

AFRICA CONFIDENTIAL

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Mr. Taylor's West Africa

Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Britain and the USA believe that Liberian President Charles Taylor has trained and armed the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front. Nothing could be further from the truth says Taylor but his fellow West African leaders find him unconvincing and alarming.

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Central Africa's schism

Few take seriously President Nujoma's claims that a ceasefire in the Congo-Kinshasa war could be signed within a fortnight but there are growing signs that Kabila's foreign backers, beset by domestic problems, are looking for a face-saving exit.

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Backstabbing for the succession is getting more vicious among barons of the ruling Adema coalition although few doubt that it will easily win the 2002 elections.

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The UN's Minurca deployment is supposed to monitor CAR's questionable elections. Yet it can't do much about Patassé's military alliances designed to forestall any challenges from his opponents.

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Political chemistry; hornets' nest; autre entente; Abidjan's Anglos.

SIERRA LEONE

No surrender, no deal

President Kabbah has narrowly missed being overthrown again and still lacks a political strategy to deal with the RUF rebellion

Prospects for a political solution to Sierra Leone's rebel war seem to have perished along with the more than 2,000 civilians officially reckoned to have been killed in the Revolutionary United Front's assault on Freetown. Indeed, local sources say the death toll could be nearer 8,000 (at the height of the fighting 550 bodies were cremated on one day) and that excludes the current round of revenge killings and summary executions by the Kamajor hunter-militias and soldiers from the West African peacekeeping force, Ecomog.

While many Westerners and expatriate Sierra Leoneans argue that the RUF's brutal assault on Freetown and operations in the diamond-rich eastern region make negotiations unavoidable for President **Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's** government, the mood inside the country has hardened. 'No surrender, no negotiations' is the view on the Freetown streets, even among those who a month ago were pushing for a dialogue with RUF leaders and a pardon for leader **Foday Sankoh**, who was convicted of treason in October and is now held under **Nigerian** guard in Conakry, **Guinea**.

In Freetown, politicians have taken to walking around in army fatigues and toting guns, vowing vengeance against the RUF; perversely, the RUF assault may have helped the credibility of the Kabbah government, and the Kamajor and Civil Defence militias which are the people's last backstop against the RUF rebels. This time, with a few exceptions - such as the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party parliamentary leader, **Sana Marrah** - most of the government resisted the temptation to run when the RUF invaded Freetown. Politicians such as Energy Minister **Thaimu Bangura** and Trade and Industry Minister **Allie Bangura**, who had been advocating a political strategy to end the war, have now joined hawks such as Foreign Minister **James Jonah** and Information Minister **Julius Spencer**.

Crossed lines

For now, the determination of the predominantly Nigerian Ecomog forces matters most. Their commanding officers appear to have taken the RUF assault as a personal slight. Another problem is the apparently confused lines of communication between Nigeria's most senior officers: Ecomog Force Commander Major General **Timothy Shelpidi**, Sierra Leone Task Force Commander Brigadier Gen. **Ahmed Ahmadu** and the Chief of Defence Staff of the (virtually non-existent) Sierra Leone Army (SLA), Brig. Gen. **Maxwell Khobe**. Of the three, Khobe has the most hands-on experience in Sierra Leone but was overruled by the other two more senior officers.

Khobe's other problem was the loyalty of his Sierra Leonean forces. He had some 3,000 Sierra Leonean troops under his command, mainly drawn from forces which had surrendered to Ecomog after the West African force had dislodged Maj. **Johnny-Paul Koroma's** junta in Freetown last February (AC Vol 39 Nos 3 & 4). Khobe had warned in an address in Lungi in early December that divided loyalties among the SLA troops under his command was crippling anti-RUF operations. As the problem of SLA collaboration with rebels worsened, Ecomog was forced to withdraw from strategic towns in the interior such as Makeni. There also appeared to be critical failures of intelligence and security among some of Ecomog's senior officers.

The involvement of some Nigerian officers in diamond-mining operations in the east did not just distract them from peace-keeping operations and frustrate their troops (whose pay was months in arrears) but also caused major security breaches. Several clandestine RUF militants, male and female, offered their services to the Nigerian officers in their diamond-mining operations as a means of gathering information about Ecomog troop deployments.

Just as serious were the divisions within Kabbah's government over how to combat the RUF's growing fire power for four months prior to the RUF's near capture of Freetown on 6 January, reports had been circulating among ministers warning of such an operation. But the cabinet's decision-making was paralysed by its lack of influence over Ecomog on security issues, together with its generalised distrust of local militias such as the Kamajors and Civil Defence Force. Ministers widely

West Africa according to Mr. Taylor

Among others, **Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Britain** and the **United States** believe **Liberian** President **Charles Taylor** has trained and armed the brutally effective rebels of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front. Nothing could be further from the truth, says Mr. Taylor at tedious length on *Radio France Internationale* and the BBC. He insists that since his landslide election victory in July 1997, he has been working tirelessly for peace, democracy and national reconciliation.

Alternative versions are circulating. Firstly, that Taylor won his election mainly because voters were intimidated by his National Patriotic Front of Liberia, amid international indifference. Secondly that his ruling circle has in fact spent the past 18 months building up an impregnable network of overlapping domestic security agencies, training and re-equipping the RUF. And thirdly that a business empire is growing up, based on smuggled Sierra Leonean diamonds, and logging companies in south-east Liberia using child labour forcibly recruited by former NPFL commanders.

Taylor recently boasted to journalists that Liberia has the most effective guerrilla fighters in Africa. His 'vision' of West Africa extends beyond a Greater Liberia, which initially incorporated large and diamond-rich chunks of eastern Sierra Leone. It seems Taylor and his key ally, **Burkina Faso's** President **Blaise Compaoré**, envisage a string of military-style states from **Niger** through to **Guinea, Guinea Bissau** and **Gambia**. They would be led by younger, authoritarian leaders, happy to build a network of informal (often criminal) business operations, and grateful to Monrovia and Ouagadougou.

