

REBELLION AND CIVIL WAR IN GUINEA BISSAU (1998-1999): ECOMOG THIRD INTERVENTION AT CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN WEST AFRICA

By

Ezeh Chinonso Kennedy

B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D.

From the analysis of the former United Nations Assistant Secretary General (UNASG) for Military Affairs and UN Peace-Keeping Operations, Lt. General Chikadibia Obiakor (2013), Guinea Bissau was once hailed as a potential model for African development but the country is now one of the poorest countries in the world with a massive foreign debt and an economy that relies heavily on foreign aid.

CAUSES OF THE CIVIL WAR

To place the 1998-1999 Guinea Bissau Civil War in perspective, the immediate and remote causes of the political and military conflict, coupled with a brief X-ray of the country's political-economic problems, which reviewed its turbulent post-independent political history and revealed why a personal feud

within the military elite could degenerate into a national war with regional and international dimensions.

THE ECONOMY

With a 1996 Gross National Product (GNP) per capita estimated at \$250, Guinea Bissau is one of the world's poorest countries. Guinea Bissau ranked 164th out of 174 nations using UNDP's Human Development Index. The World Bank poverty assessment using data from 1991, classified 26.2 percent of the population as living in extreme poverty (***"the core poor"***) and another 22.5 percent as moderately poor (***World Bank Country Report, 1994***).

Life expectancy at birth is 43.4 years and only 41 percent of the population has access to health services whereby 7,300 persons per doctor. Only 60 percent of the population has access to safe water and epidemic and water-borne diseases are widespread, while the prevalence of HIV-2 appears to be diminishing, HIV-1 cases were increasing rapidly. Also, decades of underinvestment in education have taken their heavy toll: the male and female adult literacy rates were 68 and 42.5 percent respectively (***UNAIDS and WHO Country Report, 1998***).

However, agriculture dominated the economy contributing 51 percent of GDP in 1997. Small holder agriculture based on some 90,000 small villages (tabancas), accounts for 85 percent of total employment and produced 90 percent of agricultural exports, which was dominated by one crop: Cashew-Nuts. Despite having fertile land, Guinea Bissau remained a net importer of food mainly rice, (***IMF Country Report, 1998***).

As state capacity has been a longstanding problem, a World Bank Mission in 1987 concluded that.....despite the efforts undertaken by the Government of Guinea Bissau to improve the planning process, severe shortcomings in the overall macro-economic management continued to contribute to the degradation of the country's macro-economic situation, (**Vakil Firouz, 1987**).

POLITICAL HISTORY OF GUINEA BISSAU

On 24th September 1973, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) unilaterally declared Guinea Bissau independent of Portugal, their adversary in the liberation war that had ravaged the country over the preceding decades. Portugal finally and formally recognized Guinea Bissau's independence on 10th September 1974, following its own revolution of that year.

The Portuguese colonial heritage, as in the rest of its African Empire was dismal. **Reynolds (1985)**, ranked Portugal the lowest of the colonial powers in terms of its development legacy. The Portuguese administration concentrated on extracting an agricultural surplus from Guinea Bissau for the needs of the colonial economy and urban based colonialists. A UN mission undertaken shortly after independence noted that Guinea Bissau faced acute shortages in vital areas, especially in food supplies, trained manpower, equipment and spare parts, budgetary finance and exchange, (**Davidson, 1981:23**).

During the Liberation Struggle for independence of Guinea Bissau, the PAIGC's founder, Amilcar Cabral concluded that

Africa's urban- based elite needed to commit "**class suicide**" in order to turn the state into a means for serving the broad mass of people. However, he was assassinated in Guinea Conakry in January 1973 and his Cape Verdian half-brother Luis de Almeida Cabral became the first President of independent Guinea Bissau in 1974 (**Davidson, 1981**).

Instead and despite Amilcar's Marxist-Leninist ideology, his party PAIGC, largely retained the colonial administrative structure and used this to take control over civil society as a means to personal wealth and power. It was noted that the institutions created by the party PAIGC failed to endow the state and the political system with effective accountability or meaningful popular participation and thus, the PAIGC leadership became the new urban elite.

