

British mercenary confesses role in Equatorial Guinea coup plot

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British mercenary Simon Mann has confessed in a television interview with Channel 4 News to being the “manager” of a plot to overthrow President Obiang of the tiny oil-rich West African country of Equatorial Guinea in 2004. Mann has previously claimed that he was on his way to protect a mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This is the first time that he has admitted he was involved in a coup plot.

But he claimed he was not “the main man.” When asked who the main man was, Mann replied “Ely Calil.” He continued, “I mean, if somebody wants to do me a favour, what they could [do] is put a pair of handcuffs on Calil and chuck him on an aeroplane to Malibu [*sic*].” Malabu is the capital of Equatorial Guinea.

Calil, a British citizen, is a billionaire businessman of Lebanese origin who was born in Nigeria. Mann has named Calil before in a statement he made after his arrest in Zimbabwe where he was found guilty of illegally buying arms. He later retracted this statement claiming that it was made under duress. In his Channel 4 interview, he insisted that his original statement was true although it had been made under duress.

When asked about the involvement of Sir Mark Thatcher, son of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Mann said, “Um, ya, he was a part of the team.” Thatcher was convicted by a South African court of contravening the country’s anti-mercenary laws in 2005. He pleaded guilty to unwittingly putting up US\$275,000 for the charter of a helicopter for the coup attempt. Thatcher claims that he thought the helicopter he hired was for business use.

Mann denied that either Jeffrey Archer or Peter Mandelson had anything to do with the attempted coup. Both the EU commissioner and former British minister Mandelson and the disgraced peer Archer are reported to be friends of Calil, provoking media speculation as to their possible involvement in the coup plot or at least knowledge of it. Mandelson, Archer and Calil have all denied any part in the affair.

Archer has known Calil since they were at Oxford together. A J.H. Archer is known to have paid Mann £74,000 just four days before his arrest. Archer has always denied that it was him.

Calil offered Mandelson the use of a Holland Park apartment when he was forced to sell his house in Notting Hill as the result of a financial scandal. The British media reported in 2004 that the South African authorities had a document in which “Calil says that Mandelson assured him he would get no problems from the British government side” and invited Mr. Calil to come and see him again “if you need something done.”

Calil, who has oil interests in West Africa, is said to have financed Severo Moto, the exiled Equatorial Guinean opposition leader. According to the *Times*, a meeting took place at Severo Moto’s

Spanish villa at which Calil was offered the role of chief oil broker in Equatorial Guinea if he participated in the overthrow of Obiang.

Calil, who has not been photographed for more than 30 years, was involved with the First Venetian Bank scandal in Lebanon in 1984. He was linked to a slush fund run by the French company Technip which lost a deal to build a pipeline between Algeria and Italy to the US company Halliburton. He was arrested in Paris during the Elf-Aquitaine affair and is still under investigation for allegedly taking £40 million in bribes. Many of his interests lie in Nigeria, where he built up close relations with a succession of military dictators.

Mann was arrested at Harare airport in Zimbabwe along with 69 South African mercenaries in 2004. They were on board an Antonov plane loaded with sleeping bags and supplies. Nick du Toit, a South African arms dealer and former commando, was arrested at the same time in Equatorial Guinea. He was sentenced to 35 years for his part in the coup plot.

A Zimbabwean court found Mann guilty of firearms and immigration charges. He was held for four years before being extradited to Equatorial Guinea in February. He is currently being held in the notorious Black Beach prison. A German national, Eugen Nershz, who was arrested with du Toit, died in prison shortly after being incarcerated in Black Beach.

Mann appeared wearing handcuffs and leg irons padded with rags. The camera lingered on the visible welts on Mann’s wrists as he claimed that he was being well treated in prison. With his thumbs moving nervously, he said that he had been put under no coercion. Channel 4 reporter Jonathan Miller made it clear that the attorney general of Equatorial Guinea and heavily armed guards were in the room throughout the interview.

Mann, who is due to face trial in a few weeks, seems to have come to the conclusion that his best option is to name at least some names. Calil is being sought by both the South African and Equatorial Guinea police, while Thatcher has already been convicted for his part in the coup attempt. Mann may have reasoned that he could not do them any more harm. At 55 years of age, his chances of surviving a long imprisonment in Black Beach are not high. By refusing to link Mandelson and Archer to the plot, Mann sent a clear signal that he would not involve the British establishment in the case—for now. The interview showed a man bargaining for his life on television.

The prospect of what he might say has caused consternation in Britain. Mann’s wife, Amanda, initially prevented the interview being broadcast when she obtained a High Court injunction. This was dropped when Mann’s brother and sister, Sarah and Edward, flew to see him in prison and found that he wanted the interview to go ahead. The lawyer that Mann’s wife instructed to act on her behalf is Andrew

Kerman, identified by the *Times* as a close associate of Calil. Calil's lawyers mounted a last-moment effort to get another injunction preventing the broadcast, but failed. Scotland Yard has confirmed since the interview that it is investigating whether any British citizens have been involved in illegal activities related to the coup attempt.