Many West African leaders find Taylor unconvincing and alarming. They are less worried by his failure to bring peace and development to Liberia than by his regional ambitions. The latest diplomatic assault started on 13 January when the US government announced it had categorical evidence of Taylor's material and logistical support for the RUF, and warned him to stop. Nigerian and European Union diplomats repeated that they had clear proof that Taylor had supplied and helped to coordinate RUF operations in Sierra Leone.

The evidence, we understand, is based on intercepts of satellite and mobile telephone conversations between Taylor's office and RUF commanders, including **Sam Bockarie** (alias 'Mosquito') and military coordinators close to Compaoré. Bockarie and his commanders have also been sighted cruising around Monrovia (where he has a house), protected by Liberian security. Sierra Leone's Chief of Staff, Brigadier

Maxwell Khobe (seconded from the Nigerian army), says Taylor sent some 2,000 former NPFL fighters into Freetown alongside the RUF. Even the shadowy Brigadier **Brobleh**, who runs a freelance guerrilla outfit called *Kata Kata* (Krio for 'confusion'), reckons there were at least 500 of Taylor's men in the Freetown attack. After they have wreaked vengeance on the RUF in their own country, many Sierra Leoneans demand that 'the war should be taken to Taylor.'

Taylor's envoys are hearing the message. Liberian Vice-President **Enoch Dogolea** arrived in Accra on 14 January to tell President **Jerry Rawlings** that the US and Nigerian accusations were all lies. The Ghanaian leader bluntly told him that Taylor was stabbing West Africa in the back, adding that the US evidence indicated the close involvement in the assault on Freetown not just of Taylor but of another West African leader (Compaoré) plus a North African (**Libya's** **Moammar el Gaddafi**). Rawlings ordered all Liberian refugees out of Ghana, telling Dogolea that if Taylor could afford a war against Sierra Leone, he could afford to look after his own migrants.

Rawlings, who gaoled Taylor in Accra in the mid-1980s, takes a particularly hard line. He had difficulty persuading his soldiers to join another Ecomog (West African peacekeeping force) operation but on 18 January, 500 extra Ghanaian troops were airlifted by a US troop carrier into Wilberforce Barracks in western Freetown to join the 18,000 Ecomog troops, most of them Nigerian.

Taylor had negotiated a brief rapprochement with the late General **Sani Abacha** and Foreign Minister **Tom Ikimi**. Abuja now thinks it was a huge mistake to appease Taylor, rushing through the 1997 elections and allowing him to build up a new seurocracy. Some military sources favour much tougher action, perhaps stretching to military support for Taylor's growing band of opponents. Yet most believe that restarting the Liberian war, with its multiplicity of warring factions, would be worse than letting Taylor stew in his own juice.

Immediately threatened by Taylor's vision of West Africa is President **Lansana Conté** of Guinea, shaky after winning a rigged election. Up in Liberia's north-east, **Ahmed Touré**, son of Guinea's first President **Ahmed Sekou Touré**, is assembling and training a rebel force helped by Liberian and Burkinabè soldiers. In turn, Conté is happy to accommodate anti-Taylor forces on his eastern borders. Now that Taylor's enemies include Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, some of his fellow Liberians may be emboldened again to turn their fire on the man who claims to be West Africa's greatest guerrilla leader.

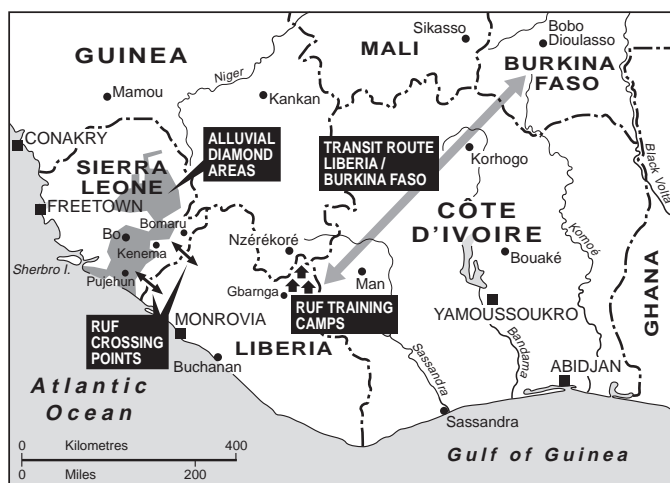
regard the Kamajors as a vehicle for Deputy Defence Minister **Sam Hinga Norman's** own political ambitions and so were reluctant to boost and update their firepower.

However, the speed of the RUF advance across Freetown in the week-ending 9 January surprised everyone. Within four days, on 6-10 January, RUF forces had captured all of eastern and central Freetown and about 70 per cent of the west of the city. The operation was a replica of Operation Octopus, the 1995 invasion of Monrovia by **Charles Taylor** and his National Patriotic Front of **Liberia**. For months before, RUF forces and their mercenary allies had been infiltrating Freetown and sneaking in weaponry and supplies past the poorly run check points, easily circumventing the main Ecomog checkpoint at Kossoh town, some twelve miles from the centre on the eastern route in.

The Ecomog counter-offensive, which got under way on 7 January, was codenamed 'Death before dishonour' in a bid to stiffen the poor morale of Nigeria's troops, who lacked both enthusiasm for a dangerous mission and respect for many senior officers. Within a week, Ecomog had dislodged the RUF from most

of its strategic positions, such as State House, but were not able to forestall the rebels' scorched earth tactics. One of our correspondents counted 500 buildings burned to ashes in central Freetown: the destroyed structures include the **Korean**-built City Hall, the famous Central Prison at Pademba Road, the headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department, Central Police station, Defence Ministry (close to State House) and the **British**-built Big Market dating back to 1878.

By 19 January, Ecomog claimed total control of Freetown, including the Queen Elizabeth docks and the Kissy suburb. And Ecomog commander Shelpidi spoke optimistically of encircling the remaining rebel enclaves on the fringes of the capital, having inflicted a devastating blow on the RUF command structure. Khobe says the RUF will be crippled by the loss of four of its most effective commanders: Brig. '**Saj**' **Musa**, Col. **Aka Atim**, Col. '**Five Five**' **Sesay** and Col. **Jibril Massaquoi**. He also reported substantial progress against the RUF in the diamond areas where Ecomog had regained control in Kenema, Bo and Pujehun, but conceded that half of Kono District and all of Kailahun District



were still in rebel hands.

