

Memorandum on S. Tomé e Príncipe

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By Invitation

Introduction

The Government of São Tomé e Príncipe (STP) was overthrown in a military coup during the early hours of July 16, 2003. The group, led by the Commanding Officer of the Army Training College in STP, Major Fernando Pereira, also known as 'Cobo', executed the action. Bursts of gunfire and a series of explosions were reported in the streets of the former Portuguese colony after the coup began at 03:00 am (0400 GMT). There were no reports of casualties. The military has taken control of the central bank, the TV and radio stations, which were taken off the air, as well as the airport and other strategic installations. After securing control of these sites, the group issued a communiqué demanding that all Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament present themselves at the police headquarters.

Prime-Minister Maria das Neves was arrested along with other government ministers including Public Works Minister Joaquim Rafael Branco, who is responsible for the country's vital oil reserves; National Assembly President Dionisio Dias and Defence Minister Fernando de Trindade. Reports have been received that the Prime-Minister, Maria das Neves, was apparently hospitalised after suffering a mild heart attack during a gunfight at her home. Later reports stated that she did receive medical care and was being well looked after. The rest of the Government Ministers were held at the main army barracks in São Tomé, the capital. About 30 lawmakers were freed after being detained at police headquarters for several hours.

During the early hours of the coup, the 'Junta' refrained from communicating either its demands or clarify the reasons behind their action. Several analysts believed that this was a reflection of the fact that the coup could merely be an action taken by the armed forces (and within these, by a minority) to pressure the government to comply with some of their demands. These included a revision of the salary scales; better career prospects as well as new equipment and infrastructure. In a context of rising expectations (as a result of the expected windfall from STP's future oil exploration) and severe poverty and underdevelopment, the political climate in STP has been, at best, unstable. Early reports suggested that Portuguese Ambassador to STP, Mario de Jesus Santos, attempted a meeting with the leadership of the coup, in an effort to determine what their demands were.

However, the presence of elements of the Christian Democratic Front (FDC) alongside the leaders of the coup raised the fear that there could in fact be a political agenda behind the coup. In fact, on the afternoon of 16 July 2003 the leader of the coup, Major Fernando Pereira, issued a statement announcing that it had a programme of government for STP. In addition, the statement announced:

- The creation of a 'Military Junta for National Salvation' to be in charge of STP until early elections are held, adding that it is not the 'Junta's' objective to stay in power indefinitely;
- That the 'Junta' will govern the country in the interim period or until such time that a Government of National Unity is formed; in the meantime, the 'Junta' will consolidate and organise STP's state institutions;
- The creation of a 'State Council' to oversee the preparation of elections;
- A curfew lasting from 1900 to 0600; the reason presented for the curfew was to prevent any looting, vandalism or disturbances.

In a follow-up statement on 17 July 2003, the 'Junta' stated that Major Fernando Pereira had spoken to Nigeria's President Obasanjo on the phone and had accepted his proposal for a meeting with a Nigerian envoy. In this regard, Major Pereira gave assurances that the airport would be reopened so that the envoy's plane could land. Furthermore, the 'Junta' announced that the airport would also be re-opened for commercial air traffic, including the scheduled Air Luxor flight from Lisbon, on July 18. However, the latest information coming from the 'Junta's' ranks indicates that a late decision was made not to enter into talks with the Nigerian Envoy and not to allow them access to STP.

Reactions to the coup

A storm of international protest gathered over the events in São Tomé e Príncipe as neighbouring countries, the Africa Union, as well as the United States and the United Nations strongly condemned the one day-old coup. The common position has been that the events in STP amount to an unconstitutional change of government and that STP's constitutional legality must be restored as soon as possible.

STP Government

The coup was conducted whilst President Fradique de Menezes was attending a conference in Abuja, in neighboring Nigeria. On being informed of the coup, President Menezes expressed grave concern over the situation in his country stating that 'Africa will not attain greatness with bad governance, corruption and coups d'etat'. In relation to the extent to which this came as a surprise to the STP leader, unconfirmed reports coming out of STP point to the fact that some sort of action had been anticipated for some time. In fact, barely a few weeks ago, the government had ordered that protection to the main depot of explosives and ammunition, S. Nicolau, be strengthened.

In several interviews, the President has repeatedly called for international help to end the bloodless coup. He pleaded 'I am now making a strong appeal to all democrats,

world leaders, and African leaders to help us stop this kind of procedure'. According to sources close to President Menezes, a request has been made for military assistance and support from both the Government of Angola and the Nigerian Government. The President also made it clear that he was planning to return to his country as soon as possible.

