US and Britain implicated in Equatorial Guinea coup attempt

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Two reports on the background to the attempted coup in Equatorial Guinea were sent in December 2003 and January 2004 by South African security expert Johann Smith to British intelligence and to Michael Westphal, senior colleague of Donald Rumsfeld and deputy assistant secretary of defence.

According to the *Observer*, the second report warned the coup would take place in March this year and that "knowing the individuals as well as I do, this timeline is very realistic and will provide for ample time to plan, mobilise, equip and deploy the force." Smith, a former commander in the South African special forces and apparently now working for the Equatorial Guinea regime, was given information by some of the South African mercenaries involved. He claims he has received death threats since the coup attempt and that he received no acknowledgements from Britain or the United States.

This revelation came after British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw admitted in response to parliamentary questioning that the British government knew as early as January 2004 that the coup was being planned. Previously, British ministers and officials denied any knowledge of the coup attempt. The operation is alleged to have been partly financed by Sir Mark Thatcher, son of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, whose court case in South Africa for involvement in the coup has been postponed to April. Straw has apparently been forced to come clean about British involvement because there is now so much information available about the events leading up to the coup attempt, including the evidence being prepared for the Thatcher trial.

In his parliamentary answer, Straw attempted to play down the admission that he had received the reports from Smith, claiming it was similar to reports circulating in the Spanish media. Because there were similar rumours the previous year, Straw claimed that the British government was sceptical about its accuracy. He also claimed that his officials could find no definitive evidence of the coup plot. This is hardly credible. Smith's reports give a wealth of information on the coup plans and the individuals involved and South African intelligence must have had knowledge of mercenaries being recruited.

Everything points to the British, American and also the Spanish governments giving tacit support to a privately funded plot to remove the president of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang, and replace him by Severo Moto, a leading opponent of the regime living in exile in Spain. Obiang is said to be in poor health and, whilst the Bush administration and Western regimes are on good terms with this despot, there are fears that if he dies there will be an internecine struggle between possible successors.

Fear of such instability must also be of concern to the oil corporations involved, such as ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco, as Equatorial Guinea is now the third largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa. The tiny country of less than 500,000 people had a gross domestic product of $US1.85 billion in 2001 and churns out 350,000 barrels of oil a day. It has vast oil reserves, estimated to be approximately 10 percent of the total global reserves, according to the US Department of Energy. US oil companies have invested $US3 billion in the country since 1995. Most of the population live in dire poverty and the regime is renowned for its brutality, with political detainees routinely tortured or ill-treated according to Amnesty International. A report by a US Senate committee revealed hundreds of millions of dollars had been deposited by Obiang, his family and associates in the Washington-based Riggs Bank "with little or no attention to the bank's anti-money laundering obligations...."

Equatorial Guinea accuses Spain of sending two warships with 500 marines on board to back a seizure of power. Not surprisingly, the members of the Popular Party government of José Maria Aznar, removed from office one week after the coup attempt, deny involvement. They claim that a "courtesy mission" was cancelled as soon as it had started, in agreement with Equatorial Guinea.

Some 17 mercenaries were arrested in Equatorial Guinea when the coup attempt was thwarted. Their leader, Nick Du Toit, has now been sentenced to 34 years in prison, with most of the others receiving heavy sentences. Du Toit was the only mercenary to admit he was taking part in an attempted coup. He has now withdrawn his evidence, claiming it was extracted under torture.

A further 70 mercenaries whose plane was stopped in Zimbabwe have also been jailed, although with much lighter sentences, after pleading guilty to arms trafficking. Simon Mann, a British ex-SAS officer from a wealthy family and with

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previous involvement in mercenary operations, was leading this group and appears to have been the main instigator of the coup attempt. He attempted to smuggle a letter out of jail, seized by the Zimbabwean authorities, to ask help from former school friend “Scratcher” (Mark Thatcher) and “Smelly” (Ely Calil, a London-based Lebanese businessman also alleged to have financed the coup attempt).