The political situation in Guinea Bissau was highly unstable in the late 1970's and the growing gap between the government and the people was accentuated by the dominance of Cape Verdians among the PAIGC's top leadership leading to resentment among Guineans. Low pay, little or no welfare coupled with political appointments of senior military officers and reductions in privileges fuelled dissent in the military especially the Army (**Forrest, 1992:33**).

In 1980, Brigadier General Joao Bernardo Vieira, a Guinean, saw this opportunity and seized power from Luis Cabral in an almost bloodless coup d'état. Cape Verde broke away from Guinea Bissau after the coup, (**BBC News Africa, 22nd October, 1998**).

The African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC) has governed Guinea Bissau since

independence, from Portugal in 1974. The Military General turned President Bernardo Nino Vieira first seized power in 1980 and allowed the introduction of a multi-party system in the early 1990's. General elections were held in July 1994 with the ruling PAIGC party obtaining the majority of legislative seats and Bernardo Vieira winning the presidential run-off vote amid accusations against the ruling party for conducting an intimidating campaign and abusing state funds. Bernardo Vieira's government also put down several coup attempts which earned him more enemies within the military and political arena.

Historically, the alliance between Guinea Bissau rebels and the Casamançais separatist group, *Mouvement des Forces Democratiques de Casamance* (MFPD) had a strong historical foundation as both represented Balanta, Biafada and Diola/Felup ethnic groups. This could be the latent reason why Guinea Bissau had offered a refuge to the Casamançais rebels fighting the Senegalese government. Again, the border disputes in the Casamance region between Senegal and Guinea Bissau dated back to an agreement of 1886 between Portugal and France which brought Casamance region then under Portuguese rule, later to French Colonial Rule (***The New African No. 366, 1998***).

THE 1998-1999 CONFLICT

It is noteworthy that the two key actors in the Guinea Bissau War were former generals in the Guinea Bissau Army namely Brigadier-General Bernardo Vieira and Brigadier-General Ansumane Mane who were actually comrades-in-arms against

Portuguese colonial rule in the 1970's, though they represented two factions in the struggle for independence. Both veterans were guerrilla leaders before General Bernardo Vieira seized power in the coup of 1980 in which he deposed Luis Cabral and confirmed himself in office via 1994 controversial elections. His opponent, General Ansumane Mane has been invoking the long socialist tradition of PAIGC party founder, Amilcar Cabral and has been telling and complaining that General Vieira has been sold to modern economic reform; ***(The New African No. 366, 1998)***.

Furthermore, France who welcomed Guinea Bissau into the CFA monetary zone in 1995 has been supportive of the General Vieira's government and the neighbouring Senegalese troop intervention in Guinea Bissau, whereas Portugal, the former colonial master has been sympathetic to the rebel cause. Similarly, after the deposition of President Vieira in 1999, France imposed economic sanctions on Guinea Bissau, referring to attack on its diplomatic installation, whereas Portugal was supportive of the political arrangement by providing asylum for President Vieira when he was allowed to leave Guinea Bissau ***(IRIN West Africa 8th June, 1998)***.

PRE-CONFLICT TENSION IN GUINEA BISSAU

In January 1998, ten separatists from the Senegalese region of Casamance were killed and another forty were arrested following clashes with the Senegalese Armed Forces in two towns on the northern border of Guinea Bissau. In late January 1998, following the seizure in Guinea Bissau of a cache of weapons, a

number of officers of the Guinea Bissau armed forces were arrested on charges of supplying arms to the Casamance separatists in Senegal, **(BBC World Report, 27th July 1998)**.

In early February 1998, the Minister of Defence of Guinea Bissau announced the suspension of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Brigadier General Ansumane Mane on the grounds of dereliction of duty in view of the fact that the weapons impounded in the previous month had been taken from a military depot of the Guinea Bissau Armed Forces and allegedly for selling of arms to the separatist rebel in the Casamance province of their neighbouring country Senegal.

This was not the first time that General Mane has been associated with illegal arms sales to the Senegalese separatist MFDC. In 1996, General Ansumane Mane was put under house arrest following the death of several children in an explosion, which occurred while they were forced to prepare shell cases, allegedly for sale to Casamance secessionists. No formal charges were made and President Vieira later reinstated General Ansumane Mane **(IRIN West Africa, 8th June, 1998)**.