Nigeria

In reaction to the coup, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo called on the coup leaders to return power to the democratically elected government. 'We strongly condemn this action and call on the military adventurists to hand over power', he said. In a very strongly worded statement, the Nigerian government condemned the actions of the military and called for the re-introduction of the legitimate government. According to a communiqué from Nigeria, because the Embassy of Nigeria in STP has been surrounded by soldiers loyal to the 'Junta', Nigeria will take 'appropriate' action should their representatives and or property be in danger.

In addition, Obasanjo spoke on the phone with Major Fernando Pereira. According to early reports, Major Pereira had accepted Mr Obasanjo's proposal for a meeting with a Nigerian envoy and agreed to reopen the airport so that his plane could land. In a later statement, however, Albino dos Santos (FDC), one of the leading members of the 'Military Junta of National Salvation', indicated that the 'Junta' had revised the earlier decision and was no longer prepared to meet with the Nigerian Envoy.

Angola

The Government of Angola also issued a strongly worded statement condemning the coup d'état. Following word of the coup, President Menezes immediately contacted Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, requesting military assistance and support. In reaction to this, President dos Santos called an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers to discuss possible military intervention in STP. According to well-placed sources in Luanda, the meeting decided that Angola would render support if called-upon and the FAA's Special Forces based in Cabo Ledo, south of Luanda, have been placed on standby. It was also decided that any action would be taken in consultation with both President Obasanjo and President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, current chairman of the African Union.

Angola has very close historical, cultural and economic ties with STP and has been eager to share in the expected oil bonanza. It should be noted that Angola is also STP's main link with the continent. In addition, Angola is closely involved with the training of STP's security forces and the Angolan state oil company Sonangol has acted as an adviser to the STP government in its re-negotiation of oil contracts with Nigeria.

Moreover, in the late seventies and early eighties, when disillusion with socialism and the MLSTP's single-party rule started to provoke splits and reactions, leading to several aborted coup d'états, Angola maintained several thousand 'internationalist security' troops in STP. At two previous occasions, in 1988 and 1997, Angola actually deployed troops to STP in support of the Government.

African Union (AU)

In reaction to the coup, Mozambique's President and current Chair of the AU, Joaquim Chissano, has flown to Nigeria for talks with President Obasanjo on possible political and military intervention to restore STP's ousted government. President Chissano was quick to react, and barely a few hours after the coup had taken place, strongly condemned the illegal overthrow of the government of STP. In Nigeria, Chissano has emphasised that STP's neighbors want a quick return to order, adding that 'this event constitutes a setback to the efforts of the African Union aimed at restoration of peace, stability and economic recovery on the whole continent'.

ECOWAS

STP is also a member of the Economic Organisation of West African States (ECOWAS) and President Menezes has called on the organisation for support. In reaction to this, the President of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, stated that he expected ECOWAS to take some action to restore Menezes to power, though he gave no specifics.

United Nations

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has also 'strongly condemned the coup d'état and called for the immediate and unconditional restoration of constitutional order'.

Portugal

Portugal, as the former colonial master, also strongly condemned the toppling of the São Toméan government in a military coup. Lisbon has convened an emergency meeting of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP) to discuss the coup's implications. 'Portugal does not accept any alteration to the democratic order in São Tomé e Príncipe, which has functioned on the basis of free elections', a Lisbon Foreign Ministry communiqué said.

The special meeting of the CPLP's Permanent Council, comprising Lisbon-based Ambassadors of the eight-nation Lusophone bloc, will debate their response to the coup. The emergency Consular Office at the Lisbon Foreign Ministry said that first indications from São Tomé were that all Portuguese nationals in the archipelago are safe and have been advised to remain indoors.

France

Meanwhile, the French government has added its voice to calls for restoration of order in STP, where army rebels in collusion with a small political party toppled the government. 'These events occurred in a country with a well-rooted democracy. France insists on the absolute need for the respect of people and goods', the French Foreign Ministry said. 'France calls for the speedy return of legitimate democracy', added the Paris communiqué.

Internal Political Motivations: an overview

There has been some speculation concerning a possible link between the members of the 'Junta', as well as the FDC, and South Africa's 32 Battalion. It is alleged that Sabino dos Santos, leader of the FDC, was trained by the SADF in the late 1980s. In fact, STP's Foreign Minister Mateus Meira Rita, who was in Portugal at the time of the coup, told journalists in Lisbon that mercenaries who had once fought in Angola for South Africa's 32 Battalion, and leaders of the Christian Democratic Front, a small party with no parliamentary representation, were behind the coup.