Much more evidence is now said to have been obtained by the South African police and intelligence services. In particular, the pilot of the plane that was allegedly flying Moto to take power after the coup, Crause Steyl, as well as two other mercenaries are giving evidence in the Mark Thatcher case in exchange for being let off with a fine and suspended sentence for their part in the operation.

There is also evidence obtained by a Nigel Morgan, said to be a friend of both Mann and Thatcher, and investigating on behalf of an oil company. His report has been passed to the Conservative opposition in Britain and to the South African authorities. Mann and Calil allegedly met in Britain at the beginning of 2003. Calil supposedly went with Mann to see Moto in Madrid in February 2003 to discuss the coup plans. Mann is said to have paid $500,000, and Calil is said to have raised $750,000 towards an operation costing around $3 million in total.

There have been other accusations made that the British government had full knowledge of a planned coup. Calil is alleged to have met former British cabinet minister and now European Union trade commissioner Peter Mandelson sometime in 2003. He wanted to sound out the attitude of the British government towards a coup and is said to have been told he would get no problems from them. That this meeting took place is denied by Mandelson.

According to various media reports:

* Finance for the operation, as well as from Calil and Mann, is also alleged to have come from Mark Thatcher, from disgraced Tory politician Jeffrey Archer, British businessman Greg Wales and from several other named Lebanese, South African and British businessmen.

* Reconnaissance operations were carried out in two fishing trawlers, not only around Equatorial Guinea, but also around the small island country of Sao Tomé that was also apparently targeted for a coup. Huge oil deposits have been discovered in the waters around this island, with production scheduled to start in 2006-7. An unsuccessful coup attempt took place in July 2003, apparently unconnected to the Mann-Calil operation.

* Mercenaries were recruited by Mann, particularly ex-members of the 32 Buffalo Battalion, a notorious special force unit that fought for the South African apartheid regime.

* A meeting took place in London in February of this year organised by the Royal Institute for International Affairs, to discuss “revenue transparency in Equatorial Guinea”. According to the *Guardian*, at this meeting an executive from an oil company declared “everyone knows there’s going to be a coup led by South African mercenaries.”

* Greg Wales is said to have had two meetings with Theresa Whelan, a member of the Bush administration in charge of African affairs, at the Pentagon in November 2003 and February 2004. Wales attended a conference organised by a group of “private military companies”, the International Peace Operations Association. At this conference Whelan is reported as supporting the role of private contractors “in supporting US national security objectives overseas”. According to the *Guardian* report, she added, “The US can be supportive in trying to ameliorate regional crises without necessarily having to put US troops on the ground, which is often a very difficult political decision—sometimes we may not want to be very visible.”

It is possible that the operation had to be aborted because either Smith or others, possibly from South African intelligence, tipped off Equatorial Guinea. Knowledge of a possible coup seems to have been widespread and common knowledge in the bar in Pretoria frequented by the 32 Buffalo men. In the event, the South African government told both Equatorial Guinea and Zimbabwe to arrest the mercenaries. Moto was flown to the Canary Islands, then to Bamako, ready to go to Equatorial Guinea. He was apparently tipped off about the failure of the coup, presumably by Western intelligence.

There have been suggestions that the South African government knew about the plot all along and was collaborating with Obiang and his ruling clique. The South African government has made much of the fact that they had stopped a threat to another African country. It will soon be opening an embassy in Equatorial Guinea and is said to be negotiating a deal between its oil company PetroSA and the Obiang regime. Calil, Wales and others have been reported by *Africa Confidential* saying that the coup was a set-up that was organised by Equatorial Guinea and South Africa. However, to suppose that the South African government, hardly known for its opposition to the United States and the Western powers, could have been planning a set-up from the start seems unlikely. Much more probable is that when details of the coup plot became too widely known, and the security of the mercenary operation seems to have been abysmal, they were forced to act.

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