Aside from the military imperatives which will remain Ecomog's domain for the next year at least, the government immediately has to address a devastating emergency: some 20,000 Freetonians, evacuated from the east of the city, have crowded into the National Stadium. The arrival in Freetown of British vessel 'HMS Norfolk' on 18 January has helped to ease the crisis, as did the arrival of an Italian cargo ship the following day with emergency rice supplies.

HMS Norfolk is also giving some back-up support to Ecomog in terms of intelligence and reconnaissance capacity. We hear that British Foreign Minister **Robin Cook** will argue for an immediate lifting of the arms embargo against Nigeria at a meeting of European foreign ministers on 25 January. That, together with the battle plans of Ecomog commanders in Freetown, presages a major push against the RUF in the coming months. Out of that will come pressure for a complete restructuring of Sierra Leone's military. Only when President Kabbah's government has its own army will it be inclined to reopen negotiations with the RUF rebels.

● In the middle of the latest crisis in Sierra Leone, we heard the tragic news of the death of academic and writer **Stephen Riley**, a former lecturer at Freetown's Fourah Bay College. He will be much missed by his students and readers of *Africa Confidential*.

CONGO-KINSHASA

Central Africa's schism

Kabila is determined to fight on but his foreign backers are looking for an exit

'Peace in our time' was the message emerging from the 18 January Windhoek summit on the Congo-Kinshasa war. Yet sadly, President **Sam Nujoma's** assurances of a new era of regional peace and the signing of a ceasefire in Lusaka within two weeks lacks much credibility. The substantive talks in Windhoek lasted just two hours, and leaders of the main rebel grouping, the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*, were excluded from the discussions again. The strongest grounds for optimism about a ceasefire of sorts are that the conflict's five main external backers (all under growing internal pressure) want a face-saving way out. That may help a de-escalation of the war and a phased withdrawal of some foreign troops (Angola has already substantially wound down its troop deployments) without pushing forward an agreement between President **Laurent-Désiré Kabila** and his armed opponents.

A chink of light flickered at the beginning of the year when Kabila said he was willing to talk to the rebels. This was the first time he had conceded that his regime faced a genuine internal rebellion rather than an invasion by **Rwandan** and **Ugandan** forces. But by 16 January, Kabila had rescinded the offer. 'I will never meet the rebels', he told a press conference in Lubumbashi. He added: 'They are puppets. If they come here, they will be killed.' With these words Kabila closed the door to negotiations. His determination to do just that had caused the cancellation of a regional conference on the war, which was to have been organised that same day by the Southern African Development Community. Its chairman, President **Frederick Chiluba** of **Zambia**, made the excuse that its members - 15 ministers of defence and of foreign affairs, including **Gabon's** - needed more time for preparation.

Compromise is what the parties to the conflict sorely need. A victory for either side (with their foreign allies) is increasingly improbable. Kabila's Angolan allies are in deep trouble, given the startling success of the rebel *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*, which has retaken almost all the territory it had lost to the government since the Lusaka accords in November 1994. Since Luanda's protégé in **Congo-Brazzaville**, General **Denis Sassou-Nguesso**, is also threatened, Angola has reduced its force in Congo-K to 2,500 men. A tumbling oil price and growing concerns about national security are eating into President **José Eduardo dos Santos'** ambitions to be the regional security manager for the Congo basin.

Moving Mugabe

The pro-Kabila alliance must therefore rely heavily upon the 8,000 - 10,000 **Zimbabwean** troops now deployed. Yet President **Robert Mugabe** faces opposition to the deployment both from the employers' federation and from the trade unions in Zimbabwe, whose unity on this issue is quietly welcomed by the donor governments, which have frozen the flow of aid - although, in December, those same donors pledged US\$2.2 billion for Uganda. President **Yoweri Museveni's** government has at least said it disapproves of corruption, and admitted that it is worried about its part in the Congo war.

The military situation is confused. In Katanga the rebel forces have advanced and taken Pweto on the Zambian border. They control Nyunzu, 95 kilometres from Lubumbashi, which - according to sources close to their general staff - they intend to attack shortly. One indicator that an offensive may be due is the presence of the chief rebel strategist, **James Kabare**, formerly Kabila's chief of staff, who has been out of action for several months because of an injury.

Elsewhere the rival armies have advanced through each others' front lines, deep into each others' territory. In late December the rebels captured Moba town on Lake Tanganyika; Kabila's *Forces Armées Congolaises*, with Zimbabwean support, promptly bypassed the rebels' defences and shelled the town. On the central front the rebels consolidated their positions in mid-January, at Kalule in Manyema province and at Kongolo in North Katanga, preparing an offensive against Mbuji-Mayi, the capital both of Eastern Kasai and of the diamond trade.

In Equateur province, soldiers who used to serve in **Mobutu Sese Seko's** army have been enlisted by the *Mouvement de Libération du Congo*, a rebel group formed in December, which is conducting an offensive with Ugandan help. The MLC is led by **Jean-Pierre Bemba**, son of **Bemba Saolona**, who in Mobutu's time was head of the *Association Nationale des Entreprises du Zaïre*. Its offensive is aimed at Mobutu's home town of Gbadolite, with its 3,000-metre

runway, suitable for large jets. In early January Bemba's forces almost captured Zongo, a town just across the Oubangui river from Bangui, capital of the **Central African Republic** (see CAR feature). Yet Bemba's soldiers too have suffered setbacks. Also in January, **Chadian** soldiers and Kabila's *kidogos* (boy soldiers, said by eyewitnesses to be often high on marijuana) recaptured Businga and Gemena, small towns which had been bombed in advance by Antonov aircraft piloted - according to the **France**-Congo network, based in Lyons - by **Sudanese**. During its counter-offensive, Kabila's army massacred 120 people at Zongo and 200 at Libenge.

