

Burkina Faso shaken by widespread protests

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The West African country of Burkina Faso has been hit by growing popular protests as well as dissent in the army. Bordering the Ivory Coast, the landlocked country has faced rising food prices, which have been exacerbated by the civil war in the Ivory Coast and French/United Nations intervention.

Supplies have been disrupted by the war and thousands of Burkinabes, who traditionally work in the Ivory Coast cocoa plantations, have fled home to this impoverished country.

Burkina, with a population of 16 million, is rated by the UN as the third poorest country in the world. Life expectancy for men is only 53 years. According to some estimates, the per capita annual income is just US\$300. This is less than the average for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. The loss of wages from the migrant cocoa workers has been a severe blow to both household incomes and the national economy.

President Blaise Compaore is increasingly under threat. He has sacked his government and top military chiefs, and taken over the post of defence minister himself. He recalled Luc Adolphe Tiao, Burkina's ambassador to France, and appointed him prime minister. Former colonial power France has warned its citizens not to travel to Burkina.

Following the changes at the top, opposition politicians are expecting a clampdown on protests. The deputy general secretary of the CGT-B trade union federation, Bassolma Bazie, said, "This is quite clearly a sign that we are dealing with a government of repression." He said the unions would call a demonstration May 1 if the government did not address grievances such as low pay and high taxes on essential goods.

Two weeks ago, the capital Ouagadougou saw the largest protest so far, with tens of thousands of people protesting against the high cost of living. Protests have built up since the beginning of the year in various parts of the country, with students communicating by Facebook in the pattern of Tunisia and Egypt.

Soldiers in a number of towns began protests last

weekend, shooting into the air, stealing vehicles and ransacking shops. At one point, they blocked the roads to the town of Fada N'gourma with tanks. The previous week, members of the Presidential Guard charged with the protection of Compaore fired their weapons in the capital in a protest over non-payment of promised bonuses. The president briefly fled the capital, concerned for his own safety.

The military rampage prompted a counterdemonstration by shopkeepers, demanding compensation for the looting and damage caused by the soldiers. They set fire to the headquarters of Burkina Faso's ruling party, as well as ransacking state buildings in the capital.

"We are angry at the soldiers who have looted our stores, and also at the government that is doing nothing to stop the looting," a shopkeeper told Reuters.

Ouagadougou has been placed under curfew, and the local hospital reports 45 people with injuries, some with bullet wounds, as well as reported cases of rape.

A representative of an Australian mining company posted a comment in the *Wall Street Journal* describing the situation. "I'm currently in Ouagadougou, which is under curfew from 9 p.m. to 6 p.m. due to the military unrest earlier this week (shooting up the mayor's house the other night, grenades into one of the court houses, soldiers driving around firing into the air at night, etc., etc.). It is relatively minor, but a good example of how fast things can change."

There are a number of Australian companies prospecting in Burkina Faso. They include Canyon Resources, which runs the Taparko North Gold Project and the Tao Gold Project in Burkina, Golden Rim Resources, AusQuest, West African Resources, Mt. Isa Metals, Ampella Mining, Eldore Mining and Gryphon Minerals. Gold is the main attraction, but economically significant deposits of copper, silver, lead and zinc are thought to exist in what remains a relatively untapped area.

Large falls were reported in the share prices of the London-listed Avocet Mining and Cluff Gold following

the army mutiny. Both companies denied that their operations had been affected by the unrest, but the markets have clearly been alarmed by the reports coming out of Burkina Faso.

Sebastian Spio-Garbrah of DaMina Advisors in New York, which describes itself as a “frontier markets risk consulting and advisory firm—with a special focus on African markets,” expressed Western concerns at the instability in Burkina Faso.

“The North African people’s revolution has finally arrived in West Africa,” he said. “Compaore fits the Ben Ali, Mubarak model—a pro-Western, anti-democratic, former military officer, who took office under suspicious circumstances.”

“The implications of Compaore’s overthrow for Guinean and Ivorian stability will be enormous,” Spio-Garbrah said.

The army mutiny appears to have died down for the time being, with Compaore promising to pay all outstanding allowances.

Student protests have continued since the death February 20 of their leader Justin Zongo. Students claim Zongo was beaten to death whilst held in custody by the police. The authorities claim he died from meningitis, a disease that has killed hundreds in periodic epidemics. Four students were killed in the protests after Zongo’s death.

Schools and universities have now been closed, and students have stepped up their demands from calling for Justice for Justin, to a statement from the “Youth of the Central-West Region” that calls for the removal of the Compaore regime.

Students set fire to government buildings in Koudougou, 140 kilometres west of the capital, earlier this week.

Despite its poverty, Burkina’s economy has been growing rapidly, driven by the rising price of minerals. This growth has benefited a tiny elite in Ouagadougou and Western investors. The increase in the prices of the country’s main commodities, gold and cotton, is expected to give a growth rate this year of 5.2 percent according to the IMF, down from the 7.9 percent of 2010 but more than the 3.2 percent of 2009.

Compaore seized power in an army coup in 1987. He was a close aide to the previous incumbent, Thomas Sankara, whom he allegedly executed—the “suspicious circumstance” referred to by DaMina Advisors.

Sankara had seized power in an earlier coup in 1983, the fourth coup since the country, previously called Upper

Volta and part of French West Africa, became independent in 1960. Sankara’s policy of “non-alignment” had meant closer ties with Ghana and Libya, and leaning to some degree on the Soviet Union against the West. Compaore rejected Soviet ties and accepted the Western domination of the IMF-World Bank, bringing in a programme of privatisation and austerity in the 1990s.

As with Ben-Ali and Mubarak, the Western powers, especially France, were prepared to back Compaore’s oppressive and corrupt regime, as a centre of “stability” in the region. The murder of journalist Norbert Zongo in 1998, who challenged the regime’s corruption, was condoned. Compaore also escaped prosecution for war crimes in Sierra Leone, despite working closely with ex-Liberian leader Charles Taylor—allegedly exporting diamonds mined by militias backed by Taylor and importing armaments in exchange. Taylor has been on trial at The Hague since 2006.

Compaore intervened in the recent conflicts in Guinea and Togo, posing as a “statesman” trusted by the West. Although officially denied, Burkina Faso provided support to the forces of pro-Western President Alassane Ouattara in the Ivory Coast. Yet it may be that Paris is ready for regime change in Burkina Faso.

The South African Institute for Security Studies has made an assessment of the situation in Burkina Faso. “Protests by members of the Presidential Guard signify that there are major developments looming in Burkina Faso,” it states, “and that tensions in the governance of the country are barely being appeased.”

The South African analysts point to a number of respects in which the fate of this tiny country hangs on international factors. “The contextual problems facing the Compaore regime are further beset by numerous external dilemmas, such as a re-assertive France that played a palpable role in resolving the Ivorian crisis and conflict, as well as Compaore’s past links with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, which are contributing to discrediting his regime. Compaore’s rule is also tainted by allegations of his involvement in the various wars in West Africa.”



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