Britain and the United States were not involved in the coup plot, Mann claimed. He denied that there had been a "nod and a wink from the UK." Nor, he insisted, was there a "nod and a wink from the United States of America. Absolutely not." The only governments that Mann was prepared to link with the coup plot were the governments of South Africa and Spain.

The potential role of governments in the coup attempt raises a series of unanswered questions. South African intelligence seems to have had early knowledge of the plot, which was being gossiped about in bars frequented by mercenaries. Mann now claims that the South African government was behind the plot.

South African Foreign Affairs spokesman Ronnie Mamoepa dismissed Mann's allegations as "preposterous." Certainly South Africa was eager to prosecute Mark Thatcher and may have tipped off the Zimbabwean and Equatorial Guinean authorities. But it is not impossible that there were divisions within the ruling elite that found expression in a coup plot that was later sabotaged.

Spain's potential role is clearer. Severo Moto is in exile in Spain. The present Socialist Party government has been less favourable towards him than the right-wing Popular Party government, in power at the time the abortive coup was in preparation. But the Spanish High Court has still just refused a bid by Equatorial Guinea to have Moto extradited and has confirmed his asylum status. Spanish oil companies lost out to US companies in the bid for oil concessions. Regime change might have seemed to be the best way of regaining Spanish influence in the former colony. Spain had something to gain from ousting Obiang. It is rumoured that a Spanish warship was sighted off the coast of Equatorial Guinea as the plot was about to begin.

The possible US role is less certain. Obiang is close to the US administration and the Bush family. As the plot was uncovered, he was found to have hundreds of millions of dollars deposited in the Washington-based Riggs Bank. With 60 accounts at the bank, Equatorial Guinea was Riggs's largest client. One account held money from US oil companies including Exxon Mobil, Amerada Hess, Marathon Oil and ChevronTexaco.

Simon P. Kareri, the bank employee who dealt with Equatorial Guinea, would return from the West African country with suitcases stuffed with millions of dollars. A US Senate subcommittee found that the bank had ignored anti-money-laundering laws.

The Clinton administration broke off relations with Equatorial Guinea in 1995 just before vast oil reserves were discovered. Equatorial Guinea has since been called the Kuwait of West Africa. It is the continent's third largest oil producer and has become increasingly important to the US.

President Bush renewed diplomatic relations in 2001. The US embassy is now housed in property rented from National Security Minister Manuel Nguema Mba, who has been consistently linked to human rights abuses. In 2006, Obiang was welcomed to the US by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who called him "a good friend." On his recent tour of Africa, Bush made a point of visiting Obiang.

It is still possible, however, that the US government wished to remove its "good friend" Obiang, who is known to be in ill health. He has a number of sons who are all vying to succeed him. Obiang himself came to power by murdering his uncle. A messy power

struggle among his family would draw in neighbouring Cameroon and Gabon to support rival factions. Not only would that pose a threat to US control of the country's oil reserves, but it would potentially inflame the rest of West Africa.

Britain's role in the affair is also cloaked in mystery. Jack Straw, foreign secretary at the time of the attempted coup, was forced to admit that the UK government had prior knowledge of it. As the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on December 7, 2004, two warnings were sent to British intelligence by Johann Smith, a South African security expert working for Equatorial Guinea. Michael Westphal, a senior colleague of former Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, was warned of the coup plot at the same time.

Straw claimed that the Foreign Office investigated the case and did not find any British companies involved. That may have been true, but a number of Channel Islands- and British Virgin Islands-registered companies are suspected of involvement. Nor is it clear why Straw did not warn the government of Equatorial Guinea that a coup was to be attempted.

Given Mann's background and career, it is difficult to believe that the coup was an entirely private enterprise. Mann is a well-connected member of a wealthy UK brewing family. Educated at Eton and Sandhurst, he became an officer in the Scots Guards, before transferring to the elite Special Air Service. There would be nothing new in Mann working for the British government. He was a co-founder of the mercenary company Executive Outcomes and its successor, Sandline. Both Sandline and Executive Outcomes have a long history of involvement in mineral ventures. There is a close connection between the two companies and Heritage Oil.

Sandline's most famous operation in West Africa was its support of President Kabbah of diamond-rich Sierra Leone. Tim Spicer, who also trained at Sandhurst before serving in the Scots Guards and SAS, heads Sandline. He claimed that in Sierra Leone he had worked closely with British Ambassador Peter Penfold. In language similar to that of the Labour government's description of its own foreign policy, he described Sandline's role in Sierra Leone as "ethical." Mann echoed that view of his own activities in Equatorial Guinea in his Channel 4 interview.

When Sandline and Executive Outcomes were hired by the government of Papua New Guinea, the mercenaries who had waged a brutal war against the local population found themselves in prison. The British government stepped in to rescue the Sandline employees. Mann has received no such help this time. He remains in prison in Equatorial Guinea, bargaining with the threat of fresh revelations.



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