The rebels lost control of Fizi town, in the mountains near Uvira in South Kivu. It was taken by Bembe resistance fighters commanded by Colonel **Njabiola**, formerly of Mobutu's army, in alliance with Hutu militiamen from **Burundi**'s *Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie*. The confusion helps explain the massacre, apparently by rebel forces, of 500 civilians in Makobola village, some 15 km. from Uvira; this was a reprisal against Bembe 'MaiMai' fighters who, during the week of 9-16 January, mounted an assault on Bukavu, near the **Rwanda** border, which the rebels held off with difficulty.

Bitter rivalry has broken out within the rebel leadership, between the Mobutists and the 'renovateurs' who are worried about the continuing unpopularity of the ex-Mobutists. **Vincent de Paul Lunda Bululu**, who served as prime minister under Mobutu, denounced the New Year speech given by **Ernest Wamba dia Wamba**, the RCD's leader and a renovator. Other prominent renovators are **Michel Tshibuabua**, an advisor to the RCD's 'foreign minister', **Bizima Karaha**; **Willy Mishiki**, a Nandi chief who left the MaiMai to join the RCD; and **Jean-François David**, a businessman who has a Congolese passport, a French passport, and a **Haitian** diplomatic passport. The renovators, who have collected 2,000 signatures from supporters, are also backed by **Arthur Z'Ahidi Ngoma**, a vice-president of the RCD, and **Deogratias Bugera**, a Congolese Tutsi who was previously number two in Kabila's government.

Renovating the RCD

The renovators argue that the RCD needs a wider base, with control of its steering committee. They would like to legitimise the rebellion, by organising local elections wherever possible. Wamba dia Wamba's speech attacked the RCD's Mobutists, saying: 'We reaffirm our militant stand against these former wreckers of the nation, who want to take the RCD hostage.' He made a similar appeal to the rebel army, praising the soldiers' courage, deploring their lack of equipment, blaming the shortages on the Mobutists, and promising to smash the guilty men. The split in the RCD is so deep that the parties have asked their Rwandan and Ugandan allies to arbitrate. It has been agreed to set up two commissions, to restructure the movement and bring the renovators back into full membership. The show of disunity comes as Bemba's MLC is emerging as a credible new focus for the anti-Kabila forces.

For Kabila, things are even harder. Some of his best troops are the 'former Katangese gendarmes', who reckon they did not get their fair share of the loot after helping Kabila to win his victory in May 1997. Some of them are threatening to go home to Angola, whose army wants them to re-enlist in the fight against **Jonas Savimbi** and UNITA; the Angolan army may yet remove Kabila's reserve of 6,000 ex-gendarmes, now in Viana camp, close to Luanda.

The economy is falling apart. Kabila tries to finance his war effort by selling forestry concessions to companies from **Malaysia**,

Argentina and **Egypt**. Former members of the Federation of Congolese Enterprises (FEC) think he is crazy to have made Decree 177, banning transactions in dollars. They think Decree 179 even worse; it compels diamond operators to sell their gems on the Congolese Precious Metals Exchange, which is run by an **Israeli** citizen, **Golan Ramy**. The immediate effect will be to encourage clandestine mining and unauthorised sales, by dealers who do not wish to be landed with unconvertible currency.

Arresting Masangu

The regime's remaining financial credibility was finished off by the arrest on 14 January of the Governor of the Central Bank of Congo, **Jean-Claude Masangu**. His offences were to oppose Decrees 177 and 179, and to fail to make timely payment of \$17 million due to an account held by the Zimbabwean army. Masangu's arrest immediately caused the Congolese franc to fall from 3.5 to 5 francs per dollar. Although Masangu and his deputy were released on 19 January, their future role is uncertain; Masangu was one of the few remaining internationally reputable figures in Kabila's regime. Kabila is also reported to have quarrelled with his key strategist, Minister in the President's Office **Pierre-Victor Mpyo**. The shortage of hard currency, the ban on using dollars, and the failure to control the price of petrol, have caused a fuel shortage in Kinshasa, where there have been several demonstrations in protest. Food is short in the capital, and prices have soared.

On the rebel side, too, local economies are under heavy pressure. The general disenchantment with the leadership on both sides is increasing support for **Etienne Tshisekedi**, leader of the *Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social*, who wants negotiations between all parties, and the withdrawal of all foreign troops. But unless one side or the other wins outright, negotiations and reconciliation look improbable. The rebels have almost ruled out a deal with Kabila, by accusing him of genocide, after the anti-Tutsi pogroms in Kinshasa and the massacres of Banyamulenge in South Kivu. Government leaders in turn accuse the rebels of genocide, since the massacres at Kasika and Makobola, also in South Kivu.

Kabila himself, criticised in Kinshasa for incompetence and for fostering the hold on power of the 'Katanga mafia', is promoting ever more virulent notions of a 'Tutsi plot'. Anti-Tutsi propaganda has been elaborated into the regime's official ideology, in a style that recalls **Adolf Hitler**'s campaign against the Jews. At Congo-Kinshasa's embassy in Brussels in December, Kabila publicly called the Tutsi 'slave-traders'; he described Rwanda's Vice-President, General **Paul Kagame**, as a sadist and a blood-drinker, and claimed that President Museveni had knowingly sent 1,500 HIV-positive soldiers to infect Congolese women.

The territory of Congo has over the past six months become de facto divided into two spheres of influence: one Ugandan-Rwandan, the other Angolan-Zimbabwean. Journalists already speak of a 'frontier' east of Mbuji-Mayi. None of the neighbouring, and warring, governments have actually proposed annexing any part of Congo - and the legal problems would be huge.

But in reality the nation is becoming two states, a process that an externally-negotiated ceasefire would do little to halt. The best hope is that if the main foreign backers withdraw from the conflict, pressure might increase on both Kabila and his opponents to seek a political settlement through the medium of a regional conference addressing economic, political and security concerns. For the past three years, France has been pushing for just such a conference; it may be that this time its proposals will get a better reception.

MALI

Trial and error

Faction fighting and an embarrassing dictator pose problems for the President

Backstabbing is getting more vicious among barons of the ruling *Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali* (Adema). Few doubt that Adema will win the presidential election in 2002 by a walk-over. The fight within the ruling party is about who will be its flag-bearer to succeed President **Alpha Oumar Konaré** (AC Vol 39 No 16).

