

French police attacked in Guinea while expelling two immigrants

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On August 16, in the middle of the summer holidays, two immigrants with no residence permits (known as *sans-papiers*), Diaby Souareba and Mohamed Lamine Diaby, were expelled from France on a Moroccan Royal Air flight to their country of origin, Guinea-Conakry, a former French colony.

If the expulsion of Souareba and Diaby has received public attention, in contrast to numerous previous expulsions that have not been made public, it is because it triggered a diplomatic incident between Guinea and France. The incident highlights conditions faced by these workers and the growing attack on immigrants in France.

The two *sans-papiers* had begun a hunger strike two months earlier in Lille (in northern France) in a desperate attempt to obtain the right to stay in France. Threatened with expulsion, they participated in the occupation of a local trade union building in Lille.

After the occupation was broken up, the two workers were taken back to Guinea by a specialised team of police made up of six members of the Border Patrol Force (*Police Aux Frontières*—PAF). On their arrival in the Guinean capital of Conakry, the two men accused the police of treating them inhumanely. Their assertions were supported by several passengers.

As they got off the plane in Conakry on August 16, in addition to the crowd that turned out to support them, Guinean police also intervened in their favour. According to an August 23 article on the *Nouvel Observateur* Internet site, “a signed interrogation statement by the PAF” recorded that “the six police officers concerned claimed that they had been received in Conakry by a reception committee that ‘included two Guinean police officers’. One of them ‘had hit one of the French police’, the statement continued. The police...were also ‘insulted and roughed up...in a hail of insults’, receiving a multitude of kicks and punches’. Some Guinean police then insulted them in the presence of a police chief... ‘Colonialism is finished’, shouted one Guinean woman police officer according to the same document.”

The arrival of the two expelled men at Conakry airport was known in advance, in part thanks to the action of a group known as “The Undocumented Immigrants Committee in the North [of France]” (CSP-59). A spokesman for the group, Saïd

Bouamama, explained to radio Europe 1, “We have the principle here that the people we have helped in the fight are not abandoned at the time they are returned [to their home countries]. We therefore have contacts with the family, and we keep in contact because we want them to come back [to France]. It is around the families of the expelled that the reception committees [in Guinea] are organized and they are organizing the fight for the return, so that these people can come back, and we are going to get organized too.”

The French government reacted by condemning the action as well as the attitude of the Guinean police in Conakry. France demanded an explanation from the Guinean government and an assurance that this would not happen again.

The police trade unions also intervened in the aftermath of the incident. They demanded measures for the protection of officers in charge of expulsions.

The Foreign Affairs ministry immediately announced it had contacted the Guinean authorities and that they had decided to “organize in liaison with our representatives, an adequate reception arrangement to avoid the repeat of such incidents.” The Interior Minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) added that the Guinean government had “presented its apologies to France.” According an August 24 article in *Le Figaro*, the Guinean government refuted this account, saying it had only expressed “regrets”, “because France is the only country in the world which repatriates the citizens of other countries without forewarning the authorities... If France had alerted us, Guinea could have taken measures which could have avoided this incident.”

Moreover, the French government, in a provocative gesture towards the victims of expulsions and with the aim of legitimizing police actions, immediately publicly defended the six police officers from the PAF who carried out the expulsion. They will be decorated with a “medal for courageous acts and dedication to duty”.

The reaction of the Guinean Prime Minister Lansana Kouyaté and President Lansana Conté was to minimise the facts. The Guinean police however, “confirmed the incident”, but contested the French police version by denying “that the Guinean police had laid hands on the French police”.

Guinea-Conakry is a former French colony with a population

of just over 9 million. According to the United Nation's *World Report on Human Development 2006*, Guinea ranked 160 out of 177 countries in an index of development. The editor of Guinea's *Solidarity* summed up in a few words the country's situation on radio Europe 1: "We are a developing country whose population has no more than a dollar a day. The families rely on all those who leave. Therefore seeing them return, it is frustrating, it's serious."

A cholera epidemic is currently plaguing the country and, according to the Director of Public Health, Doctor Mohamed Mahy Barry, has infected 1,764 people since January, causing 67 deaths. The town most affected is the capital, which has been hit with 32 deaths and 827 declared cases. Cholera, also called "the disease of the poor" is a disease associated with the absence of good hygiene, a sanitary infrastructure and adequate water.

On August 24, a one-day strike of bakers deprived most inhabitants of bread in Conakry. The bakers were protesting against the increase in the price of flour. The price of a loaf of bread has nearly doubled, from 1,200 to 2,000 Guinean francs.

The demand for asylum on the part of Guineans has greatly increased, not only for economic reasons, but also political. Anyone arrested and perceived to be an opponent of the government is systematically tortured, although the constitution forbids it. The resistance of the two expelled Guinean *sans-papiers* reflects the will of the population to fight against these living conditions.

The present government of Guinea-Conakry came to power earlier this year following a general strike and uprising of the whole population, which had lasted more than a month. A peaceful march last January was subject to bloody repression by the state. The new government had received the official support of Paris last March. According to the radio-KanKan site, the French minister for co-operation and development and French-speaking countries, Madam Brigitte Girardin, travelled to Guinea the day after the new government head, Lansana Kouyaté, took office, announcing 1.1 million euros in immediate aid.

The interest that the ex-colony represents for France is also illustrated by the eagerness of the new rightwing Gaullist French President Nicolas Sarkozy of the UMP, to warmly receive Kouyaté in mid-June, even before the formal constitution of his government. A budgetary aid package of 24 million euros was promised to the Guinean prime minister.

The images of the immigrant expulsions from France, which are the outcome of the daily harassment of undocumented workers in particular, are broadcast by satellite television, thus transmitting the growing violence of French police interventions. This has not failed to exacerbate the anger of the population in Guinea and in France.

After coming to power in May, Sarkozy has pursued anti-social and brutal anti-immigrant policies that he had already applied as minister of the interior in the former UMP

government of Dominique de Villepin. He hastened at the beginning of July, even before his holiday in the US, to exhort his ministers to apply his government's program with vigour, by means of official letters signed also by Prime Minister François Fillon, and addressed to several ministers.

In this way he reminded the minister for immigration, Brice Hortefeux, of the government's objectives for expelling immigrants from France. Some 25,000 expulsions were planned for 2007. In this letter, the prime minister reaffirmed his determination to do everything to meet the quotas for expulsions, saying: "You [the minister for immigration] will fix a ceiling for immigration each year according to the different motives for settling in France, and you will aim for the objective whereby economic immigration represents 50 percent of the total flow of entries for long-term settlement in France...You will take as a reference the policy employed by some of our partners, for example, Canada or Great Britain, who examine candidates for immigration in relation to certain criteria, including geographical origin, and determine their priorities as a consequence."

Since the final adoption on October 28 of the bill on "the law relative to the control of immigration, to the residence of foreign nationals in France, and to nationality," the government has reinforced its heavy-handed interventions.

As a consequence, many candidates for immigration, after having indicated their personal details to the authorities, daily endure police harassment. The Guinean population is all the more hostile to these practises as the economic, social, and political situation in this former French colony is catastrophic.

Taking into account the conditions that exist in many other countries throughout the world, the case of these two Guinean undocumented workers is entirely representative and underlines the despair of all those who flee poverty in the hope of being able to lead a decent life and provide for their families by working in the more developed countries.

The real objective of the hunting down of undocumented immigrants is to divide the working class according to race and ethnicity, and at the same time to oppress the working population. The attacks on immigrants' rights are the testing ground for a general assault on the rights and living conditions of the whole working class.



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