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**EQUATORIAL GUINEA:
THE POSITION OF REFUGEES AND EXILES IN 2001**

By A Writenet Independent Researcher

Translated from the French by Carolyn Norris

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E-mail: writenet@gn.apc.org**

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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
CP 2500, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

E-mail: HQES00@unhcr.org
Web Site: <http://www.unhcr.org>

1 Introduction

In Equatorial Guinea political dissent dates back to the period under Spanish colonial rule. As far back as 1942 members of the Benga ethnic group from Corisco and the southern coastal region of mainland Equatorial Guinea as well as the Bubi, the indigenous ethnic group living on the island of Fernando Poo, were denouncing Spain's violation of agreements governing good cohabitation and commercial collaboration signed by the Spanish plenipotentiary Juan José de Lerena in the mid 1840s.¹ However, Equatorial Guineans became increasingly familiar with the phenomenon of political exile from the 1950s when the first nationalist demonstrations demanding independence were brutally repressed by the Spanish colonial government.

The birth of various liberation movements from the 1950s resulted in Spanish government reprisals and many independence fighters going into exile.² The first and the most important of these liberation movements was the Liberation Crusade (La Cruzada de Liberación), which was led by Acacio Mañé Ela prior to his assassination by the Spanish Civil Guard in 1958. It is worth noting that the coup attempt against the country's first President, the dictator Francisco Macías Nguema, in June 1974, which was organized from Bata prison and led by Benga Estanislao Ngume Beholi, was similarly called the Crusade Movement for the Liberation of Equatorial Guinea in the name of Christ (Movimiento Cruzada de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial por Cristo). It was within the Cruzada that men like Atanasio Ndongo Miyone, Clemente Ateba Nso and Pastor Torao Sikara became politically active.

In 1959 a political party, the People's Idea of Equatorial Guinea (Idea Popular de Guinea Ecuatorial – IPGE) was created in Mbam (Cameroon). A few months afterwards its leader Enrique Nvo Okenve, another prominent nationalist, was killed by pro-Spanish elements in Cameroon, where he had sought refuge from harassment by the Spanish colonial government. After his assassination, his personal secretary, Clemente Ateba Nso sought out José Perea Epota, a Benga from the Island of Corisco who was intellectually more able to take over the leadership and administration of the party. This movement operated clandestinely for many years with members such as Antonino Eworo, Clemente Ateba, Jesús Mba, Juan Ebang and Pedro Ekong, and collaborated with the National Movement for the Liberation of Equatorial Guinea (Movimiento Nacional de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial - MONALIGE).³

The MONALIGE party was born after the death of Acacio Mañé Ela who had always refused to go into exile.⁴ It had been created at the instigation of men including Atanasio Ndongo

¹ Ndongo Bidyogo, D. *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial*, Madrid: Editorial Cambio 16, 1977

² Liniger-Goumaz, M., *Guinée Équatoriale: de la dictature des colons à la dictature des colonels*, Genève : Editions du temps, 1982 ; Alo Esono, M., former civil servant, former post-independence parliamentarian, former political prisoner living in Bata, Equatorial Guinea. Personal interview, Bata, 13 October 2001; Alo Mansogo, M., former member of MONALIGE, former political prisoner born in 26 June 1926 in Kogo where he currently lives. Personal interview, Bata, 13 June 2001; and Ateba Nso, C., former private secretary to the nationalist leader Enrique Nvo, former ambassador of Equatorial Guinea in Gabon living in Niefang, Equatorial Guinea. Personal interview, Bata, 25 October 2001

³ Liniger-Goumaz; Ndongo Bidyogo; and Ateba Nso

⁴ Benkabouche, M. (World Alliance of Reformed Churches), Letter to Amnesty International on Equatorial Guinea, Geneva, 11 December 1997, (unpublished document)

Miyone, Pastor Torao Sikara and Ebuka Besebo and was formally constituted in 1962.⁵ It was this strong nationalist political activism which along with pressure from the United Nations led to Spain's proposal for autonomy. The proposal was put to a referendum on 15 December 1963. Autonomy was granted in 1964 though Equatorial Guinea remained under the control of the Spanish Presidency. The Autonomous Government lasted until 12 October 1968 when the country gained its independence.