Following protest by opposition parties at the delays in the organisation of legislative elections in March 1998, an independent National Election Commission was established and elections were due to be held in July. In April, General Ansumane Mane this time publicly accused the Minister of Defence and a group of officers in the Armed Forces of the same involvement in arms trafficking to the Casamance separatists in Senegal. However, at the sixth PAIGC congress held in May 1998,

President Joao Bernardo Vieira was re-elected president of the ruling party.

THE MILITARY REBELLION

Following continued suspicions, coupled with latent political pressure from Senegal and domestic opponents, President Vieira finally dismissed the once suspended and reinstated Brigadier General Ansumane Mane on the 6th June 1998 (***US Department of State Report, 1999***).

On 7th June 1998, the day President Bernardo Vieira had appointed a new Armed Forces Chief-of-Staff, Brigadier General Humberto Gomes and the day before a parliamentary commission into arms sales was to officially announce its findings, Brigadier General Ansumane Mane seized the control of Bra Military Barracks overlooking Bissau and other strategic locations including the international airport, marking the start of the military and political conflict in Guinea Bissau. General Ansumane Mane subsequently demanded the resignation of President Bernardo Vieira, his administration and the conduct of free and democratic elections in July 1998; (***US Country Report, 1998 & 1999***).

Fewer than 300 soldiers remained loyal to President Bernardo Vieira who was forced to call on longstanding joint defence agreements with neighbouring Senegal and Guinea Conakry. Their response was swift, within 48 hours, 1,300 Senegalese troops and 400 Guinean soldiers had arrived to conduct operation “***Gabou***”, being the historical name for the region encompassing Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau and part of Mali.

But with this military support from Senegal and Guinea-Conakry on the side of Guinea Bissau troops loyal to President Bernardo Vieira, they attempted unsuccessfully to regain control of General Ansumane Mane's held areas of the city and heavy fighting ensued, **(Newswatch Magazine, 30th June, 1998)**.

In the following days, more than 3,000 foreign nationals were evacuated from the Guinea Bissau capital Bissau by ship to Senegal. Sequel to this, an estimated 200,000 residents of Bissau fled the city prompting fears of a humanitarian disaster, with the hostilities preventing aid organisations from distributing emergency food and medical supplies to the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's). The fighting continued into July 1998 with many officers and men of the Guinea Bissau Armed Forces reportedly defecting to the side of the rebels led by Brigadier General Ansumane Mane **(BBC World Report, 27th August, 1998)**.

At this juncture, it is time to pause and consider when, how and why a domestic political crisis and leadership tussle amongst cabals of the same military elite in Guinea Bissau could escalate into a national conflict with regional dimension and international implications.

First, successive governments have failed to build a legitimate state of Guinea Bissau. President Bernardo Vieira disregarded constitutional law, order, practice and the Supreme Court was forced to sanction his actions **(Duval-Smith, 1998:27)**.

The President concentrated power in his own hands, isolated himself from most people but relied on inner circle of advisors and increasingly treated Guinea Bissau as his personal property.

Following the PAIGC's victory in the 1994 elections, President Bernardo Vieira replaced old PAIGC officials with his own loyal supporters, right down to the lowest level of public service. Top government officials were changed once more in 1997, following a constitutional crisis involving the dismissal of Prime Minister Saturnino da Costa **(SIDA Country Report, 1997)**.

Most observers of Guinea Bissau's politics concluded that elements in the Army were profiting from the selling of arms and that both General Ansumane Mane and President Bernardo Vieira knew about it and benefited from these illegal arms sales which possibly led to personal feud that degenerated into national conflict.

Secondly, deep and longstanding fault lines existed in the military's relationship with the presidency. The 1980 coup d'état which brought General Bernardo Vieira to power occurred after the army dissociated itself from the government of Luis Cabral. The army expected its due reward but instead, Bernardo Vieira contained the army's influence by maintaining the PAIGC as the main instrument for personal advance. Coups were attempted in 1982, 1983, 1985 and 1987. After each coup, President Vieira tightened his grip over the government and the Army, **(Economist Intelligence Unit Report, 1999)**.

