Zimbabwe government arrests coup plotters

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The arrest of a planeload of 64 mercenaries who are now standing trial in Zimbabwe raises questions about the involvement of Western intelligence agencies.

On March 7, the plane was stopped at Harare airport when it was on the way to take part in a coup in Equatorial Guinea. One of the leaders of the expedition, Simon Mann, who met the plane in Zimbabwe with two other men, apparently thought he had made a deal with a Zimbabwe military officer, Colonel Tshinga Dube, director of Zimbabwe Defence Industries, to buy $180,000 worth of AK47s, mortars and ammunition.

The attempted coup in Equatorial Guinea is the latest in a series in West Africa where the discovery of huge offshore oil deposits has attracted growing interest. Last year alone, there were coup attempts in Mauritania and São Tomé and Principe, as well as a successful coup in Guinea Bissau.

The Zimbabwe arrest coincided with the arrest of 15 mercenaries in Malabo, capital of Equatorial Guinea. Their leader Nick du Toit appeared on state television confessing to the coup attempt. He said, "It wasn't a question of taking the life of the head of state but of spiriting him away, taking him to Spain and forcing him into exile , and then of immediately installing the government-in-exile of Severo Moto. The group was supposed to start by identifying strategic targets such as the presidency, the military barracks, police posts and the residences of government members."

Moto is the main opponent of Equatorial Guinea's President Teodoro Obiang Nguema and is currently in exile in Spain.

Zimbabwean Home Affairs Minister Kembo Mohadi accused the United States, British and Spanish intelligence services of backing the mercenaries. He said, "The western intelligence services persuaded Equatorial Guinea's service chiefs not to put up any resistance, but to cooperate with the coup plotters."

Zimbabwe is currently the number-one pariah state in Africa in the eyes of the US, Britain and the Western powers. The Zimbabwean government has, therefore, regarded the arrest of the mainly white mercenaries—20 South Africans, 18 Namibians, 23 Angolans, two from the Democratic Republic of Congo and one Zimbabwean with a South African passport—as a propaganda victory. Not surprisingly, Western governments denied involvement and the BBC dismissed Mohadi's claims as "spurious."

However, it is widely known that du Toit, Mann and another leader of the Zimbabwe team, Simon Witherspoon, have long-standing involvement in Western-backed mercenary operations. The *South African Mail and Guardian* admitted that the "key players also have links to the American and British security establishments."

Both Mann and Witherspoon are former leaders of Executive Outcomes (EO), a mercenary outfit that was brought in by oil companies to support the present MPLA Angolan government against the UNITA rebel forces in the 1990s and played a key role enabling the MPLA to win the war. Mann, a former SAS officer with close ties to the British military, was also a founder of Sandline International, a mercenary group that supported the government of Sierra Leone against rebel forces.

The British government's support of Sandline was exposed in 2000, and they had to be dropped. South Africa banned EO after legislation outlawing mercenaries came into operation in 1999.

Most of the present mercenaries are likely to have been in EO, and before that in the notorious 32 Commando, a group used by the apartheid South African government for clandestine operations in Angola and Namibia. According to the *Mail and Guardian*, du Toit was formerly a member of the South African military's special forces. He is now director of Military Technical Services (MTS), a South African-based company whose founder, Tai Minaar, had close links with the CIA and died in mysterious circumstances in 2001.

The importance of Equatorial Guinea lies in its huge oil wealth. A tiny country with a population of less than 500,000, sandwiched on the West African coast between Gabon and Cameroon, it now ranks only behind Nigeria

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and Angola as the third-largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, with a daily output of more than 200,000 barrels. Oil was first discovered off the island of Bioko, site of the capital Malabo, in the mid-1990s. Since then, Equatorial Guinea has become the fastest growing economy in Africa if not the world, with GDP growth of nearly 70 percent. It has the fourth highest US investment in sub-Saharan Africa, with oil companies operating there including Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco.

Equatorial Guinea is governed by one of the most repressive and secretive regimes in the world. The media is entirely state-controlled, and there are persistent cases of human rights violations, including the jailing of 68 oppositionists last year after their alleged involvement in a coup plot. In the elections of 2002, described as "multiparty," President Teodoro Obiang Nguema won nearly 100 percent of the votes in a blatantly rigged poll. Equatorial Guinea was granted independence in 1968 after 150 years of Spanish rule, and has been ruled by the Nguema family ever since. Human rights abuses by President Francisco Nguema in the 1970s resulted in up to a third of the population either fleeing the country or being killed. He was replaced by his nephew, the current president, in 1979.

There is every reason to believe that Western intelligence agencies were keen to see Nguema replaced. According to *Africa Confidential*, he has been grooming his eldest son Teodorin to replace him, but army officers, including Ngeuma's half brother General Agustin Ndong Ona, were opposed to the plan, regarding the son as too unstable—he owns a hip-hop record label in Los Angeles. Ndong was jailed and tortured for his part in last year's coup attempt and was eventually allowed to flee to Spain. *Africa Confidential*'s editor, Patrick Smith, says that opposition leader Severo Moto held a series of discussions with former Spanish Prime Minister Aznar with a view to getting recognition if he organised a successful coup. Presumably, Moto would have been willing to open up Equatorial Guinea to European oil companies, given that US companies have benefited most from the oil boom.

Reports in the British *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers cite the information minister of Equatorial Guinea saying that one of those arrested had claimed Moto was close to a London-based Lebanese businessman, Ely Calil, who was paying out $5 million to finance the coup attempt. This relationship to Calil is substantiated by a relationship between a company owned by Mann, Logo Logistics, and a company called the Asian Trading and Investment Group, said to be connected to Calil. Logo Logistics own the plane that was grounded in Zimbabwe. Asian Trading had a deal with Mann, the terms of which were seen by the *Observer*, to provide $5 million for "mining, fishing aviation and commercial security projects in West Africa."

Calil denies the allegations. He made his fortune in trading with the Abacha regime in Nigeria and was arrested by French police in 2002 in connection with the payments of illegal commissions by a subsidiary of the French oil company Elf to the Nigerian regime. He was released on appeal, though investigations are continuing. Calil appears to have connections in the highest echelons of the British establishment.

South Africa exposed the coup attempt with maximum publicity, allowing the mercenaries to travel to Equatorial Guinea and Zimbabwe before they were arrested. President Obiang Nguema said on state radio that he was told by South Africa that a group of mercenaries were heading for his country, and it was confirmed by a South African government spokesman that their intelligence services had indeed provided the information. South Africa has agreed to assist in the trial of the 15 arrested in Equatorial Guinea to make sure it is seen to be "transparent and fair."

Since the arrests in Equatorial Guinea preceded those in Zimbabwe, it can also be concluded that South African intelligence made no attempt to stop Logo Logistics's plane discretely. They must have been fully aware what was happening when the plane took off from Johannesburg, made a stop at Wonderboom airport near Pretoria, then flew to the town of Polokwane in the north of South Africa, where it picked up its 63 passengers before going on to Harare. It can only be concluded that the South African government is making clear to the Western powers that it opposes such methods of "regime change," presumably fearing that the ANC government and certainly its neighbour in Zimbabwe could be the target of such outside intervention.

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