Independence arrived in the midst of ethnic conflict, deliberately generated and encouraged by the Spanish Presidency and within Spanish colonial circles in Equatorial Guinea. This appalling start was to set the historical tone for the country which remains to this day. The new republic was led by a Fang, President Francisco Macías Nguema, who was democratically elected and very rapidly turned the country into a republic ruled by nepotism. Its people soon became hostage to the bloody dictatorship of a family clan, the Essangui from Mongomo district on the mainland, resulting in vast numbers of people choosing exile; an estimated third of the total population of 400,000. On 3 August 1979, Lieutenant-Colonel (now General) Teodoro Obiang Nguema, nephew of Francisco Macías Nguema, took power in a military coup, and had his uncle executed immediately. This military dictatorship simply prolonged the former regime under a different guise.⁶ The incompetence displayed in running the country has generated great hatred and resentment between Equatorial Guineans which, though contained so far, could one day explode with devastating effect.⁷

The main countries which have received the Equatorial Guinean exodus are Gabon, Cameroon, Nigeria (because of their geographic proximity) and Spain (because of its cultural proximity). In fact, the two dictatorships which followed independence in Equatorial Guinea have encouraged the dispersal of Equatorial Guineans throughout the entire world. There has been a real conspiracy of silence surrounding this human suffering because some great powers have strong strategic and economic interests in gaining access to the country's rich forest, oil and mining resources. In addition, although the United Nations has been observing human rights developments in the country since 1979 there has been no noticeable or significant change nor any effective pressure. Moreover, human rights violations have been allowed to continue and dictators have been able to retain power due to lethargy within the Organization of African Unity and because of the all too obvious and destructive complicity of neighbouring countries, in particular Gabon.⁸

With a view to understanding better the life in exile of Equatorial Guineans, we met refugees in Gabon and Spain and also interviewed refugees returning to Bata.

⁵ Liniger-Goumaz

⁶ Nguema Esono, F., Balboa Boneke, J., *La transición de Guinea Ecuatorial: Historia de un fracaso*, Madrid: Ediciones Labrys 54, 1996

⁷ Liniger-Goumaz; Nguema Esono, F.; and Balboa Boneke

⁸ The complicity of the government of Gabon has been demonstrated by numerous arbitrary arrests of political opponents and their extradition from Gabon to Equatorial Guinea. Among those so treated are Bonifacio Ondo Edu (president in the pre-independence autonomous government), Francisco-Javier Ndong Obiang (the founder of a protest movement directed against this regime), Felipe Ondo Obiang (former president of the parliament), Guillermo Nguema Ela (former minister for economy and finance) and Aquilino Nguema Ona (opposition politician). It would appear that President Bongo of Gabon is indeed the "political godfather and guide" of Obiang, as illustrated by the fact that the organization of the two « democratic parties », of Gabon (PDG) and Equatorial Guinea (PDGE), is identical, and that the Sons of Obiang [Fils d'Obiang] organization of Equatorial Guinea is a replica of the Sons of Bongo [Fils de Bongo] organization of Gabon.

2 Brief Overview of the Political and Socio-economic History of Equatorial Guinea

The aim of this chapter is to provide some background information to explain why Equatorial Guineans began to take the route of exile in such large numbers.

2.1 The Main Stages in the Country's Geopolitical History

In 1472 the Portuguese sailor, Fernão do Pó, landed on the island which took his name until it was renamed the Island of Bioko at independence. This territory was therefore “initially Portuguese”.

Equatorial Guinea became a Spanish colony as a result of the Spanish-Portuguese Treaty of San Ildefonso of 1 January 1777, which was ratified by the Treaty of El Pardo on 24 March 1778.

As a result of a policy of “provincialization” introduced in 1959, the Spanish territories of the Gulf of Guinea, Fernando Poo and the mainland called Rio Muni became Spanish provinces.