President Bernardo Vieira also promoted his supporters in the Army which led to tensions between senior staff Veterans of the Guinea Bissau Liberation War and the newer cadre of career soldiers, **(EIU Report, 1999)**.

Thirdly, the 1997 general and presidential elections held in the aftermath of the Liberian Civil War sent a resounding message to

West African leaders and warlords alike, that ECOWAS and the wider international community would immediately tolerate extreme violence as a political tool to rise to political prominence, **(Yoroms, Gani and Anning, 1997).**

The former warlord, Charles Taylor, became Liberia's president after deploying his considerable resources, obtained via the Liberian civil war to win an election that international observers declared free and fair.

The UN, AU, ECOWAS and the larger international community took no action to debar war criminals from seeking office in Liberia, thus demonstrating that they were totally indifferent to Liberia and its people. The resulting **"latent message"** undoubtedly reached Guinea Bissau where their deaf and blind internalised the unambiguous gospel and music of **"rebel impunity"**.

Finally, the MFDC's insurgency and the presence of 15,000 Senegalese refugees in Guinea Bissau contributed to the regionalisation of the conflict; **(BBC News Africa, 16th December, 1999).**

Senegal undoubtedly saw Bernardo Vieira's request for help as an opportunity to remove MFDC's supporters from Guinea Bissau's Army and attack its border bases. Guinea Conakry had similar motives since it was widely rumoured that Guinea Bissau's Army had sold arms to the MFDC rebels. Finally, crushing the military revolt in Bissau will send a warning signal to dissenters, would be disgruntled elements or rebels within Guinea and Senegal not to try anything similar.

The Senegalese expected to restore order and reinstate President Bernardo Vieira within 48 hours but Guinea-Conakry and Dakar were surprised by the Guinea Bissau's Army near total support for General Ansumane Mane.

As the Dakar based daily newspaper *Wal Fadjri* noted puts it; the Senegalese army had expected ragtag militia instead they found hardened, gallant and combat ready Guinea Bissau soldiers who greeted them with heavy artillery fire (***IRIN West Africa, 15th December, 1999***).

THE RESOLUTION OF THE WAR

Following the mediation by a delegation from the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) on 26th July 1998, the government of President Bernardo Vieira and the rebel soldiers agreed to implement a truce but this failed to hold, prompting international efforts which became more coherent following the violation of the first truce.

The former colonial master, Portugal had to accept the ECOWAS pivotal role as mediator and provider of ECOMOG peacekeeping forces while the United Nations, European Union, France and Sweden added further international pressure for peaceful resolution of the conflict. On the 25th August 1998, representatives of the government and the rebels met under the auspices of CPLP and ECOWAS on Sal Island, Cape Verde where an agreement was reached to transform the existing truce into a ceasefire. The accord also provided for the re-opening of the international airport for the deployment of international forces to maintain and supervise the ceasefire; (***ECOWAS Peace Plan,***

30th August, 1998). In September 1998, ECOWAS intensified mediation and talks between the government and the military rebels in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire whereby the rebels demanded that all Senegalese and Guinean forces be withdrawn from Guinea Bissau as a pre-condition to a definitive peace agreement, which was flatly rejected by Bernardo Vieira's government (***The Tribune, 25th September, 1998***).

Further talks were held under the aegis of ECOWAS Summit in Abuja, Nigeria which resulted in the signing of the Abuja Peace Accord on 1st November 1998. Under this accord, the two sides reaffirmed the ceasefire of 25th August and resolved that the withdrawal of Senegalese and Guinean troops from Guinea Bissau be conducted simultaneously with the deployment of ECOMOG (ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group) interposition force, which will guarantee security on the border with Senegal. The accord also agreed to the formation of an interim government of national unity with legislative and presidential elections to be held by the end of 1999 (***ECOWAS Peace Accord in Abuja, 1st November, 1998***).

