

What's Really Behind France's Sudden Scramble to "Save Central Africa"

Is it a colonial hangover, or is it about mineral interests?

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The United Nations Security Council has announced sanctions against the Central African Republic (CAR) and has also given the French a big green light to use its military, as well as spearhead African Union forces in order to put down violence and restore "security, law and order" in the former French colony.

French President Francois Hollande announced "immediate" action yesterday, deploying 250 new army troops to join an already existing 600 troops currently stationed in that country.

The UNSC also imposed an arms embargo on the landlocked, mineral-rich African state and asked the United Nations to prepare for a possible peacekeeping mission, presumably to rescue the country from chaos under its new Muslim leader Michel Djotodia, who came into power in March ousting the French-backed junta of President Francois Bozize.

AREVA AND CENTRAL AFRICA

French state-owned and government-friendly media, December 5, gave all-day headline coverage to President's Hollande's call for war in the little heard-of Central African Republic (CAR). So what's the background on this?



This desperately poor former French colony in central Africa is known to French for its former dictator – "Emperor" Bokassa – who before being overthrown provided a large gift of diamonds to "his friend", French president of the day, Giscard d'Estaing for helping organize the 1977 ceremonies enthroning the "Emperor" with a robe by Pierre Cardin and 100 000 pieces of gold and silver plate decorating the "imperial" palace. Although today's white expatriate French population is small, estimated at no more than 600 – 1000, deaths among these expatriates would be as "unseemly" as in the imperial days of the colony. More important in fact, apart from the very small amount of diamonds and gold produced by the CAR, the country was promoted by many players – especially French, Canadian, Chinese and British – to hold impressive, or possibly huge quantities of uranium.

The French state-owned geological bureau, the BRGM, alongside Swiss and German mining interests (notably Uranio AG) had since the 1970s identified the Bakouma region in north central CAR as holding "potentially large uranium resources" at low depths, easily mined by open pit techniques. Relatively nearby coal or lignite resources might also theoretically be

developed to provide cheap (if not “low carbon”) energy to operate uranium yellowcake conversion, before export.

Reaching a peak in 2009-2010 but falling away very fast after that, with uranium prices and the fond hopes of the so-called “nuclear renaissance”, several global mining resource promoters and traders were active with the Bakouma play, and other uranium asset plays in southern Africa.

The *Uramin* (ou UraMin) Corp. founded by Stephen Dattels and James Mellon and listed in Toronto and London, in 2005, featured the Bakouma uranium play among its portfolio of African uranium resources. UraMin was unsurprisingly registered in the Virgin Islands, to avoid taxes, but more surprisingly was bought out by Areva’s then-CEO Anne (‘Atomic Annie’) Lauvergeon in a deal struck in 2007 but only finally executed in 2011. The amounts paid by Areva varied from the first airing of the deal in the press, at about \$470 million, to the probably final sum paid by state-owned Areva of \$2.5 billion, according to French newspaper ‘Le Monde’ in a 13 January 2012 report.

✖ Shortly after the sums were finally paid in late 2011, Atomic Annie was unceremoniously sacked as Areva CEO by then-president Nicolas Sarkozy in the dying days of his regime. Parisian political gossip claimed that Atomic Annie had been “ungenerous” in the commissions or kickbacks paid to long-time Sarkozy dealmaker and close political friend, Patrick Balkany, who had flown with Lauvergeon in her Areva Gulfstream on several dealmaking visits to Bangui, capital of CAR in 2008, and to neighboring Congo DR, where French-backed CAR junta leader or “*president*” Francois Bozize (photo, left, with ex-President Sarkozy) operated numerous cross-border trades with the local dictator. Balkany, in December 2013 has been charged by the French justice system with bribery and corruption on affairs unrelated to the CAR.

Following the 2011 Fukushima disaster – fatal for the image of nuclear power as “clean, cheap and safe” – the bottom fell out of the uranium market. Lauvergeon, even in 2007, had paid an extreme high price for low-performing, or in Bakouma’s case non-performing uranium assets. She had to go.