The ramshackle *Coordination des Partis Politiques de l'Opposition* (Coppo) is badly split along lines of age and personal enmity, not to mention political strategy. Opposition veterans, including **Mohammed Lamine Traoré** of the *Mouvement pour l'Indépendance, la Renaissance et l'Intégration Africaine* (MIRIA), a left-wing breakaway from Adema, accuse it of establishing a new one-party state since the near-total opposition boycott of the botched 1997 elections. Others complain that this argument now alienates potential voters. October saw the end of the mandate of the controversial *Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante*, accused by opposition figures of corruption and nepotism: pessimists wonder what will take its place, with elections in rural communes

due in April. Coppo's doyen **Almamy Sylla**, of the hopelessly split *Rassemblement pour la Démocratie et le Progrès*, recently dismissed government initiatives meant to show progress on accountability as 'folklore'.

Pressure from Konaré for a national forum on electoral and constitutional changes has led to behind-the-scenes contacts between the high commands of Adema and Coppo. Yet the Adema barons' main concern is to secure a credible mandate for Konaré's successor in 2002. The turnout in 1997 was dismal - a point noted by Konaré's **Burkinabè** counterpart **Blaise Compaoré**, who pulled out the stops in November to secure a poll turnout near 60 per cent.

Adema is far from united. At the municipal elections in April 1998 (also boycotted by Coppo parties) Adema dissidents mounted their own electoral lists against local party establishments. The party elite has since split painfully down the middle over the recently created mayorship of Bamako, a key kingmaking post. **Boubacar Bâ**, Mayor of Bamako's Commune 5, is a close political ally of both *Assemblée Nationale* speaker **Aly Nouhoum Diallo** and Prime Minister (and Adema President) **Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta**. Konaré and his presidential strategists, however, fearing Diallo's growing influence, backed Adema Secretary General **Iba N'Diaye** against Bâ. Intimidated and fearing damage to his own presidential prospects, Keïta also stopped supporting Bâ, whose municipal council was debarred from office after N'Diaye got the nod. Recriminations will continue, especially if Keïta follows up

Many complaints, some satisfaction

The 144 employees of Timbuktu airport wrote to complain that their pay arrived late. They couldn't afford to travel across the desert and mountains to the capital, Bamako, to read their grievances aloud. But Justice Minister **Diabaté Hamidou** duly read their letter.

Sergeant (retired) **Cheick Coulibaly** had a grievance going back 30 years: he wanted compensation for five years spent doing hard labour because his political views did not match the then government's. Dressed in a white bubu and cap, he read his letter directly to Armed Forces and Veterans Minister **Mohamed Salia Sokona**.

Coulibaly was one of forty-odd personal petitioners to last month's EID. Here, this refers not to a Muslim festival but to the five-year-old *Espace d'Interpellation Démocratique* (Forum for Democratic Petitions), partly modelled on the direct democracy of old-time tribal councils. Once a year (this time on 10 December, the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), Malians can submit their grievances directly to Premier **Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta** and his entire cabinet. Since 80 per cent of Malians do not know how to read, the EID is publicised on the radio in all 13 official languages. Last year, 269 people sent letters of complaint; 98 were invited to Bamako and over 40 read their letters aloud.

One woman complained of a badly performed circumcision. A young man had been maltreated in prison. A father of four couldn't afford CFA 7,500 (US\$15) per child for school enrolment. A medical student had been forgotten by the government while on a scholarship in Prague and left to fight for his life with skinheads. A man had been fired after a visiting **American** filed a sexual harassment charge. First wives spoke of the rights granted to second and third wives. And almost every sector of government was addressed.

Each complaint is limited to five minutes but the live broadcast of the EID - brightened by cheers and jeers, songs and skits - lasts 15 hours, for all of which a good proportion of the country's ten million citizens stay glued to the state television channel ORTM. For the benefit of foreign observers, most complaints are made in French, with many others in the most widespread language, Bambara. Many

citizens attend the **Chinese**-built Hall of Congress in colourful bubus, often without shoes. Male ministers wear European grey suits and ties, with the two female ministers (of Communication and Family) in bright traditional dress.

After the complaints have been read, the appropriate ministers respond; they have already seen all the letters and their prepared responses often sound perfunctory and bureaucratic. But the replies are officially recorded and may be reviewed the following year. The letter from the 144 Timbuktu airport employees is their second - last year's ministerial promise was presumably ignored.

Opposition leaders from far left to far right refuse to attend, mocking the EID as '*Espace d'Intoxication Démagogique*' (Forum for Demagogic Intoxication). They claim that the only grievances considered are those for which there is a ready answer and that ministers don't keep their promises. They call the EID an expensive public relations ploy designed to hide corruption and attract outside approval (aid accounts for 20 percent of the national budget).

Proceedings are observed by an honorary jury, which this time included **Laurence Ndadayé**, widow of **Burundi's** slain President **Melchior Ndadayé**, and guests from **Britain, France, Germany** and the International League for Human Rights, together with Malians representing women's, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant groups. After the public hearings, the jury makes policy recommendations; its ten proposals in December included increasing the education and health budgets, expediting laws against female circumcision (which **Senegal** has just banned) and improving gaols. In six months, some jurors will be invited back to evaluate progress. The 1997 jury made twelve recommendations and was impressed by the government's efforts.

Promises made to individuals often go unfulfilled. The Timbuktu workers may not get paid vacations and Sgt. Coulibaly may have to do without compensation, despite the Minister's promise that his case would be examined. Nevertheless, Mali is the only country in the world to risk an EID, which may explain why Timbuktu's airport workers stay at their jobs even when their pay fails to arrive.

the purge at a party congress that must be held by April. High-profile victims already include Diallo's deputy at the Assembly, **Bocar Sall**, and veteran fixer **Abderahamane Niang**.