However, peace had not been secured on the ground as the military rebels obtained upper hand during the rainy season (which lasted from June to October) as they controlled over 79 percent of Guinea Bissau by the time of the third ceasefire agreement. President Bernardo Vieira's fate and position became increasingly uncertain as the date for the withdrawal of Senegalese and Guinean troops drew nearer. Tension increased as the mobilisation and deployment of ECOMOG force was repeatedly delayed and postponed. Fighting again flared up in

Bissau on 31st January but ceased on 3rd February 1999, before ECOMOG troops from Benin, Gambia, Niger and Togo were deployed (***NWC Lecture, 22nd February, 2001***).

The absence of Nigerian soldiers as part of ECOMOG contingent to Guinea Bissau showed and confirmed Nigeria's neutrality, impartiality and non-dominance of ECOMOG operations as cynics and critics had always noted.

ECOMOG OPERATION IN GUINEA BISSAU

Bowing to pressure of public opinion, the Senegalese and Guinean governments tried to convert their unilateral military incursion in Guinea Bissau to an ECOWAS led ECOMOG operation but ECOWAS insisted on their withdrawal and non-participation in ECOMOG operations in Guinea Bissau in an apparent show of impartiality and neutrality. In February 1999, Senegalese and Guinean troops were replaced by a new ECOMOG force of 600 to 700 troops with the mandate of monitoring the ceasefire and thereby facilitating the holding of elections (***CNN Africa Report, March 1999***).

ECOMOG carried out extensive reconnaissance of Guinea Bissau and submitted a comprehensive report to ECOWAS Secretariat.

Rather, an ECOMOG operation largely led by Francophone countries namely Benin, Mali, Niger, Togo and the Gambia was deployed to Guinea Bissau. The ECOMOG military operation was supported logistically and financially under the French Peacekeeping Training and Initiative for African Countries: Renforcement des Capacities Africaines Maintien de la Paix (RECAMP) (***Ero, 2000***).

ECOMOG Troops involved in this operation were drawn from small countries with inexperienced soldiers and they were not strong enough for the mission assigned to them. ECOMOG found it difficult to deploy the proposed force of 1,500 men. Benin provided about 150 troops trained under the US peacekeeping training programme, African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI), Togo gave 150 troops and Mali 120 troops.

These troops were expected to provide a strong interposition force to block rebel activities within Guinea Bissau and on the border with Senegal. The deployment was ineffective in view of the interference and conflict of interests shown by France and Portugal. ECOMOG had put together for the first time a military team that was Nigerian-free, in a clear attempt to free ECOMOG from its Nigerian chains and its aggressive tactics; (***Drift, 1999:225-240***).

The ECOMOG forces were eventually withdrawn after the coup that overthrew President Vieira which consequently dented the image and credibility of ECOMOG in peacekeeping. The overall ineffectiveness and feebleness of the ECOMOG soldiers deployed in Guinea Bissau were summed up by the frequent comments and cliché on the streets of Bissau in 1999: “ECOMOG is having a nice holiday in Guinea Bissau” (***Ero, 2000***).

The failure of this foreign backed military arrangement clearly underscores the need for more self reliance in the management of regional conflicts and the active involvement of a preponderant regional power in any security arrangement.

The assistance provided through RECAMP and ACRI still exposed the fact that: beyond Nigeria, many ECOWAS Member States

lacked the military and economic capacity to launch the force necessary to stem the tide of conflicts in the West African sub-region. The extent of this weakness was succinctly highlighted by the Executive Secretary of ECOWAS in his letter to the UN Secretary General: “It would be particularly useful to acquire for ECOMOG appropriate logistics for the deployment of a Naval Unit, made necessary by Guinea Bissau’s geographical make-up. The acquisition of an aeroplane or helicopter is also essential to enable ECOMOG to make important, urgent trips between Bissau and points outside the country” (**Ero, 2000**).

However, inspite of ECOMOG shortcomings, the third intervention in Guinea Bissau is another bold attempt after Liberia and Sierra Leone by ECOMOG under the leadership of ECOWAS. These conflict resolution efforts in West Africa is an eloquent testimony of ECOWAS willingness, ability and readiness to take on security challenges with a view to restoring peace and security to Guinea Bissau; and by extension, upholding ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance, thereby enhancing regional economic integration which is ECOWAS core objective.

