France implicated in attempted coup in Central African Republic

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After 11 days of intense fighting in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), it appears that an attempted coup has been prevented. According to unofficial estimates, up to 300 people were killed in the fighting between troops loyal to President Ange-Felix Patasse and a rebel group led by General Kolingba who ruled the country from 1981 to 1993.

Up to 100,000 people have been displaced as a result of the fighting and aid agencies are now beginning to send in medical and water supplies. There are reports of the population running out of food and a three-fold increase in prices. The Central African Republic is landlocked between Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is one of the poorest countries in central Africa and has suffered as the war in the Congo has blocked its main trade route, the Congo River.

Kolingba and his rebels are reported to have withdrawn from the capital, although government troops are still engaged in house-to-house searches. Many reports state that the troops are carrying out reprisals against people from the Yakoma ethnic group, the tribe from the southern part of the country to which Kolingba belongs. *Radio France Internationale* reported that Patasse supporters were not distinguishing between civilians and putschists, "in Bangui hatred messages are being circulated."

Tribal divisions were encouraged when CAR was a French colony—the Yakoma people, who were traditionally traders, were most likely to receive an education and took government jobs. France's involvement in CAR continued after independence in 1960, when it backed the infamously sadistic dictator Jean-Bedel Bokassa from 1966 to 1979, including financing the ceremony that crowned him as emperor.

Patasse, who comes from the northern Sara tribal group, came to power in 1993 when elections were held under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Since then his government has lurched from one crisis to another. Civil servants salaries often go unpaid for months at a time and repeated strikes have been organised by the trade unions.

The strike action that had built up since the beginning of this year was eventually called off by union leaders after the government paid three months of salary arrears. Teachers' strikes are continuing, as they have not been paid for nine months. It seems that a general strike was only averted after the IMF released some cash to the CAR government. Bilateral aid also came from France and Libya. The Patasse regime had responded to the strikes with a clampdown on all opposition, breaking up demonstrations and jailing opposition members of parliament.

There is widespread opposition to the government because of the worsening social conditions. More than 50 percent of the population survive by subsistence agriculture. The government has lost control of the eastern parts of the country and poachers freely hunt down elephants for their ivory. Bangui has been plundered three times by mutinous soldiers, and not even a cinema remains. An estimated 15 percent of the population is HIV positive and Aids victims occupy 95 percent of hospital beds.

Oluyemi Adeniji, the former head of the United Nations peacekeeping mission to the CAR and now UN special representative in Sierra Leone, blamed the situation on "the usual mistake of the international community, that you help a country stabilise politically but then forget that unless economic conditions are also made right political crisis is likely to recur again." After a series of army mutinies, a UN mission was sent

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to the CAR as a peacekeeping force, but it was withdrawn last year, and since then the country has been starved of aid.

The UN mission was presented as one of the few success stories in Africa, after the disasters of Somalia and Rwanda. French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin pressed for the UN to replace French troops, who had been in the former French colony since 1996. This was part of a new French policy toward Africa, which was marked by a move away from the networks of patronage and corruption that had characterised the previous period.

France's Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine said of the recent events, "The time for interference in Africa is over." But he regretted the involvement of Libya's General Gadhaffi. Libya sent two planes with equipment and soldiers to defend President Patasse. Expressing the concern of a section of the French ruling class, who once saw French Equatorial Africa as its own private preserve, *Le Monde* newspaper complained that Gadhaffi was acting as France's gendarme. The paper demanded to know why it was correct to intervene militarily elsewhere but not in Africa. "Are universal human rights only white?" it wanted to know.

Whatever the official line from Jospin and Védrine, there is evidence suggesting that France was involved in the events, but not on the side of the government. *Radio France Internationale* reported a speech made by President Patasse in which he requested an international report on the arsenal seized at Kolingba's home. This was said to contain French weapons that should have been sent to CAR's police force. According to the radio report, Patasse "more or less questioned the role of France."

Even more telling was the fact that Jospin refused to condemn the mutiny against what is supposed to be a democratically elected government. Instead he said, "We are being unsparing in our urging of dialogue to try and resolve this crisis."

General Kolingba called on France for support, claiming that he did not intend to carry out a coup, but to restore "national cohesion, peace and security in the country." Even if Kolingba did not get direct French support he may have got assistance from France's allies in Africa.

According to the CAR government, 300 African mercenaries led by two Rwanda generals are fighting alongside Kolingba's rebels. It is likely that they are from the Rwanda Hutu militia, the Interahamwe. The Interahamwe have been fighting in neighbouring Congo, and the Lusaka peace deal may have forced them to look for another field for their activities.

Acute divisions within the French ruling class are expressed in relation to the events in the Central African Republic. Jospin, with his eyes set on the Elysée Palace in next year's presidential elections, is unwilling to risk exposing the activities of elements of the military, which would like to continue the old policy of direct intervention in Africa.

Meanwhile, Gadhaffi has been courting Patasse as part of his Pan-African policy, because the CAR offers a potential military base for operations in Chad. A new pipeline is due to open in 2004 that will carry oil from Chad's southern region to Cameroon on the West coast of Africa.

Also interested in the CAR is Jean-Pierre Bemba, leader of the Mouvement de Liberation du Congo (MLC), who joined Gadhaffi in sending troops to back up the Patasse regime. Bemba, a millionaire businessman, is backed by Uganda and has been fighting against the Kabila regime in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Included in his movement are former Mobutu supporters known to be close to the family of US President George W. Bush and Vice President Cheney. In the past, Patasse has enjoyed close relations with the DRC, which protested at Bemba's involvement.

The deposits of gold, diamonds and uranium found in the Central African Republic are no doubt an attraction for Bemba's operations. Whether this is a freelance job or whether the US backed Bemba is not clear, but what is certain is that Bemba's involvement and possibly that of the Interahamwe are yet another sign that the Lusaka peace deal has not stabilised the situation in central Africa but has merely displaced the conflict into the surrounding countries.

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