

New military coup in Guinea-Bissau leaves one hundred dead

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Fighting has erupted once again in the West African country of Guinea-Bissau. In a military coup on May 6-7, military leader Ansumane Mane sent forces to attack the presidential guards of President Joao Bernardo Vieira and remove him from office. Within weeks of vowing never again to resort to arms to settle the dispute between them, they have brought one of the world's poorest countries to the brink of disaster once more.

Troops loyal to Mane rounded up the remnants of Vieira's men on Saturday, May 8, using heavy arms and machine-gun fire, and claiming at least six more lives. This brought the number killed in the latest violence to around a hundred, with at least 263 injured, many seriously. The national Red Cross society reported between 95 and 100 deaths, including military and civilian casualties. Forty-six civilians were killed when a shell landed in a compound. Military casualties are believed to be higher, but neither the new ruling junta nor the government forces have offered figures. The Red Cross reports a lack of medicines to assist the wounded.

Those who fled the fighting in the capital, Bissau, on May 6, returned following the surrender of the government forces. The May 8 shooting in the city centre caused another exodus—it is not known how many are still displaced. Shelter is urgently needed for those whose houses were destroyed or damaged during the latest conflict. The damage is highest in the city centre and the Belem, Cuntum and Ajuda districts.

After coming to power in 1980, on the basis of his role in the 1974 war for independence, Vieira and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC) employed socialist and anti-imperialist phrases to hide their true politics. For years, no other party was allowed to challenge their grip on

power. Since last year, however, the bitter feuds between different layers within the ruling party have come to the surface, and revealed their real relation to the former colonial powers.

Showing his support for the national borders laid down in an agreement between France and Portugal, Vieira charged that Mane, one of his comrades-in-arms during the liberation war and then head of the army, had organised gun-running to rebels demanding independence for the Casamance region of Senegal. Mane responded by claiming that it was in fact the president who had directed the arms dealing. Mane then launched his first coup attempt in February to remove Vieira from office.

Such was the alienation of the majority from the party that led the war for independence that no movement came forward to prevent the military coup. Some even hailed the end of the Vieira era. Lacking popular support, Vieira turned instead to the main imperialist power in the region, France. Together with troops from neighbouring states under its influence, France used the crisis to strengthen its presence.

The situation having been stabilised by the use of these troops, the parliament in Bissau was reconvened on February 20 on the basis of a shaky agreement between the two rival factions of the ruling party. Its first act was to bring charges against the former administration. Vieira was put on trial for illegal arms dealing and for inviting foreign troops into the country. He had already been removed from his post as PAIGC leader when the present coup brought the charade of parliamentary democracy to an abrupt end. After the presidential palace was set ablaze, Vieira and his family sought asylum first in the French Embassy and later in the Portuguese.

Vieira's replacement as president was determined at a

meeting May 11 between General Mane and the political parties. Malam Sanha, president of Guinea-Bissau's legislature, the Assembleia Nacional Popular, was chosen as interim president "until new general and presidential elections are held in November." (Elections promised for March never took place).

Interim Prime Minister Francisco Fadul was on his way back from a fundraising meeting with aid donors in Lisbon, Portugal when the second coup took place. He flew home on May 8, vowing to move on with the democratic process as planned and saying that Vieira would be free to go into exile. However a spokesman for the junta, Major Zamora Induta, who is particularly hostile to the ex-leader, said he must be tried for "treason".

Sanha spoke on the Portuguese Renascenca radio station, appealing to the former colonial power, Portugal, to "do as it has done up to now" by making the international community understand that there was no coup and rallying international support for the West African country. "I, myself in particular, will do my utmost to ensure that this uprising will be for the good of the people of Guinea-Bissau and, above all, for the consolidation of democracy and development," Sanha said.

It seems that the new administration is looking for backing from Portugal rather than from France. France and Mali have condemned the junta's take-over, as have the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Fred Eckhard, Annan's spokesman, said on Tuesday that the UN was "reviewing the options" with regard to its involvement in the peace process. France has announced economic sanctions against Guinea-Bissau, claiming this is in response to the burning down of the French embassy.

During the conflict last year, up to 400,000 people were displaced within the country. The situation of those who have returned to their homes is still considered to be "very precarious". Several thousand refugees have not yet returned.

In Casamance, Mouvement de Forces Democratique de la Casamance (MFDC) have urged Lisbon to mediate an end to the 17-year-long war in the area. MFDC's Secretary-General Mamadou Sane said that the conflict dated back to a convention signed in 1886 when Portugal ceded Casamance to Senegal, then a

French colony.



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