Mark Thatcher arrested over alleged African coup plot

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The name of Thatcher has assumed political prominence once again, carrying with it a familiar bad smell. This time the Thatcher in question is Margaret Thatcher's son, Mark, who has been arrested in South Africa after being accused of involvement in an alleged coup.

Sir Mark, who inherited a baronetcy after the death of his father Dennis one year ago, was taken into custody after a dawn raid on his home in Cape Town, South Africa, by the police anti-fraud unit known as the Scorpions. He faces a possible 15 years in prison for allegedly helping bankroll a failed coup in Equatorial Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa's third-largest oil producer with proven oil reserves of 12 million barrels.

Thatcher, 51, was later freed on two million rands (£167,000) bail, but could face extradition to Equatorial Guinea, or prosecution under South Africa's Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act that prohibits South African residents from assisting in a coup or military activities outside South Africa. He must return to court in mid-November.

The coup plot also allegedly involves another corrupt Tory bigwig, Lord Jeffrey Archer, who was only recently released from prison after serving a sentence for perjury.

Thatcher's alleged involvement in the plot to overthrow Equatorial Guinea's tyrannical President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo—who has declared himself "god" and has ruled the country since 1979—came to light as a result of the arrest in Zimbabwe on March 6 of his neighbour Simon Mann.

Mann is an Old Etonian family member of the Watney brewing empire and a former soldier in the elite Special Air Service. He was one of 64 suspected mercenaries imprisoned after their jet landed in the Zimbabwean capital Harare, apparently to pick up a cache of arms. A total of 89 foreigners, most of them South Africans, are currently imprisoned in Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea.

Mann and Thatcher were close friends who regularly dined together. Greg Wales, who has alleged links to the coup plot and is a long-standing friend and former business partner of Mann's, told the *Guardian*, "Simon and Mark did a number of business deals together—in mining, and aircraft and fuel brokerage."

Thatcher is said to have invested over £1100,000 in Mann's company, Guernsey-based Logo Ltd.

A similar amount is said to have been paid into an offshore account belonging to Mann by Lord Archer. An aide to President Obiang said that Thatcher's name would be added to Archer's and those of four businessmen in a legal action being brought by Obiang at the High Court in London for compensation.

President Obiang has also claimed that other leading Tories were involved in the coup plot. He told *Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent* that "certain elements also indicate that Thatcher and a former Thatcher cabinet minister whom I cannot name handled the financial planning of the coup."

According to Mann's handwritten confession, which his lawyers claim was extracted under duress by the authorities in Zimbabwe, he held a series of meetings in January with potential investors on how they would benefit from replacing Obiang with Spanish-based exiled opposition leader, Severo Moto.

The coup plotters counted on international support for their efforts at a time when global corporations were seeking to tap into Equatorial Guinea's oil and when the ailing tyrant Obiang was planning to hand over power to his equally unstable playboy son, Teodorin.

Mann was allegedly approached by Moto's backers to plan a military coup, including the Lebanese oil tycoon, Eli Calil, who is a British citizen and lives in a £12 million home off the King's Road in Chelsea, West London. Equatorial Guinea's Information Minister Agustin Nze Nfumu has alleged Calil arranged to pay Mann $5 million to hire a group of mercenaries to oust Obiang.

Mann was a natural choice. In the 1980s he founded the mercenary outfit Executive Outcomes, which was involved in operations in both Sierra Leone and Angola.

If the coup had been successful, its backers would have allegedly been given oil concessions in a state that produces 350,000 barrels a day.

A former South African Special Forces commander who worked with Mann and is accused of participating in the plot, Nick du Toit, has turned state witness and named both Calil and Moto as co-conspirators.

On November 15, 2003, Mann's Logo Logistics signed an agreement with a group of Lebanese investors in the Asian Trading and Investment Group SAL, which is allegedly linked to Calil and was used to channel funds for the coup attempt. According to the *Observer*, the Lebanese investors were to provide Mann's company with $5 million for "mining, fishing, aviation and commercial security projects in West Africa." Mann also signed an agreement with Du Toit on December 1, which guaranteed financing from Logo Logistics of up to $2 million for "unspecified projects."

Du Toit also apparently set up a company in December 2003, Triple Option Trading, that was half-owned by three senior members of Equatorial Guinea's ruling elite and he was possibly used to infiltrate the plot from the outset.

According to Mann's own written testimony, he met with Moto in Spain in early 2003. Mann says his role was to escort Moto to Equatorial Guinea at the time when "simultaneously there would be an uprising of both military and civilians against Obiang."

Mann himself is said to have put in $400,000 to cover the cost of a Boeing 727 bought a week before the coup attempt from a firm in Kansas, specially converted for US military use so that it could take off and land on shorter runways.

It is alleged that in February, Mann had flown to Harare to discuss a consignment of arms with officers of the state-owned Zimbabwe Defence Industries, to be delivered on February 20 to the airstrip at Kolwezi in Congo that was under the control of a local rebel leader. A plane would then send the weapons to Equatorial Guinea via Harare, but apparently failed to appear.

Nevertheless, on Sunday, March 7, Logo Logistics' Boeing 747 left

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South Africa with 65 soldiers on board, and two packages of cash amounting to $130,000, and landed in Zimbabwe where they were supposed to meet up with Mann, and pick up weapons including 150 hand grenades, 80 60mm mortar bombs, 100 RPG-7 anti-tank projectiles with 10 launchers, 20 light machine guns, 61 AK-47 assault rifles and 75,000 rounds of ammunition. Instead they were arrested. The Obiang regime also announced the arrest of more mercenaries led by Du Toit.