AREVA RESOURCES SOUTHERN AFRICA

While still in power at Areva, and still in favour with Mr Sarkozy, Lauvergeon used the “large Bakouma prospect” as a key element in her corporate strategy to develop southern African uranium resources, and linked energy resources especially coal. With cheap coal to power uranium enrichment facilities – producing “almost zero carbon” uranium fuel – this can fuel dangerous and expensive nuclear reactors in “climate conscious” democracies, like France. Believing public opinion to be utterly stupid was a major help to the Areva strategy, promoted by France’s servile press and media as Areva’s “green energy” strategy.

✖ Areva’s Trekkoppje mine in Namibia also purchased from UraMin, the same year 2007 as the Bakouma purchase, for the global sum of \$2.5 billion, was developed on the basis of Areva’s belief that the mine’s huge water needs could be supplied by cheaply desalinated water, using coal energy for desalination, at a seaboard location for 200-kilometer inland pipeline transport to the mine site. Areva also believed that the very low uranium-content ores at Trekkopje could be efficiently exploited, and that world uranium prices would hold at more than \$50 per pound (current Dec 2013 price, about \$36).

In all cases Areva... was wrong.

By the end of 2011 it announced write-downs of 1.5 billion euros on its entire south African mining “portfolio” of operations, and specifically Trekkopje, as well as a 800 million euros loss on its nuclear operations. Areva’s losses on its wheeler-dealing in CAR were never disclosed, but no mine development of any kind ever started in CAR, whereas at Trekkopje some initial mine development work was started, before the project was abandoned or “mothballed”.

Areva’s southern Africa strategy was not only driven by the fond hope that uranium prices could or might attain \$75 a pound, as world reactor orders and projects leapt into high gear, but also due to its intensifying security concerns at its two giant uranium mines in Sahel Africa, in Niger. Since 2009, and increasingly, hostage taking for ransom, and suicide attacks on Areva personnel and installations have incurred costs to Areva – denied by the corporation but reported in the French press – of at least 30 million euros simply for the “repurchase” and liberation of hostages. Spilling over to neighboring Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauretania, Algeria, Libya and Chad, Areva is opposed by regional and local insurgents ranging from irredentist Tuaregs to Al Qaeda jihadists and fundamental Christian bandit insurgents from as far away as Uganda. Areva’s relations with the local French-backed juntas controlling Mali and Niger, in particular, are also “troubled”. This resulted on October 27, 2013 in the Niger junta refusing to further cooperate with Areva, and the closure of its giant Arlit mine. The junta helped itself to 500 tons (1 million pounds) of uranium to “cover its expenses” but its booty has not yet been sold.

SAVING C.A.R. “FOR FRANCE AND THE WORLD”

CAR is comparable to another former French colony – Haiti – due to its extreme poverty and the extreme corruption and barbarity of its juntas and dictatorships, or “governments” ruling with French backing. CAR may have considerable agricultural potential, its mineral resources may be larger than so-far proven, but “saving the country” requires large-scale, long-term investment which is unlikely to materialize in a poverty-wracked country subject to anarchy, rebellion and near-genocide.

Hollande’s claim, on French government-owned and government-serving media, that France’s armed intervention in CAR was supported and encouraged by “other European countries”, meaning Germany when it concerns hoped-for payments to France for its gung-ho remake of French colonial history, is unlikely to be anything but political grandstanding by Hollande. Interest in a low population, if large land area country, with no infrastructures and landlocked in the interior of the African continent can only be low. Other European countries are very unlikely to provide troops, and US military involvement is very unlikely. This will be an all-French show, ending with another French-chosen and French-backed junta.

Almost certainly, the “patriotic minded” media of France will be whistling tunes about Bakouma’s vast reserves of uranium when they are not touting diamonds littering the streams and rivers of CAR. In fact the diamonds are few and far apart, and the reserves of uranium are low grade. Much of the data provided by Uranio AG and UraMin is criticised as “fantasist” by more-polite geologist who do not want to use other and harsher words to describe the material that was fed to Areva – for \$2.5 billion of French taxpayers’ money. Straight down the drain!

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