Against this background, the on-off trial since October for 'economic crimes' of former dictator **Moussa Traoré** has proved a fiasco. On 12 January, Traoré, his wife **Mariam** (née Cissoko) and relative **Douah Abraham 'Ramos' Cissoko**, who was in charge of customs revenue before 1991, were condemned to death. Traoré's last Finance Minister, **Tiénan Coulibaly**, and two others, including a former Interior Minister, General **Sekou Ly**, were acquitted. Questions have been asked throughout the trial, including why the authorities refused to televise proceedings: Traoré's previous 1992 trial, for his regime's part in the deaths of over 100 protesters during his overthrow in 1991, was broadcast in full. This time, the defence lawyers, including **Senegalese** human rights specialist **Magatte Seye**, boycotted the proceedings, which they described as a travesty of justice.

The media blackout is seen by ordinary *Bamakois* as recognition that the prosecution (years in preparation) was hopelessly flawed. The guilty verdicts covered embezzlement of only CFA 202 million (US\$357,000); the Traoré fortune has been estimated at up to \$2 billion. Traoré pointedly refused immediate comment on the sentence, which he adds to a death sentence passed in 1992. There is no real likelihood of execution: neither Konaré nor any conceivable successor would risk the international condemnation this would bring.

Koran-carrying Traoré

Domestic opinion, outside the more radical left-leaning student circles, would also be outraged. In the weeks preceding the start of Ramadan in mid-December, Traoré ostentatiously arrived each morning carrying a Koran. He retains considerable sympathy among the country's regional Islamic dynasties, which Konaré cannot afford to alienate further. The death sentence on Mariam reflects the danger she still poses to the government, despite being gaoled since 1991. If acquitted, she could have concentrated on reviving the Traorés' once worldwide network of contacts in favour of the only opposition party that Adema strategists still take seriously: **Choguel Maïga's** *Mouvement Patriotique pour le Renouveau*. The MPR claims direct descent from Traoré's *Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien* and Maïga was the man Adema policy-makers approached in June for secret talks with Keita on a way out of the political impasse. If the MPR deserted Coppo, the opposition alliance would probably implode. Political progressives fear a nostalgia for the Traoré era, especially in rural areas.

Adema's other tricky proposition is privatisation. Finance Minister **Soumaïla Cissé** has cracked the whip over state enterprises, including power provider *Energie du Mali*, telecoms concern Sotelma (*Société des Télécommunications du Mali*) and the newly profitable cigarette maker, Sonatam (*Société Nationale des Tabacs et Allumettes du Mali*). Cissé wants selloffs, probably to **French** buyers, in 2000. So far, he has kept his private business interests far enough away to avoid controversies like those that have at times surrounded key ministries, including that of Mining.

Cissé may hope to build a presidential political coalition around his connections at the *Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles*, the cotton parastatal often referred to as 'the state within the state'. Others in government are slow to move; these companies are the plums in the patronage game. **Vincent Bolloré**, a French magnate known as '*le Petit Prince*' for his armlock on many areas of the Franc Zone's service economy, is keen to add

Sonatam to his collection of ex-state tobacco enterprises.

Konaré and Adema are now confident that Paris will not inflict any pre-electoral dirty tricks on an administration that it has often disliked. Bad blood between Konaré and neo-Gaullists such as **Michel Dupuch**, head of the Elysée Palace's *cellule africain*, goes back at least as far as Konaré's refusal to travel to Dakar, Senegal, for French President **Jacques Chirac's** first presidential tour of Africa in July 1995. After a frustrating year for the would-be reformers of Africa policy in France's governing *Parti Socialiste*, Premier **Lionel Jospin** sees Konaré as one credible element in the new Franco-African relationship for which the PS hopes.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Dubious democracy

Election results can be fixed but it will be more difficult to contain the military fall out

On 10 January, soldiers of President **Ange-Félix Patassé's** Presidential Guard, led by General **François Djadder Bedaya**, set free **Théophile Sonny Colé**, veteran leader of the main union federation, the *Union Syndicale des Travailleurs Centrafricains*. Sonny Colé is now also coordinator of the new opposition alliance, the *Union des Forces Acquisées à la Paix et au Changement* (Union of Forces Supporting Peace and Change, UFAPC). He had been arrested the previous day for writing a tract the President called 'seditious'. Colé was beaten up during his arrest, losing two teeth and later needing stitches in his head; protest demonstrations followed.

It is widely feared that these events, immediately after the general elections of November-December and six months before the presidential poll that is due at the end of June, could lead to worse violence. The parliamentary polls - theoretically supervised by 2,000 men of the *Mission des Nations Unies en République Centrafricaine* (Minurca) - elected 109 deputies. (The previous National Assembly had only 85 members. It was presided over by **Hugues Dobozeni**, number two in Patassé's *Mouvement de Libération du Peuple Centrafricain*, MLPC, which has held power since 1993).

The results, as published by the Supreme Court and Minurca, gave the presidential party and its micro-party allies 51 seats, against 55 for the UFAPC; independents won three constituencies.

Just before the new Assembly opened, though, the MLPC (whose campaign was openly funded by **Chad, Congo-Kinshasa, Libya** and **Sudan**) won over two of the independents. The third, **Younous Sidick**, joined them after presidential supporters killed his son, an opposition activist, at the end of December. Now the '*Mouvance Présidentielle*' (Presidential Movement) had 54 seats. The UFAPC had already appointed **Abel Goumba** (73), veteran leader of the *Front Patriotique pour le Progrès*, to head the Assembly. But a few hours before parliament opened on 29 December, **Dieudonné Koudoufara** left the opposition *Parti Social Démocrate* and rejoined the presidential ranks. Now Patassé's supporters had 55 seats, the UFAPC, 54.

Disgusted by the defection of Koudoufara (who hails from Ouadda Djalé in the north-east), the PSD asked the Constitutional Court to declare the result invalid, on the grounds that all its candidates had signed a pre-electoral agreement on campaign

funding. The Court has yet to rule on the case. The opposition coalition, loudly protesting at 'le hold up' of its victory, tried to organise meetings and marches. The Presidential Guard dispersed them. Feelings ran high.