On 15 December 1963, under pressure from the United Nations and Afro-Asiatic countries, these territories were granted autonomous status in 1964, after an earlier referendum, although Equatorial Guinea remained under the control of the Spanish presidency.

On 12 October 1968, Equatorial Guinea at last gained independence. It was founded on the basis of conflicts arising from a series of complex disagreements:

- the persistent confrontation between nationalists and the colonizers;
- the social dichotomy created by the colonizers between the “savages” of the interior and the “civilized” inhabitants of the coastal areas and the islands.⁹
- the relatively recent animosity between the country's two main ethnic groups, the Fang and the Bubi, which had been encouraged by Spanish colonialists;
- the confusion sown amongst Equatorial Guinean nationalists by the Spanish lawyer, García Trevijano.¹⁰

The new independent republic was ruled by President Francisco Macías Nguema, a member of the Fang ethnic group, who unfortunately brought a new and extraordinary suffering upon the Equatorial Guinean people to follow the colonial repression they had endured. As the country rose out of 200 years of colonial authoritarianism it was transformed into a nepotistic republic. Its people became hostage to the bloody dictatorship of the Essangui clan and an estimated third of the population went into exile.

On 3 August 1979 the nephew of President Macías Nguema, Lieutenant-Colonel Teodoro Obiang Nguema, who was Chief of Staff of the Equatorial Guinean army, led a palace coup and seized power. President Macías Nguema, uncle of the new Head of State, was executed immediately afterwards. Some sources state that many of the abuses committed under Macías Nguema's regime were continued by his successor. The military dictatorship simply

⁹ There was an educated coastal population, whose members held the few positions of responsibility to which black people could be appointed within the colonial administration, while the inhabitants of the interior were practically treated as slaves.

¹⁰ On the role of Trevijano see below, section 2.2.3

preserved the previous government under a new guise without any respect for the rights of its people. Many of the leading figures in the old regime retained their positions under the new one. This situation still prevails.

2.2 Socio-economic and Political Situation before Independence

2.2.1 Socio-economic issues:

In comparison to the current situation there is general agreement that, before independence, Equatorial Guinea was relatively stable both socially and economically. Until 1968, the year of independence, Equatorial Guinea was seen as a rich country within an African context with an economy based on agriculture (essentially cocoa, coffee and tropical woods), fishing and a small but flourishing industrial base. Foreign trade, largely with Spain, generally showed a surplus which resulted in a positive balance of payments.

Equatorial Guinea headed the list of African countries measured according to their per capita exports: US\$ 135 in 1960 (compared to US\$ 105 for Gabon) and US\$ 332 in 1962.¹¹ In 1954 General José Díaz de Villegas publicly acknowledged that Equatorial Guinea brought Spain a total annual wealth of never less than 1,500 million pesetas in fruit and various merchandise. Such statements openly contradict the official line, which tended to describe Equatorial Guinea as a financial burden for the colonial power.¹²

| Year | Exports to Spain | Imports from Spain |
|------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1932 | 10.8 | 1.9 |
| 1934 | 16.8 | 1.7 |
| 1935 | 14.0 | 1.8 |
| 1940 | 29.0 | 7.1 |
| 1950 | 1,132.0 | 819.0 |

Trade between Equatorial Guinea and Spain in millions of pesetas/gold¹³

With regard to health facilities, Equatorial Guinea had one of the best health services in Africa with numerous hospitals and well-qualified staff. In 1961, infant mortality was 40.1 per thousand, compared to between 150 and 200 per thousand for Africa as a whole.¹⁴

In the field of education, school attendance rates were among the highest in Africa - 90% and sometimes higher – and illiteracy was almost unknown on the island of Fernando Poo.

2.2.2 Colonial Political Harassment

From the 1940s Spanish colonial policy gave rise to the birth of nationalist liberation movements which though determined were divided and badly organised.

