Accusations of Spanish involvement in coup highlight instability in Guinea

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Allegations of involvement in an aborted coup against the former Spanish colony of Equatorial Guinea earlier this year continue to be levelled against the Spanish government. Last month, Miguel Abia Biteo Borico, the prime minister of Equatorial Guinea, told the General Assembly of the United Nations that Spanish warships had sailed to join the coup with the approval of the then Popular Party (PP) government of José Maria Aznar. Borico appealed to the UN to adopt measures to prevent such coups in the future.

The coup was supposedly due to have taken place on March 7. Fifteen soldiers were arrested in Malabo, the capital of Equatorial Guinea, under the leadership of Nick du Toit. Du Toit has claimed, in a televised confession, that he had recruited the mercenaries to remove President Teodoro Obiang Nguema from power. Another 65 soldiers were arrested en route from Zimbabwe.

The coup is alleged to have been partially bankrolled by Mark Thatcher, son of the former British Prime Minister. Its aim is said to be the removal or assassination of the tyrannical Obiang and his replacement by leading opposition figure, Severo Moto, currently in exile in Madrid. The alleged rewards for organising the coup were to have been extensive concessions in the country's massive oil reserves.

Allegations of the involvement of Aznar's right-wing PP government are not new. Three months after the arrests, Miguel Mifuno, a special adviser to Obiang, accused the Spanish of having sent a warship with 500 marines to the country to provide resources for foreign mercenaries. According to Mifuno, the Spanish government had offered to send arms to assist with a border dispute with neighbouring Gabon. These were refused, but the Spanish sent another message announcing the departure of the warship full of marines. "It was already in our territorial waters," said Mifuno.

One week after the coup attempt in March, Aznar's government was unceremoniously removed from office in an explosion of popular mass opposition to the war in Iraq. It was replaced by the Socialist Party (PSOE) under José Luis Rodriguez Zapatero. When Mifuno made his allegations in June, the PSOE denied any knowledge of the ship's presence in the region and rejected the possibility of Spanish involvement.

Borico's recent statement to the UN adds greater detail to the allegations, and has drawn a more vigourous defence of the Aznar government from the PSOE. He alleges that two Spanish warships had set sail on January 29 for Equatorial Guinea to support the coup attempt. The ships, said Borico, were there "to provide support in the event of resistance" and to put in power Severo Moto Nsa, "who had formed a government in exile that was recognised by the former Spanish government."

Ana Palacio, the minister for the exterior under Aznar, claimed that the "courtesy mission" had been agreed with Obiang during her visit to Malabo in November 2003. The mission was then cancelled as soon as it had begun, in agreement with the Malabo government. Borico, though, claims that Obiang had never agreed to the presence of the ships, and had rejected them out of hand. Under the terms of the aborted mission, however, they would then have had to remain in the region of Equatorial Guinea for 45 days, until March 13—that is, after the planned coup.

Zapatero's government is sticking to the line that it knows nothing about the ships' mission. Zapatero's Foreign Minister, Miguel Angel Moratinos, says that his department has no documents on the matter. An official representative of the Foreign Ministry called Borico's statements "unacceptable" and said the government "rejected and energetically denied" them.

The representative continued, "The government has many times denied any involvement" and has "reiterated its commitment not to conduct activities that might destabilise a foreign government". Rather, Spain was seeking to maintain the "best possible" relations with Equatorial Guinea. Inigo Palacio, the second Spanish ambassador to the UN, said that the Malabo government had offered not the slightest proof of their allegation.

Severo Moto also claims the Spanish had nothing to do with the coup. He criticised this position, and said that oppositionists often felt that Spain was protecting the status quo in Equatorial Guinea, and had no desire to do anything. He also said that Borico's statements indicated Obiang wanted to condemn him to death.

Celestino Bacale Obiang of the party Convergence for Social Democracy also rejected any participation of the Spanish, but said that the clique around Obiang had tried to remove him from power with a view to gaining access to the country's resources.

Sources close to the PP have indicated that the Aznar government had no knowledge of a coup planned by this international network, but suggest that they were aware of other proposed coup attempts. The presence of the ships, though, was not related to these plots, according to reports in *El Pais*, but was intended as a gesture of support to Guinea in the territorial dispute with Gabon over the island of Mbagne in the Gulf of Guinea.