THE 1999 MILITARY COUP

As expected, the government of national unity took off on 21st February 1999 under the leadership of Prime Minister Francisco Fadul, a former Prime Minister and Personal Adviser to President Bernardo Vieira who has sided with the military rebels. Also the ten Ministers and seven Secretaries of State were divided between President Bernardo Vieira and General Ansumane Mane whereby

agreement was reached on the allocation of the portfolios to the two sides.

As peace was still shaky in early May 1999, President Vieira announced that legislative and presidential elections would take place on 28th December 1999. After two days of fighting, President Bernardo Nino Vieira was overthrown by the rebel military junta on the 7th May 1999, sparking widespread and strong condemnation especially from ECOWAS, UN, AU, EU and the rest of international community including the civil society organisations. President Bernardo Vieira subsequently took refuge at the Portuguese Embassy where on the 10th May 1999, he signed an unconditional surrender. He was eventually granted asylum in Portugal (*IRIN-West Africa, 11th May, 1999*).

POST-CONFLICT TRANSITION

The military junta of Brigadier General Ansumane brought in a new government under an interim president, Malam Bacai Sanha who was the President of the National People's Assembly before the coup. The new government sought to extradite Vieira, charging him with crimes ranging from misuse of public funds to murder. Grave allegations dating back to failed coups of the 1980's were discovered and reopened.

On 28th November 1999, presidential and legislative elections were held with the opposition Social Renewal Party (PRS) led by Kumba Yalla, who narrowly lost the 1994 presidential election, winning 38 out of 102 seats thereby making it the largest party represented in the National People's Assembly. The long ruling African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape

Verde (PAIGC) won only 24 seats followed by the Guinea Bissau Resistance Party (***IRIN-West Africa, 14th September, 2003***).

Kumba Yalla failed to secure enough votes for the first-round victory over Malam Bacai Sanha and in a run-off election held on 16th January, 2000 Kumba Yalla defeated acting President Malam Bacai Sanha of the PAIGC, winning 72% of the vote cast. Kumba Yalla was sworn in as democratically elected President of Guinea Bissau on 17th February, 2000 and three years later, Kumba Yalla was overthrown in a bloodless military coup; (***BBC Africa, 20th February, 2000***).

THE 2003 COUP

On the 12th September 2003, the electoral Commission of Guinea Bissau announced that it would not be able to finish voter registration in time to hold parliamentary elections as planned on 12th October 2003. Added to this was the stagnant economy, political instability and above all, total discontent by the military over unpaid salaries that finally led to the bloodless coup of 14th September, 2003.

President Kumba Yala also fondly known as Lala was detained and placed under house arrest. The leader of the coup General Verissimo Correia Seabra referred to the incapacity of Yala's government as justification for the military takeover which led to his public announcement on the 17th September, 2003 that he has resigned as President of Guinea Bissau. He also signed a political agreement that prohibited him from participating in future politics for five years (***BBC News Africa, 18th September, 2003***).

On 26th March, 2005 ex-president Kumba Yala was chosen as the PRS candidate for 19th June presidential election by his party's national council despite being officially banned from politics for five years. The Supreme Court of Guinea Bissau later cleared him to contest for the election with five judges ruling in his favour and one opposed his candidacy and legibility. According to official results of the 19th June 2005 election, Kumba Yala came third with 25 percent of the vote, behind Malam Bacai Sanha and former President Bernardo Nino Vieira who came first, thus he could not participate in the run-off. The second round held on 24th July 2005, resulted in Bernardo Vieira's victory; **(CNN News, 24th July, 2005).**

President Bernardo Nino Vieira (27th April 1939 - 2nd March 2009) was then sworn into office as elected president of Guinea Bissau on the 1st October, 2005. He was the President of Guinea Bissau from 1980 to 1984, for the second time from 1984 to 1999 and for the third time from 2005 to 2009. He made a political comeback in 2005, winning that year's presidential election **(Tribune, 25th July 2005).**

President Bernardo Vieira was killed by Guinea Bissau soldiers on the 2nd March 2009, apparently in retaliation for a bomb blast that killed Guinea Bissau's military chief, General Batista Tagme Na Waie; **(Times Online, 2nd March, 2009).**

The military officially denied these allegations but later, the Army officers claimed responsibility for President Vieira's death; **(BBC News, 4th March, 2009).**