In fact, there are a number of individuals directly implicated in the coup that have had training with the SADF. However, the importance of this may only be of a tactical nature, and not of a political one. The incorporation of a number of S. Tomenses in the 32 Battalion dates back to 1988, when a splinter group of the National Resistance Front of STP, based in Gabon, attempted an invasion of STP. A number of elements involved in this failed attempt (reportedly not more than 10) found their way to Walvis Bay in Namibia, having been incorporated in the 32 Battalion for their knowledge of Portuguese, in the SADF fight against the FAPLA/Cuban forces in Angola.¹

It must be also remembered that some of the members of the National Resistance Front of STP were pardoned by the government and incorporated into the armed forces (therefore the possible and legitimate presence of some of these individuals in the STP Armed Forces).

Formed in 1990, the Christian Democratic Front (FDC), an off-spring of the National Resistance Front of STP, has no real political agenda at all. There is no party constitution and no declared political program. The FDC never gained more than 1.7% of the votes during any of the elections that they part took in. During the electoral campaigns they were largely invisible. In fact, they may only have participated in the elections to get access to the funds made available by the government to all the political parties during election campaigns.

On 17 April 2003, the FDC organised a protest march in order to voice their opposition to the government. This action was also done to highlight the widespread poverty, corruption within government and misappropriation of oil funds. The FDC also demanded better jobs and living standards and in the subsequent counter-action by the STP Security Forces, one youth was killed. It is believed that it was following this action that the STP government realised, for the first time, the potential threat posed by the FDC.

¹ The failed invasion took place on 8 March 1988, by 44 elements of the Frente de Resistência Nacional de STP - Renovada (FRNSTP-R). Three members of the organisation were killed by government troops on the beach at São Tomé whilst the others were detained and subsequently tried and sentenced in 1989. They were, however, in early 1990, pardoned by the then President, Pinto da Costa. The same year they founded the FDC. The FRNSTP-R was a splinter group of the FRNSTP, a Resistance Group set up in 1981 against the socialist MLSTP Regime in STP. The FRNSTP was based in Libreville and supported by President Omar Bongo. The group lost importance when political liberalisation in STP began. Due to this, the group then had to leave Gabon and ended up in Walvis Bay where they applied for asylum. The group was then integrated into the South African Defence Force as members of 32 Battalion. Some of these members subsequently joined the South African Special Forces Regiments. With the change of the South African Government in 1994, several of these members, along with their families returned to STP. Some of the leading figures within the FDC are the following: Albino Santos (member of the FDC and former 32 Battalion member; now acting spokesman for the 'Junta'); Arlecio Costa (member of the FDC and ex-32 Battalion and 1 RR); Sabina dos Santos (member of the FDC and former 32 Battalion member; formerly based in Libreville).

STP's Armed Forces

The general condition and state of the 900 strong STP armed forces is very bad and substandard. This was one of the main factors that led to the military supporting the coup. According to several high ranking officers, the situation within the military is described as atrocious. There is a total lack of equipment and rations and the military units have to go without pay for months on end and lack basic support.

Final comment

The general security situation in STP is presently quite tense. Judging by the support provided to the coup plotters by the military and population in general, it must be accepted that they do enjoy some support. It is also a clear indication that some of their grievances are real, and that the level of expectations in the archipelago is increasingly high.

Both Angola and Nigeria will be eager to intervene militarily, especially as there is a lot at stake for both countries. It can be expected that, should there be no further negotiations between the 'Junta' and/or Nigeria or Angola, that a military invasion will be conducted within the next couple of days. It is highly unlikely that the 'Junta' would be able to resist any such action. This could lead to bloodshed and anarchy on the island.

The hoped-for oil bonanza in STP will, once again and in all probability, be delayed further. Bids for the nine 'blocks'- areas of sea in which bidders can explore for oil- were meant to start in October with a price tag of more than US\$ 100m (£63m). The coup will also delay the awarding of licenses, especially against the background of the fact that the whole process of forming the Joint Development Zone (JDZ) - revenue, the shape of Blocks, borders, etc - was fraught with difficulty. This event could well set the process back yet again.

The unstable situation in STP can also have a detrimental effect on the security situation in neighbouring Equatorial Guinea, who has also been subjected to a potential militant threat over the last 18-month period.