This suggestion lays bare the content of Spain's interests in the region. Mbagne was part of the territory ceded to Equatorial

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Guinea in 1968 when it gained independence from Spanish colonial rule. The government of Gabon claims that the island was given to it by Guinea's first president, Francisco Macias Nguema. Macias was overthrown and executed in 1979 by Obiang, his nephew. The document ceding Mbagne to Gabon, which was supposed to have been signed on a trip there by Macias, has never turned up, and litigation continues. Gabon moved to occupy the island in 2002.

Mbagne acquired greater significance with the discovery of huge oil reserves in its territorial waters. Based on its oil reserves, Equatorial Guinea is already attracting large amounts of foreign investment. Since the discovery of offshore reserves in 1995, oil companies like ExxonMobil, Marathon and Elf have invested some $3 billion in the country. In 2003, the Spanish-owned Repsol-YPF acquired prospecting rights near Mbagne. Two months ago, US giant Marathon Oil announced the investment of $1,400 million to construct Guinea's first liquid gas petroleum plant. In sub-Saharan Africa, Guinea is behind only South Africa, Nigeria and Angola in US investment.

It has been estimated that the Gulf of Guinea could contain crude reserves of 114,000 million barrels, some 10 percent of the world's total. For this reason, those countries investing in the region have to secure their investments. Earlier this month, leaders of 17 navies from West Africa, Europe and the US met in Naples to discuss maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. Alongside the local navies of the Gulf were representatives of the nations with an interest in the oil reserves, including the US, Britain and Spain.

Called to meet "a new demand for integrated maritime security" in the face of international terrorism, according to Admiral Gregory Johnson, commander of US Naval Forces Europe, the conference addressed "the need to reduce maritime threats to economic development, such as...offshore oil production."

Equatorial Guinea produces some 350,000 barrels of oil a day. The economy is growing by around 65 percent per annum. Annual income from oil is estimated by the International Monetary Fund to be $1 billion per annum, but this is based on 1992 prices and output. The current figure is more likely to be in the region of $3 billion.

Average income is said to have grown from less than $500 to around $5,000 per person. But in reality, there has been no improvement in social conditions, and the infrastructure has not been improved. Rents have doubled. Obiang and the clique around him have enriched themselves massively through oil production. A recent report from the US Senate subcommittee on Riggs Bank revealed that Riggs had opened a governmental account for Equatorial Guinea in 1995. In the following eight years, it also opened accounts for Obiang, his wife, her son and other leading members of the government. The total in these accounts had risen to some $700 million by the end of this period. Riggs Bank has just agreed to pay $25 million in fines for breaches of US anti-money-laundering regulations.

Obiang, who came to power through the overthrow of the equally brutal Macias regime, has continually attracted criticism from human rights organisations. He has often sought to justify repression on the pretexts of threatened coups against his government. Lucie Bourthemieux, a legal adviser to the minister of justice, told John Vidal of the *Guardian*, "Democracy is young here. It may not actually be the most suitable method of politics."

At the same time, Obiang continues to pose as a defender of the Guinean people against the rapacity of the oil corporations. As Miguel Mifuno told the *Guardian*, "Oil here is a political resource. When we had none, no one was interested in us. Now everyone comes to take advantage of us. Our enemies say that the oil money goes only to the president. That is vulgar talk."

ExxonMobil is accused of having paid $400 million into Obiang's private account. Thanks to allegations of Spanish involvement in the events of March, Obiang can pose as an opponent of imperialist intervention in Equatorial Guinea.

Borico told the UN that those who attacked the government on human rights and wasting the resources gained from oil revenues were seeking to "justify an absurd military intervention." It is probably true that there will be moves to replace Obiang by force if he threatens the oil interests of the major corporations, or if he is no longer seen as capable of controlling the country. Although Obiang has served the purposes of the oil corporations thus far, they may find it necessary to substitute an alternative.

A recent article in *afrol News* suggests that a consensus is forming over the need to turn to the European Union to safeguard Spanish interests in the Gulf of Guinea.

The article states that a letter has been sent to the European Parliament calling for "a clear attitude" towards the Obiang government. Citing the Senate report on Riggs Bank, the letter says that the Obiang regime, thanks to the "lack of transparency" in the oil industry and its consequent maintenance of the population in a state of poverty, is jeopardising the political stability of the whole of the Gulf of Guinea region. According to *afrol News*, this document was signed by representatives of the PSOE, the PP, the Stalinist-led United Left (IU) the Association for Democratic Solidarity with Equatorial Guinea (ASODEGUE) and the main trade unions (CCOO and UGT).

One cannot take at face value either Obiang's claims to be resisting outside attempts to destabilise Equatorial Guinea, or—on the other hand—any professions by the Spanish ruling class that they are not involved in such efforts.

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