In his televised confession Du Toit claims that he recruited more than 60 veterans of bush wars in Angola and Mozambique, whom he promised $6,000 each if they fought their way into Equatorial Guinea's capital, Malabo, and removed Obiang from power or killed him.

Mann's confession states that he met with at least a dozen British millionaires, including some household names. One of these told the press anonymously, "Simon said he wanted around 10 people to each invest about £100,000. He claimed this consortium would share an immediate payout of £15 million once the coup had taken place, followed by profits from oil deals."

Lord Archer was allegedly one of those approached, and is said to have paid money into an offshore bank account belonging to Mann just four days before the coup attempt fell apart. Legal documents and bank account details are said to show a payment by J.H. Archer, Lord Archer's initials, made to one of Mann's companies for $134,980 to an account at the Royal Bank of Scotland in St Peter Port, Guernsey.

Though Mann's friends insist that his confession was beaten out of him, evidence of his connection with Mark Thatcher and his possible involvement comes from a different source.

Mann attempted to smuggle a letter to his wife, which was intercepted by Zimbabwean and South African intelligence. In the letter Mann pleads for help from some of his influential friends, who he calls "Scratcher" and "Smelly." Smelly was Eli Calil. Scratcher was Mark Thatcher. The *Times* quotes the letter stating, "I must say once again: what will get us out is MAJOR CLOUT. We need heavy influence of the sort that ... Smelly, Scratcher".

According to the *Guardian*, Mann wrote his wife, "Our situation is not good and it is very URGENT.... They [the lawyers] get no reply from Smelly and Scratcher [who] asked them to ring back after the Grand Prix race was over! This is not going well."

Mann went on to write in a way that suggests that "Scratcher's"/Thatcher's involvement in the coup was direct. He writes, "It may be that getting us out comes down to a large splodge of wonga! Of course investors did not think this would happen. Did I? Do they think they can be part of something like this with only upside potential—no hardship or risk of this going wrong. Anyone and everyone in this is in it—good times or bad. Now its bad times and everyone has to F-ing well pull their full weight."

He then concludes, "Anyway [another contact] was expecting project funds inwards to Logo [Mann's firm] from Scratcher (200).... If there is not enough, then present investors must come up with more."

Mann was clearly expecting Sir Mark to make a $200,000 (£111,000) investment, but he does not specify whether it was for the coup.

The *Guardian* states that the letter also refers to David Hart, the former Old Etonian millionaire and union-busting adviser to Margaret Thatcher when she was prime minister during the 1984-85 miners strike. It quotes the letter more fully stating, "We need heavy influence of the sort that ... Smelly, Scratcher ... David Hart and it needs to be used heavily and now."

Thatcher's lawyer, Peter Hodes, said Sir Mark was arrested on suspicion of providing financing for a helicopter linked to the coup plot and that he would plead not guilty.

Du Toit testified in court on the day of Thatcher's arrest that Sir Mark had met Mann in July 2003 and shown interest in buying military helicopters for a mining enterprise in Sudan, but he said that the meeting was a "normal business deal" unrelated to any coup plot.

There have been rumours that Thatcher made an investment in Mann's Logo Ltd company through a South African company called Triple A Aviation, which signed a contract to provide aircraft and aviation services in January. The company, which trades as Air Ambulance Africa, paid $100,000 (£55,000) into Logo's account on March 2, less than a week before the coup attempt. Niel Steyl, the brother of the head of Air Ambulance, Crause Steyl, is a former pilot for Mann's Executive Outcomes and was piloting the Boeing that was seized in Harare.

The *Guardian* states that its sources claim that Triple A also provided the twin-engined King Air turboprop that flew the exiled Equatorian Guinea opposition leader, Severo Moto, from Spain to Bamako, Mali on the eve of the alleged coup attempt.

Mark Thatcher is a chancer, who has accrued a substantial personal fortune largely by trading off his mother's name and connections.

At the top school of Harrow, where he was known as "Thickie Mork," he passed only three O levels and made poor A level grades. He failed his accountancy examinations three times, one of a string of failed careers including selling jewellery, racing driving, and entrepreneur.

Nevertheless he has succeeded in amassing a personal fortune in excess of £60 million as a result of various shady deals.

In 1982 he famously got lost in the Sahara desert for six days during the Paris to Dakar rally. But it was his business deals that showed his true mettle. In 1981, Margaret Thatcher secured a £300 million construction deal in Oman for Cementation, a Trafalgar House subsidiary. Her son was accused of receiving payments as an intermediary in the contract. In 1985, he was said to have pocketed £12 million in commissions after his mother signed the al-Yamamah arms deal with Saudi Arabia.

He has also been accused of using a handwritten note from his mother, addressed to the ruler of Abu Dhabi, to secure a profitable deal and of connections with the Pergau dam affair, when British aid was allegedly linked to a £1.3 billion contract placed by Malaysia in Britain.

In the mid-1980s, he moved to the United States where he worked as a representative of Lotus cars and where he married the millionairess Diane Burgdorf. It was as a result of tax investigations following the failure of some of his business ventures that the couple moved to South Africa in 1995.

It appears that Thatcher had returned to South Africa only in order to prepare a secret move to live in Texas. Makhosini Nkosi, a spokesman for South Africa's National Prosecuting Authority, said, "It does appear that he was planning to leave the country. The house was on the market, he had disposed of some of the cars, and there were suitcases around the house which indicated they were planning to leave. He did confirm he was planning to relocate to Texas."

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