On 3 January, Patassé dismissed **Michel Gbezera Bria** as Premier and gave the job to his ex-Finance Minister, **Anicet Dologué**. His first assignment was to try to bring into government some young opposition figures from the south, to help national reconciliation ahead of the coming presidential election. Dologué, 42, is an official at the Yaounde-based *Banque des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale* (BEAC), with little experience of politics and may follow the lead of his boss, an expert fixer. More importantly, he is a nephew of **Antoine Ouanzala**, Patassé's former *Chef de Cabinet*, and comes from Ouham Pendé in the far west. He is Gonghe, the group which includes the Kare and Patassé's own Soumah Kaba peoples. On 11 January, at Patassé's instigation, the presidential deputies (now in the majority) chose the man who leads both the Gonghe and the MPLC's radical wing as President of the new Assembly instead of Goumba. This is **Luc-Apollinaire Dondon Kosnabaye**, who is also Patassé's ritual hairdresser.

Voters without borders

All significant opposition parties and politicians are in the UFAPC alliance. One of the ironies of pluralism is that (replacing the aging Goumba, who lost the previous presidential poll) the former military ruler **André Kolingba** has now been propelled into the position of leader of the opposition. The main political divide, emphasised by the rise of Dologué, Dondon and their Ouham Pendé allies, is between the 'Savaniers' of the north and the 'Riverains' of the south. Political parties are usually linked to a regional group and no significant leader stood in the multi-ethnic capital. Patassé and even the leaders of the left-wing parties stood in their home districts - Goumba in his native village of Kouango, along the Congo border east of Bangui, and **John-Paul Ngoupandé** in Dékoua, north of Sibut. Parties even get votes from their tribesfellows in neighbouring countries, many of whom cross the border to vote. At the last elections, many southern Chadians, mainly Sara and Kaba, voted MLPC, while many Congolese from Equateur, especially from the late **Mobutu Sese Seko's** Ngbandi people, voted for Kolingba's RDC.

Kolingba, representing the *Riverains*, is widely regarded as the only opposition politician with the support and credibility to go to a second round with Patassé, the *Savanier*. Moreover, Patassé knows that, if he does not win outright and the voting goes to a second round, his rival will pick up hefty support from the 'déçus de Patassé', the disappointed who backed him last time not for ethnic reasons but because they thought he might bring democracy (AC Vol 39 No 5). Democrats **Nicéphore Soglo** in **Benin** and **Albert Zafy** in **Madagascar** were both beaten in second-round votes by former dictators. To avoid that fate, Patassé is striving to ensure a first-round victory.

Patassé also risks being overthrown by the army and told *Africa Confidential* that he fears he might suffer the same treatment as did his friend **Pascal Lissouba** in **Congo-Brazzaville** at the hands of **Denis Sassou-Nguesso**. Yakoma soldiers have already mutinied three times; Kolingba is Yakoma and so are the best-trained 2,000 of the CAR's 6,000 army and security forces. Patassé has therefore formed a 3,000-strong praetorian guard of Kaba, Gbaya, Tale, Kare and Vale people from the north-west, known as 'Karako' after their base. They are backed up by ex-rebels from southern Chad, known as 'Codos Mbakara' (Sara for 'Bullet-proof Commandos'), who

formerly supported **Moïse Ketté** and the late **Frisson Laokein Bardé**, killed in June on the CAR border.

In 1996, Chad's ruler, General **Idriss Déby**, also assigned some 2,000 Chadian troops to safeguard Patassé's security (and his own); in CAR they are known as 'Ya pas la Temps' (sic) because they keep on moving. These Chadian forces are paid for by Colonel **Moammar el Gadaffi's** government.

On 18 December, the UN Security Council extended Minurca's mandate by one year; having supervised the disarming of the warring factions, it is now supposed to monitor the elections. It cannot do much about Patassé's intricate military alliances. Since 2,000 French troops left in 1998, he has signed defence agreements with Congo-K, **Nigeria** and **Libya**. Now he wants Congo-K's President **Laurent-Désiré Kabila** to help him fix up an accord with **Angola**, partly to avert the kind of bombing President Lissouba underwent in October 1997 in Congo-Brazzaville.

In 1996, Patassé signed defence pacts with both Chad and Sudan; Sudan's forces on occasion pursue Colonel **John Garang de Mabior's** Sudan People's Liberation Army right into CAR and often attack the SPLA from Mboki base in Zandeland, CAR, adjoining Congo and near Sudan. Chad and Sudan have used their accords with CAR to get themselves involved in the Congo-Kinshasa war. CAR itself repeatedly denies involvement (AC Vol 39 No 4). In early November, **Jean-Pierre Bemba's** *Mouvement de Libération du Congo*, supported by Yakoma former mutineers from the CAR army, defeated 3,000 Chadians, who were pre-positioned at Gbadolité in Ngbandi country to support Kabila's government. The Yakoma and Ngbandi belong to a single riverain group whose territory straddles the River Oubangui and so lies across the CAR-Congo border. Bemba and his supporters pursued Kabila's troops and the Chadians (who fled to Bangui), then set up positions in Zongo across the river from Bangui, in the territory of the Ngbaka, another cross-border people (See Congo Feature). Bemba is an Ngbaka from Equateur and the son of *Mobutiste* millionaire **Bemba Saolona**; Mobutu's security services relied heavily on Ngbandi and Ngbaka troops, who are now fighting alongside the rebels in Congo-K. On the CAR bank of the Oubangui, the Ngbaka are regarded as one of the *Riverain* peoples who oppose Patassé and his *Savaniers*. Both President (and Emperor) **Jean-Bedel Bokassa** and President **David Dacko** were Ngbaka.

CAR's cross-border ethnic and political alliances, and the usual political rivalry between *Riverains* and *Savaniers*, have helped involve it in Congo-K's international war, adding an extra danger to the existing instability.

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Administration: **Clare Tauben**.

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Pointers

SUDAN/IRAQ

Political chemistry

A key reason why the **United States** bombed *El Shifa* factory on 20 August (AC Vol 39 No 17) was because of its links to Iraq, *Africa Confidential* has learned. US and **British** intelligence feared the pharmaceuticals plant was a secret route by which Iraq was circumventing United Nations sanctions to import raw materials and components for its biological warfare (BW) and chemical warfare (CW) programmes. Combined with reports of weapons manufacture/storage, this triggered the attack.

