding for 2,000 troops. It was Avebury who also blew the whistle on the Labour government's involvement in Sierra Leone. Lissouba had sent the list to the Brussels-based arms dealer, Labayfar, which has been acting as an intermediary. Labayfar approached the Ukrainian government to purchase the arms from its ARTEM manufacturer, but was turned down when it found the deal would breach UN embargoes. Less scrupulous Russian firms have since agreed to supply

the desired military hardware. Where the mercenaries would come from is not disclosed.

Lissouba is staying at the Belgravia apartment of financier Robert Bost. Bost told the *Mirror*, "my role is to get foreign banks to invest in the country. Lissouba gave me a copy of a letter from Downing Street to help me in my endeavours. The letter is not signed by Tony Blair, but by a member of his staff." The *Mirror* says that Lissouba has been a regular guest of MPs at the House of Commons, where he also met Foreign Office officials. He is said to have the support of politicians and businessmen from the United States, Britain, Belgium and South Africa. Last year he was kicked out of France, as the government refused him support.

Those actively plotting with him "have been promised rich rewards", which includes commissions on arms sales and "lucrative jobs" when Lissouba is back in power. Major oil discoveries off the coast of West Africa have attracted interest in the Congo, which last year increased its oil output to 13.6 million tons, making it the fourth largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa after Nigeria, Angola and Gabon.

Whatever the intrigues of the US, Britain and France in the area, Lissouba's "democratic" credentials are questionable, to say the least. The 2.6 million population live in extreme poverty, with an average life expectancy of 47 years. Lissouba came to power in 1992 when Sassou Nguesso stepped down after 13 years of military rule. He immediately agreed to an IMF austerity programme. Current debts to world bankers stand at over \$5 billion.

The opposing presidential candidate, Bernard Kolela, had no major ideological differences, but like Lissouba had whipped up ethnic and regional sentiments. In

1993, civil war broke out between Kolela and Lissouba's factions, which ended in mediation only after much bloodshed and destruction of the country's infrastructure. The IMF measures, including thousands of job losses from privatisation, led to growing resentment against Lissouba's rule, which was transformed into support for Nguesso's Congolese Workers' Party. Before the next elections could be held in June 1997, Lissouba sent in the army to arrest Nguesso and disarm his militia. The plan backfired, as Nguesso, with support from Angola and Laurent Kabila, the new president of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRG), defeated him. Nguesso, despite being called a "Marxist" in the 1980s when he received Soviet backing, seemed to have got the tacit support of the US and western governments. Lissouba, being a long-standing collaborator with the CIA-backed Unita forces in Angola and a supporter of Mobutu in the DRG (formerly Zaire), had fallen into disfavour. Nguesso now has deals with some 12 western oil companies, including the French group Elf-Aquitaine, which undertakes 80 percent of exploration and mining activities in the Congo.

In an escalating civil war, Lissouba's faction has been attempting to regain control over the last five months. Again, the conflict is deteriorating along ethnic lines, with thousands killed and over 100,000 fleeing into the jungle. As with the bloody conflict in Sierra Leone, the real perpetrators of this disaster are the British and western governments, who, after overseeing the looting of billions of dollars in profits for the banks and multinationals, are encouraging this fratricidal slaughter.



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