¹¹ France, Ministry of Cooperation, *Guinée Équatoriale, dossier d'information économique*, Paris: Service des études économiques et questions internationales, June 1980; and Ndongo Bidyogo, D., Guinea, merienda de blancos, *Historia 16*, t. 4, n. extra 9, April 1979, pp 105-16

¹² Lacosta, X., Cronología de Guinea Ecuatorial : 1950/1979, http://www.afrol.com/es/Paises/Guinea_Ecuatorial/documentos/cronologia.htm [accessed 31 December 2001]

¹³ Fernandez Clemente, E., Un lugar al sol: Colonialismo en Guinea (1883-1936), *Historia 16*, t. 4, n. extra 9, April 1979, pp 96-102

¹⁴ French Ministry of Cooperation

In 1950, several of these groups joined together to form the Cruzada de Liberación, which aimed to make black and white people alike aware of the abuses of the colonial system. Its first leader was Acacio Mañé Ela who went so far as to undertake joint action with the Gabonese and Cameroonian resistance movements fighting against French colonialism. In that same year, 1950, some discontented seminarists from the Banapa Seminary on what is today the Island of Bioko led a revolt which resulted in the expulsion of several students, including Atanasio Ndongo Miyone, Enrique Gori Molubela and Rafael-Dámaso Sima. They returned to the country's mainland territory, Rio Muni, and Ndongo Miyone began working actively with the Cruzada.

Acacio Mañé Ela, a man of strong religious conviction, was arrested by the Spanish Civil Guard on 20 September 1958 immediately after he had been to confession with Father Nicolás Preboste. He was assassinated the following night and his body was thrown into the sea with a stone tied to his neck.

2.2.3 Independence

Equatorial Guinea became independent on a foundation of deep and complex political conflict between Equatorial Guinean nationalists, who were aspiring to freedom, and Spain, the motherland, which was deeply divided into two factions over the question of Equatorial Guinea. The Spanish Presidency, represented by Luís Carrero Blanco, Secretary General to the Presidency, was responsible for the issue of colonial Equatorial Guinea and strongly supported the idea of indefinite Spanish presence in the country so that Spain could retain the huge benefits it had developed over centuries. On the other hand, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, represented by Minister Fernando-María Castiella, who had to take responsibility for Spanish colonial policy and its inconsistencies, was in favour of embarking on a process of independence.¹⁵

Under pressure from the United Nations, the Fourth Commission on Decolonization (or the Special Committee of Twenty-Four) recommended in Resolution No 2230 of 20 December 1966 that Spain urgently called a constitutional conference to set a date for Equatorial Guinea's independence.

The country's main political parties and social groups MONALIGE, the National Union Movement of Equatorial Guinea (Movimiento de Unión nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial - MUNGE), IPGE, the Ndowné group and the *Fernandina* minority – wanted a form of independence which would bring about a unitary state combining the two island regions and the mainland. This position was supported by Foreign Affairs Minister Castiella and Manuel Fraga Iribarne, Minister for Information and Tourism.

Carrero Blanco was determined to use every means to prevent the country achieving self-determination and to retain control of the country's important economic interests, so he gave support to colonial circles within the country and encouraged the formation of small local ethnic groupings, such as the Bubi Union (Unión Bubi), led by Edmundo Bosió Dioco, who proposed separate independence for the two regions.

During the Constitutional Conference the Spanish lawyer, García Trevijano, first appeared on the Equatorial Guinean political scene. He attended the Conference officially to help draft an

¹⁵ Liniger-Goumaz; Nguema Esono and Balboa Boneke

electoral law and the new constitution which would bring independence to the country. However, when the Equatorial Guinean delegation refused his offer of help, García Trevijano formed a faction called the Joint Secretariat (*Secretariado Conjunto*), led by Francisco Macías Nguema, which systematically opposed all proposals made by the Equatorial and Spanish delegations.

As we have already noted, it was in this conflictual climate of divisions and betrayals that the country gained independence, the polarity soon becoming apparent within the Government and more generally throughout the population in this newly-independent country. There is no doubt that this very difficult beginning shapes and explains the history of the country to this day.