In 1992, Iraqi intelligence boss **Wafiq el Samarai'i** defected to the Kurdish safe haven in northern Iraq. UN investigators and Western intelligence debriefed him. Though not immediately linked to the weapons of mass destruction programme, he knew of operations to conceal key elements from UN weapons inspectors and of how President **Saddam Hussein** had managed to buy inputs internationally. Most of his information was later verified.

El Samarai'i stated that Saddam had set up Samarra Drug Company as a front to buy materials abroad for the CW, and especially BW, programmes. He also said Samarra was the main location for hiding BW records.

Iraq had two other major front operations to buy 'dual use' goods on the world market, which could be used for civilian purposes or for manufacturing CW and BW: the Technical and Scientific Materials Imports Division (TSMID) and Agricultural Supplies Co. Modern pesticide, fertiliser or pharmaceutical plants are also normally multi-use and could be used for BW/CW production: in Western countries they are subjected to regular inspection.

For the most sensitive purchases, particularly from the USA or Europe, Iraq used Samarra Drug. In 1990, for example, Iraq cultured ten litres of ricin toxin as a BW agent. At Muthanna, this was weaponised into artillery shells and testing took place; Samarra procured the ricin. Muthanna is one of at least three dual-use establishments in Iraq where ordinary research/production also occurred.

Shifa officials publicly said they sought a manufacturing alliance with Samarra. A plant evaluation expert told us that with the UN embargo, such an alliance would not make economic (as opposed to political) sense. Shifa also had contracts to supply Iraq with drugs under the UN-agreed programme; US suspicions were aroused because Shifa negotiated the deal with Samarra. Private Sudanese air companies were contracted to fly the drugs from Khartoum directly to Samarra in Iraq. US suspicions were aroused because of Samarra's other activities.

NIGER/ALGERIA

Hornets' nest

Algerian troops raided into north-west Niger in late November, with approval and support from the government in Niamey, *Africa Confidential* has learned. Their target, in the Azaouak region (AC Vol 39 No 9), was a network set up by the *Comités de Vigilance de Tassara* (Tassara Vigilance Committees), usually referred to as '*Milices arabes*' ('Arab militias'). These are believed to send weapons and medical supplies across the border to Algeria's *Groupements* (or *Groupes*) *Islamiques Armés* (GIA). The Algerian army was probably hoping to wipe out the GIA squads which have made the Azaouak their safe haven. Four Nigerien soldiers were killed in the operation. So were a dozen GIA men; others fled towards the **Malian** border. Niger is politically and economically drained; President **Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara's** government is taking a big risk by confronting the militarily and financially powerful Islamists.

BRITAIN/FRANCE

Une autre entente

It is a reflection of how grave the region's spiralling conflicts are that Britain and France are now working more closely on Africa policy than at any time since General **Charles de Gaulle** established a base for the Free French (Resistance) in West Africa in 1940. We hear that this initiative is to be capped early this year by a joint Africa visit by Foreign Secretary **Robin Cook** and Foreign Minister **Hubert Védrine** - a diplomatic first.

This Paris-London cooperation is being driven more by Whitehall's Africanists (who have always envied the long hours that the *Quai d'Orsay* devotes to Africa compared to the short shrift the continent gets in the higher reaches of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office). It's also backed by enthusiasts in Paris who are fighting a rearguard action against a major switch of economic and diplomatic focus from Africa to the European Union.

Details of plans have emerged since the Franco-British summit in Saint-Malo on 3-4 December, attended by Cook and Védrine and premiers **Lionel Jospin** and **Tony Blair**. Both sides committed themselves to harmonising their policies in Africa, promoting debt relief and the EU tenets on human rights and good governance. They also agreed to exchange information on African developments, organise joint heads of mission conferences in Africa and promote regional integration, particularly between networks of Anglophone and Francophone countries.

As an experiment, they will establish Franco-British diplomatic missions in two African

countries where previously either London or Paris was not represented. For some months, Britain operated a mini-mission in **Burundi** next door to the French Embassy: the two cooperated extensively, sharing intelligence about arms flows and local politics. On 20 January, senior officials in the FCO's Africa Command went to Paris for discussions with colleagues at the *Quai* on the rising tide of African conflicts. They will also prepare the ground for a two-day joint meeting in London in early February on African security: countries on the agenda include **Angola**, **Congo-Brazzaville**, **Congo-Kinshasa** (AC Vol 39 No 24), **Liberia** and **Sierra Leone**.

While there is a growing consensus on Africa policy between Blair's Labour Party and Jospin's *Parti Socialiste*, news of such innovation hasn't yet persuaded the Elysée's Africa *cellule*, where would-be successors to **Jacques Foccart**, such as long-time Ambassador to **Côte d'Ivoire** **Michel Dupuch**, insist that Africa policy is best conducted at president-to-president level, through 'Big Men' and their personal envoys.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Abidjan's Anglos

Any diplomatic damage caused by the postponement of President **Henri Konan Bédié's** official visit to **Britain** (AC Vol 39 No 24) seems to have been repaired fast. Whitehall's Minister for Africa **Tony Lloyd** stopped over in Abidjan on a whistle-stop tour of West Africa in November to try to reschedule the trip for later this year. His *escale* may have helped save a major contract for a UK-based consortium considered at risk after the Bédié affair.

This was the US\$100 million development contract for the Locodjoro site in Abidjan port, an expansion including an industrial free zone, international container terminal and 'telecommunications gateway'. On 15 January, it was announced that London-based consortium Lodoco, headed by TCI Corporation and including Standard Chartered Bank, Christiani and Nielsen, OT Africa Line, Alexander Gibb and another shipping group, had won the contract.

Reinforcing British interest in Côte d'Ivoire is the London visit this month of rising political star and new Minister of Development, Planning and Programming **Tidjiane Thiam**, a 38 year-old formerly working for **American** management consultants McKinsey. He is in charge of Bédié's 'twelve great projects', which include the new port, a third bridge for Abidjan and the long overdue refurbishing and extension of the international airport.

UK companies believe that, thanks to Bédié's more even-handed policy towards *les Anglo-Saxons* (compared to his super-Francophile predecessor the late **Félix Houphouët-Boigny**), they can now make headway in **France's** business capital in Africa; Thiam's visit to London is likely to be a busy one.