

France accused of attempted assassination in Guinea

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11 January 2010

Following an attempt on the life of the president of Guinea, Captain Moussa “Dadis” Camara, on December 3, the Guinean communications minister, Idrissa Cherif, has accused the French government of being complicit in the attack.

Camara was attacked by his aide, Aboubacar “Tumba” Diakite. Cherif stated that only the French authorities know of the whereabouts of Diakite, who in a recent interview on French RFI Radio, as reported by BBC News, stated that he shot Camara in the neck to avoid being arrested and because he felt “betrayed.”

Diakite had been held responsible by the regime for the massacre of 156 opposition supporters at a football stadium in the capital Conakry in September. Others were severely beaten, and women were gang-raped. Camara tried to distance himself from the incident at the time, denying having full control over his men. However, the subsequent arrest of opposition leaders and supporters, and the establishment of military checkpoints around the capital, point to a government-organised campaign of oppression.

Camara, who is being treated for his wounds in the Moroccan capital, Rabat, has been president for just over a year following the death of Lansana Conte who held power for 24 years. Camara promised free democratic elections for December 2010, in which he would not stand. The protest of an estimated 50,000 people in September was organised after his announcement that he would stand in the planned elections.

A leaked United Nations report, based on interviews with more than 600 people, said at least 109 girls and women were subjected to rape, sexual mutilation or kidnap for repeated rape. It called for Camara to be

charged with war crimes following the massacre. This has increased international pressure on the regime.

President Barack Obama, and Presidents Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal have called for Camara to step down. The latter are close to the US and France, respectively. France, the former colonial power, has announced that it will cut military aid to Guinea, but has maintained relations with the country despite the football stadium atrocity.

Under former President Lansana Conté, Guinea aligned itself more closely with the Western powers. He imposed austerity measures and economic reforms dictated by the International Monetary Fund, designed to open up the economy to Western corporations, giving them access to substantial mineral reserves including bauxite, iron ore, gold, diamonds and uranium.

But official corruption was rife, with Guinea rated as the world’s most corrupt state alongside Haiti. This acted as a major impediment to investment. In the latter years of his regime, the country degenerated into a narco-state, with the political and military elite taking a cut from the trafficking of drugs from Latin America through Guinea, en route to Europe.

Camara came to power in December 2008 pledging to end this situation. He has berated members of the previous regime on television but has done nothing substantial to end either the narcotics trade or corruption generally. More significantly, he has angered the mineral companies that have major interests in Guinea by renegotiating their contracts.

Last year, Camara stripped Rio Tinto of part of its Simandou iron ore concession and gave it to BSG

Resources Guinea, a subsidiary of Israeli businessman Benny Steinmetz's BSG Resources. Simandou holds the largest unexploited iron deposit in the world. Its development is seen as essential to the survival of the company.

The *Times* of London suggested that Guinea had received a major offer from China, which is rapidly developing its interests in Guinea. Russia and China recently signed a deal to build a US\$1 billion hydroelectric dam in Guinea. In return, the Chinese will receive the right to mine bauxite. Guinea has one third of the world's bauxite, the ore that is used to make aluminium. It supplies almost half of the bauxite imported into North America.

Mining as a whole produces 25 percent of the Guinean national income, and bauxite extraction is the most significant sector of the industry. But the government's income from bauxite is expected to fall by 60 percent this year in line with falling world prices.

"These are the revenues that allow the state to buy rice and pay for some of the state's obligations. The situation could be very tense," Ibrahima Soumah, a former minister for mines and currently a World Bank consultant, said recently.

A hike in the price of rice and fuel helped to provoke mass strikes against the previous regime in 2007. The prospect of government revenue collapsing has given added urgency to the US and EU calls for elections. Major transnational companies need a government that can control this mineral-rich country.

Fundamental to the concerns of the US is that Guinea could provide access to the considerable oil reserves located off its coastline. Recent seismic surveys suggest sizeable deposits, with some estimates suggesting that its offshore oil fields could supply the United States with up to a third of its requirements within a decade.

The US condemnation of Guinea as an "unconstitutional government" indicates that Washington is not willing to let a politically unstable regime, prepared to cooperate with Moscow and Beijing, continue to hold office indefinitely. Camara has stated that he will return to Guinea despite international opposition.

America's position in Africa has suffered from the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama made it clear when he visited Africa that he intends to reassert American hegemony on the continent.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reiterated the same message on her visit. She warned that investors would not tolerate failed leadership and civil unrest. Obama recently used the US presidency of the UN to host a lunch for African presidents at which trade and investment was at the top of the agenda.

The US demand for elections and "transparency" in government is the means by which the Obama administration hopes to break up the ruling African elites that insist on taking a share of the profits generated by transnational companies.

This agenda offers nothing for the mass of the population, who have already lost the small concessions that were made to them after independence. According to the World Food Programme, 53 percent of the population of Guinea live in poverty, with the figure rising to 70 percent in rural areas. Only 16 percent of the population have access to electricity. Students can often be seen studying under the lights of Conakry airport. The average income is less than a dollar a day, making Guinea one of the poorest countries in the world despite its vast mineral wealth.

The present instability may see a realignment in the leadership of the junta or the promotion by the Western powers of opposition leader Alpha Conde who heads the Rally for the People of Guinea, to provide more favourable opportunities for the further exploitation of the country's resources at the expense of the wider population.



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