

France dispatches troops to Central African Republic

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France has stepped up its military presence in Africa by sending 300 troops to the Central African Republic (CAR) following a coup on Saturday March 15. The troops are officially there to secure the airport and help evacuate French citizens from the capital, Bangui.

Although France has formally condemned the coup, its leader, General Francois Bozize, was recently in exile in Paris and has asked for more French troops to be sent to help stabilise the country. Everything points to France working behind the scenes to further its imperialist ambitions in Africa.

Bozize, a former army chief of staff of CAR's army, led about 1,000 rebel troops into Bangui, apparently meeting little opposition. CAR's President, Ange-Felix Patasse, was attending a conference in neighbouring Niger and when his plane attempted to land at Bangui airport it was shot at—forcing Patasse to flee to Cameroon.

Bozize was apparently welcomed by people dancing in the street, demonstrating the widespread hatred of Patasse. CAR's population of 3.5 million is one of the poorest in Africa, with an average income of \$290 a year. Civil servants have been unpaid for months despite taking repeated strike action.

Although it has considerable mineral wealth in diamonds and uranium, as well as possible oil deposits, CAR has suffered from continual instability. It is surrounded by countries that have been engulfed in wars—Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Republic of Congo (ROC) and Chad. Conflict between Chad and Libya enabled Patasse to bring a detachment of Libyan troops into Bangui, putting pressure on Chad from the south.

After France cut back on economic aid and withdrew its troops in the mid-1990s, there has been a series of army mutinies and coup attempts. The last attempted

coup was in October 2002 when Bozize's supporters based in neighbouring Chad launched an attack on Bangui. It was repelled by the Libyan troops, who continued to help prop up Patasse's regime until the end of last year when they withdrew under western pressure.

Patasse had also been supported by the rebel group from the DRC—the Mouvement de Liberation du Congo (MLC) led by Jean-Pierre Bemba. This outfit, based in the north of the DRC and backed by Uganda, was under pressure from a western imposed ceasefire that cut across its diamonds for armaments trade. Its forces moved into CAR where they were hated by the population, accused of mass rapes and human rights violations. Under pressure from the west, the MLC was forced to withdraw at the beginning of this year.

Having lost his protection from Libya and the MLC, Patasse obtained backing from 300 troops from the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa States (CEMAC). These troops, mainly from Gabon and Republic of Congo, were equipped and trained by France, with US backing, to provide some stability in the region.

When Bozize's forces entered Bangui there was no resistance from the CEMAC troops, who abandoned their control of the airport and presidential palace and withdrew to barracks. According to the IRIN news service, their chief of staff said "Our mission was not to defend the [presidential] residence but the head of state, and I think that we have not failed in our mission."

Bozize suspended the constitution and dissolved government and parliament, but has declared his coup was only a "temporary break" with democracy—a reference to the fact that Patasse was supposedly elected to office in 1999. He has met with CAR's army and police chiefs, who are apparently offering their

support, and with opposition political leaders.

The only difficulty faced by Bozize in taking power appears to have come from large-scale looting in Bangui. Hundreds of people seized the opportunity to loot government buildings and the private villas of Patasse supporters. Lorry loads of food were taken from the United Nations World Food Programme's (WFP) warehouses. WFP have now had to appeal for more food aid for a desperate population. Bozize's forces began shooting looters, giving rise to most of the 30 or so casualties of the coup.

As well as France, official condemnation of the coup has come from the UN, the African Union, and the US. However, there seems to be little real opposition to the military strongman Bozize establishing his control as a welcome alternative to the unstable regime of Patasse. France has called for "a real, all-inclusive dialogue" to establish government in CAR: a call that has been supported by the US.

CAR had attempted to gain backing from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund last year when Patasse's prime minister, Martin Ziguéle, promised a free market-type opening up of the economy and a clampdown on corruption. It seems that western bankers did not trust the regime and loans and aid were not forthcoming. Bozize's main task will be to gain western financial support.

Chad is reported to be sending troops to CAR and Bozize has demanded that they become part of the CEMAC force that Bozize has requested, together with the French troops, in order to help stabilise the country. Republic of Congo's foreign minister, Rodolphe Adada, is reported by the BBC singing Bozize's praises, saying that CAR "can trust a man who says the kind of things we have heard." Since ROC is the chair of CEMAC, this seems to signal their backing.

Chad troops were reportedly seen amongst Bozize's forces, although they deny taking part in the coup. Their involvement may well create resentment amongst the elite in CAR. However, France seems to support a stronger regional role for Chad.

Chad was supported by the West during the Cold War period as an opposition to Libya. In recent years, whilst France kept on a 1,000 strong military garrison there, it denounced the flagrant abuse of human rights by President Idriss Deby. The visit by President Chirac to Chad on his way to the World Summit on Sustainable

Development in South Africa last August suggests a "reconciliation" is taking place, according to *Africa Confidential* magazine.

Chad obtained \$3.7 billion backing from the World Bank to build an oil pipeline from Chad through Cameroon to the coast. Despite protests from human rights groups and environmentalists, the construction of the pipeline is ahead of schedule and the first oil will be pumped through later this year. Although only five percent of oil revenues go to the producing region, the oil production will considerably boost Chad's role in central Africa.



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