

Guinea-Bissau president to be put on trial

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The president of Guinea-Bissau in West Africa, João Bernardo Viera, is to be put on trial for his failure to halt arms trading to Casamance separatists in neighbouring Senegal. This decision was reached by the parliament at its meeting on April 16.

Parliament voted by a majority of 74 deputies, among 90 present, to uphold the findings of a report by a parliamentary commission into the arms trade across Guinea-Bissau's northern border with Senegal. The report found that Viera had known of the arms deal, but "did nothing against it", although about 40 of his aides, mainly army officers, were directly involved. After receiving the report, parliament demanded that charges be laid against Viera as the supreme commander of the armed forces.

Last November, the parliament, dominated by the Viera's own African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC), called for him to resign, accusing him of violating the constitution by calling in foreign troops without consulting parliament.

Four others, including a former defence minister and ex-national radio chief, are also to be put on trial, along with all those accused of involvement in the arms dealing. The latter will be put on trial within the next 30 days. The head of the country's navy, Caetano Fernandez, is already under arrest, facing charges of accepting bribes to allow foreign boats to fish in Guinea-Bissau's territorial waters. Two senior officials at the Ministry of Fisheries have also been detained.

Guinea-Bissau has been rocked by civil war since June last year, following an attempted military coup. The coup was sparked when President Viera sacked army chief General Ansumane Mane on June 6, 1998, in connection with the alleged arms trafficking to separatists in Casamance. Mane turned this charge back at the head of state, accusing him of suppressing parliamentary debate of a report that would have

implicated him in the deal. Mane proclaimed himself the leader of a military junta.

Despite a truce signed on July 26, 1998 and reaffirmed in August, and a peace accord signed in November 1998, fighting continued to recur. Hostilities were renewed in October 1998 and again in early February 1999. When fighting flared up in February at least 100 people were killed in four days, until Togolese mediators secured a truce. A new Government of National Unity was sworn in on February 20, which included Viera and military junta appointees.

After the fighting had stopped, parliament set up a commission to investigate the arms-trafficking allegations, which had been used as the pretext for launching the military coup. It is this commission which has provided the report now being used to justify a trial of the president. While putting the president on trial, the commission cleared the leader of the coup, General Ansumane Mane, of "wrongdoing" and stated that during the inquiry "no-one directly or indirectly accused Mane of involvement in arms trafficking". It urged that his suspension as armed forces chief be reviewed. Mane recently arrived in Lome in neighbouring Togo for discussions on the peace process in Guinea-Bissau.

This country of around 1.1 million people faces huge economic and political problems. The nation is among the 15 poorest in the world, and its economy has been further dislocated by the war. The World Food Programme says it has started distributing food aid in Guinea-Bissau to help alleviate shortages. In addition to poverty and the casualties of the war, the country has been hit by a meningitis outbreak. It is also littered with thousands of land mines (only 563 devices, mostly anti-personnel mines, have been deactivated so far). The World Health Organisation and the Ministry of Health reported 2,123 cases of meningitis by April 4, since the

beginning of an epidemic in January. It said 500,000 doses of meningitis vaccine, 250,000 donated by Cooperation Francaise and 250,000 by MSF-Spain, were delivered on April 10, enabling a vaccination campaign to get under way.

The country is also struggling to cope with thousands of refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the country is currently providing asylum for 6,604 refugees. This includes 5,415 Senegalese refugees dispersed in the northern frontier areas and approximately 750 grouped at the Jolmette refugee camp, some 200 kilometres east of the capital, Bissau. Other refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone were in urban areas of Bissau. Government figures estimate that 8,500 citizens of Guinea-Bissau were still out of the country, including 3,500 in Portugal and others in Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea and Senegal. The Prime Minister, Francisco Fadul, told French radio that elections scheduled under the peace agreement for March had been delayed, to allow time to conduct a new census of voters and for refugees to return to Guinea-Bissau.

The number of troops from neighbouring countries, sent to put down the fighting, climbed to more than 2,000 at the height of the conflict. Most came from Senegal, previously a colony of France and still under French influence. France also supplied the finance and transportation for the intervention. Its aim was to continue the rule of Viera, who has been in power since 1980. Believing they had achieved this goal, most of the Senegalese troops were withdrawn. The soldiers still present are under the direction of ECOMOG, the military force of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Nigeria, which is the most industrialised and powerful country in West Africa, was too preoccupied with its own upcoming elections to send troops, so the way was clear for France to expand its influence. Although a former Portuguese colony, Guinea-Bissau is one of a number of West African states whose currency is the CFA franc, which is pegged to the French franc (others are Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo).

The fighting in the Casamance region was continuing last month, with at least 22 separatist rebels killed in heavy clashes. Reports from southern Senegal claim that elements amongst the Casamance separatist rebels, the Democratic Movement of Casamance Forces led by

Augustine Diamocoune, have begun disarming 16 years after a bloody war of independence broke out. Land mines planted in the disputed area have killed more than 140 people in the last year, including at least 50 Senegalese soldiers, according to official figures.



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