

Insurgent Gabon soldiers shot dead in foiled coup attempt

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On Monday morning, several soldiers from the Gabonese army stormed the state-owned radio station in the capital city Libreville. After seizing control of the station's operations, the coup leader, Lt. Obiang Ondo Kelly, broadcast a statement. After declaring that the military had overthrown the government, Kelly announced a "National Restoration Council."

A video clip circulated showing the insurgent soldiers inside the radio station and two armed men dressed in military fatigues generally worn by junior officers in the Gabonese army standing behind Lt. Kelly, who was seated before a microphone.

Reading the statement, Lt. Kelly appealed to listeners: "If you are eating, stop; if you are having a drink, stop; if you are sleeping, wake up. Wake up your neighbours... rise up as one and take control of the street."

Kelly stated on air that the rebel faction represented the Patriotic Movement of the Defence and Security Forces of Gabon, and specifically called on Gabonese youth to "take charge of their destiny." He made a further overture to the Gabonese military, calling on soldiers to take control of transportation systems, armament reserves and airports, in the "interests of the nation."

Gabon's President Ali Bongo Ondimba was out of the country during the coup attempt, receiving medical treatment in Morocco. Ondimba has been hospitalized since October after suffering a stroke, when he left the country to attend a conference in Saudi Arabia. The insurgent soldiers appeared to be taking advantage of the president's absence.

Minutes after the takeover of the radio station, government troops poured into the streets, accompanied by tanks and armored vehicles, and stormed the radio station. A volley of shots rang out before the

government declared that it had routed the coup plotters and restored order.

In the first moments of hearing the broadcast, several youth in Libreville took to the streets in support of the coup and set a car and tires on fire. Internet was cut off, with electricity cut in some areas of the city, and the government imposed a curfew over Libreville. In addition, Gabon closed off the border with Cameroon, in effect stopping trade between the two countries.

One insurgent was killed at the radio station, while others surrendered. Lt. Kelly fled, and a short time later, he was shot dead while hiding in a house. Government spokesman Guy-Bertrand Mapangou told the media that the government was investigating the group's motives.

The coup attempt takes place amid increased political tensions in the region, particular in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where an announcement of a result in the disputed election contest to name a successor to President Joseph Kabila has been delayed indefinitely.

Notably, the coup attempt occurred mere days after the Trump administration deployed 80 troops to Gabon for the purpose of "protecting US assets in the event of violent demonstrations" arising from the Congolese election.

France also maintains a permanent military presence in the country, with nearly 1,000 troops and an air detachment located at Camp de Gaulle adjacent to the airport in Libreville.

Gabon is a tiny country in Western Africa with a population of 1.5 million and a government that is run by a dynastic elite. The Bongo family has held power in Libreville for more than a half a century, beginning with the installment of Omar Bongo as president in 1967 by French president Charles de Gaulle. With

Omar Bongo at the helm, French imperialism sought to maintain its economic interests in its former colony after Gabon's independence in 1960.

Omar Bongo remained in power for the next 42 years until his death at age 73 in 2009. His rule was characterized by nepotism, corruption and the enrichment of a tiny layer of elites who carved up Gabon's vast oil and gas deposits, along with significant resources of uranium, minerals and precious gems, giving extraction contracts to Western companies. While this parasitic elite enriched itself, it came at the expense of the Gabonese masses, who experienced social misery.

In an election marred by irregularities and fraud, Bongo's son Ali Bongo Ondimba was elected president in 2009. The poll was met with social unrest, with protesters pouring into the streets of the capital in anger at such a blatant display of dynastic succession. For its part, the incoming Bongo administration violently cracked down on the protests, with security forces swarming into the streets of Libreville, firing tear gas, beating protesters, and carrying out mass arrests.

In 2016, social unrest again rocked the country when Ondimba was reelected once again amid widespread allegations of irregularities in the tally. More than 1000 were arrested and 17 people killed, with scores injured in the ensuing police crackdown.

In recent years, the Bongo dynasty has come under fire from Washington and Europe following the release in 2010 of a US Embassy cable from Wikileaks documenting the embezzlement of millions of dollars from the Bank of Central African States which Bongo funneled to political supporters in France of then French president Nicolas Sarkozy.

For its part France was from the start opposed to an Ondimba government, and during the Bush administration, Omar Bongo remarked to then US Ambassador R. Barrie Walkley, "The French don't like my son."

While it is unknown whether Washington or Europe were behind the coup attempt, there are indications of a falling out of relations in recent years between Washington and the Bongo regime, which had enjoyed years as a subservient partner of US interests. In 2010, a US Senate report documented serious crimes committed by the Bongo government, including election fraud and corruption.

According to the report, the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations highlighted that Omar and Ali Bongo have amassed "substantial wealth while in office, amid the extreme poverty of its citizens."

The Senate report is a completely hypocritical and cynical whitewash of Washington's criminal involvement. The Bongo dynasty served for years as a pliant government carrying out the dictates of American capitalism in Gabon. Highlighting this, in 2010 then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed the importance of Gabon and called Ondimba "a valued partner."

Speaking to the media regarding the attempted coup, a spokesman for United States Africa Command (US AFRICOM) issued a complete denial that American troops stationed at Libreville had any involvement in the coup attempt, and further denied that American forces participated in the operation to restore order.

Notably significant is AFRICOM's close relationship with the Gabonese military, in particular through several training and readiness exercises conducted in the country over the last decade, which leave little doubt to the predatory aims of the Pentagon.

In 2017, AFRICOM held training exercise Judicious Activation in the country, consisting of training given to Gabonese troops in establishing a short-term forward operating base from which military forces could mount an attack and set up logistics in order to sustain forces in deployments across the region.

Considering the vast scale and reach of AFRICOM's operations extending across the African continent, it can be stated with certainty that Washington is keeping a watchful eye over the political turmoil in Gabon and will intervene at a moment's notice if American economic interests come under threat.



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