

Military regime massacres protestors in Guinea

By Ann Talbot
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Repression continues in the aftermath of the massacre of an estimated 157 people attending an opposition rally outside a football stadium in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, on Monday. Eyewitnesses reported that troops bayoneted fleeing demonstrators. Soldiers are said to have publicly raped women.

“The military is going into districts, looting goods and raping women,” said Mamadi Kaba, the head of the Guinean branch of the African Encounter for the Defence of Human Rights (RADDHO), speaking to AFP.

Opposition leaders in the West African country have been arrested, and scores of protestors were taken away in military trucks. There are reported to be military checkpoints across Conakry.

An estimated 50,000 people had gathered at the stadium following reports that Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, head of the military regime that has run Guinea since December 2008, would stand in elections planned for January 2010. Camara has previously said that he would not run for president.

The demonstration followed calls from the Obama administration in the United States for Camara to step down. Speaking at the United Nations Human Rights Council, US Chargé d’Affaires Douglas Griffiths said that his government could not remain indifferent “when constitutional and democratic systems are undermined or overthrown outright.”

The US has only just rejoined the Human Rights Council under President Obama. It boycotted the organisation under his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Presidents Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal had previously visited Guinea to convey the same message. The visit from the two heads of state represented a concerted approach from the Western powers—Sirleaf is dependent on the

US and Wade is close to France.

France, the former colonial power, immediately announced that it was cutting military aid to Guinea. It has maintained relations with the country, despite condemning Camara’s coup, and has been involved in training the army.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said that the European Union would meet to consider “additional measures, particularly against individuals, that could be taken swiftly,” following the bloody suppression of the demonstration.

Speaking from New York, Alpha Condé, who heads the opposition Rally for the People of Guinea, pledged to “mobilise the people” and said that the demonstrations would continue despite the killings.

Condé initially welcomed the coup that brought Camara to power, declaring it was the action of “patriots.”

He was imprisoned under the former president, Lansana Conté, who seized power after the death of the country’s first post-independence ruler, President Ahmed Sekou Touré, in 1984.

Under 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 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 next 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.

America's position in Africa has suffered from the debacle in Iraq. 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.

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