

Spain accused of planning coup in Equatorial Guinea

Vicky Short
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Spain stands accused of involvement in an aborted coup in its ex-colony, Equatorial Guinea, which was allegedly due to take place on March 7.

Miguel Mifuno, special adviser to President Theodoro Obiang, has alleged that the Popular Party (PP) government of Jose Maria Aznar, which has since been replaced by a Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) government, had sent a warship to the country with 500 marines on board. “Our intelligence forces,” he declared, “say that the warship was going to arrive on March 8, the same date that the coup attempt was going to take place.

“It was already in our territorial waters with 500 soldiers aboard. Meanwhile there was a team of foreign mercenaries already in Equatorial Guinea who knew where we lived. They had plans to kill 50 people and to arrest others. Spain was providing all the facilities for the coup. (The boat) was there to provide resources for the mercenaries.”

Mifuno added that Spain was also providing funds to opposition groups in exile and that it wanted to run its former colony.

It is also alleged that Spain had offered to send arms to the country just before the coup attempt, ostensibly to help it with a longstanding border dispute with Gabon. The president refused, and when Spain sent another message saying that the marines were coming the president again refused and sent a letter to the United Nations to clarify the matter. The ship was nevertheless sent.

Equatorial Guinea is a tiny country on the western part of sub-Saharan Africa. The country is comprised of a mainland area and a series of small islands including Bioko, which houses the country’s capital, Malabo. It is 10,831 square miles, with a population of just over half a million. It was a Spanish colony until 1968. For

many years, agriculture (primarily cocoa, coffee and timber) formed the basis of the economy. However, since 1995, significant offshore oil discoveries in the Gulf of Guinea have converted Equatorial Guinea into the third-largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa, behind Nigeria and Angola. Oil accounted for nearly 90 percent of the value of total exports in 2001. Equatorial Guinea’s total proven reserves are estimated at 1.1 billion barrels of oil.

Oil was first discovered off the island of Bioko 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.

The location of Equatorial Guinea’s reserves in the hydrocarbon-rich Gulf of Guinea (estimates of probable reserves are as high as 10 percent of the world total), has prompted large amounts of foreign investment (primarily by US companies) in further exploration and development of the country’s oil sector.

The expansion of offshore oil exploration by Equatorial Guinea and its neighbours has increased the importance of maritime borders used to delineate each country’s rights to offshore oil deposits. In March 1999, President Obiang signed a decree unilaterally adopting an equidistant median line to define territorial boundaries as stipulated under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Cameroon, Sao Tome & Principe, and Nigeria subsequently accepted the decision as an improvement over constantly disputed traditional boundaries. Relations remained strained, however, because of Nigeria’s ongoing border dispute with Cameroon.

Equatorial Guinea is currently involved in a similar

dispute with Gabon, over the ownership of the island of Mbagne in the Gulf of Guinea. In February 2002, Equatorial Guinea's nominal control of Mbagne was threatened when the government of Gabon seized control of the island. Since then, the governments of both countries have met to discuss the issue, including the possibility of joint exploration of the waters surrounding Mbagne, but have not achieved any resolution to their dispute.

While the alleged attempted coup took place last March when Spain was still under the rule of Aznar's right-wing PP government, which was ignominiously kicked out of office by a massive antiwar movement on March 14, the present PSOE government has taken it upon itself to deny the allegations—saying that it knows nothing about a Spanish ship being there and rejecting any implication by Spain in the coup.

The accusation that Spain was involved in a planned “regime change” in Equatorial Guinea was first raised after 67 mercenaries were arrested and tried in Zimbabwe. They were Angolans, South Africans, Namibians, Congolese and one Zimbabwean with a South African passport. According to Zimbabwe's Home Affairs Minister Kembo Mohadi, the mercenaries were “aided by the British secret service, that is MI6.... American Central Intelligence Agency and the Spanish secret service.”

The Zimbabwe arrests 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.”

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

There have already been a number of coup attempts 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 Príncipe, as well as a successful coup in Guinea Bissau.

The Spanish government was denounced in a report by Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Oxfam, among other nongovernmental organisations in January, for exporting weaponry to 10 African countries. These weapons, including large-calibre Howitzer-type arms, are exported under the guise of hunting and sports equipment. Spanish arms exports amounted to 274 million euros in 2002, according to the report.



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