2.3 After Independence

What followed was serious political, economic and social deterioration.¹⁶

The country became independent on 12 October 1968. Although he was democratically elected as President of the Republic, Francisco Macías Nguema led his country to ruin and destitution by his dictatorial and excessively repressive policies.

The situation deteriorated very quickly: economic and administrative infrastructures were destroyed and the roads became unusable for lack of maintenance. In addition, agriculture, which had been the country's main source of wealth suffered, fishing was reduced to nothing more than a subsistence activity and all the industries which processed agricultural products were closed. In 1978, exports were down to around 20% of their 1970 levels. The state of the hospitals was indicative of the social situation. There was no furniture, linen, medicines or basic materials and the staff were incompetent and inadequate in number. The education system soon became catastrophic. The schools were just as dilapidated as the hospitals as no funds were made available to maintain them.

In the field of politics, the multi-party system was simply abolished and replaced by the sole party, the Sole National Workers' Party (Partido Unico Nacional de Trabajadores – PUNT), to which the whole population was obliged to belong. This tendency to compel the population to belong to the ruling party still persists, even though a multi-party system has been allowed since 1992. Anyone who opposes this policy is called “a subversive”. One of the regime's main activities is seeking out subversives and it is a skilled practitioner at forcibly transforming the population's attitude. The people have had to relearn how to survive in poverty and to devote itself to the personality cult of the President of the Republic. With the exception of France which has never broken off its relations with Equatorial Guinea, the West, with all that it represents, has become the declared enemy of the regime. This was the period when the largest number of the country's intellectuals, cadres and political dissidents died, starting with the leaders of the former political parties : Atanasio Ndongo Miyone (died on 25 March 1979 at the Model Prison in Bata), Bonifacio Ondo Edu (died on 26 March 1979 at Black Beach prison in Malabo), Enrique Gori Molubela, Saturnino Ibongo Iyanga, Pastor Torao Sikara, and so on. In fact it would seem that all intellectuals were regarded as potential opponents of the regime. This marked the beginning of the irresistible political rise of

¹⁶ Liniger-Goumaz; Nguema Esono and Balboa Boneke

President Macías Nguema whose path was to be marked by ever more terrible crimes and murders.

It was also during this period that the Equatorial Guinean population took the road to exile in large numbers, fleeing political cleansing, police harassment, poverty and denunciation. Amongst the first to open up this new phase of exile was the main electoral rival to President Macías Nguema, the previous government's President, Bonifacio Ondo Edu, who took refuge in Gabon before being extradited by President Bongo and executed without trial by the Equatorial Guinean authorities.

On 3 August 1979, a palace revolt led to the fall of Francisco Macías Nguema and resulted in his nephew, Lieutenant-Colonel Teodoro Obiang Nguema seizing power.

3 The Equatorial Guinean Exodus

3.1 The Origins of Equatorial Guineans in Exile

The practice of large scale exile for Equatorial Guineans that we see today began with the regime of Francisco Macías Nguema when the country became independent. It was the social repression, the most extreme use of denunciations, arbitrary imprisonment, political murders and summary executions, the almost systematic persecution of intellectuals, cadres, members of the liberal professions and the country's serious economic decline which caused thousands of Equatorial Guineans to flee into exile at this time.

3.2 The Different Categories of Refugees

The first Equatorial Guineans to leave their country were those who feared for their lives as a result of political persecution, that is, intellectuals, cadres and well-known opposition political parties activists. We will call these the political refugees, regardless of whether they were recognized as such in their country of refuge. Then, with the country's rapid economic decline, those seeking better living conditions went into exile, fleeing general poverty and the total absence of any sure guarantee of work. These are what we will call economic refugees.

Anyone who left the country was automatically considered a "subversive", an enemy of the regime and therefore the homeland, and so ran the risk of the most severe punishment including death if they were to return to Equatorial Guinea. Some people were persecuted simply on the basis of having relatives in neighbouring Gabon or Cameroon. Many Equatorial Guineans living abroad still have this fear today.

In Spain in particular but also elsewhere in Europe and the rest of the world, there are many Equatorial Guineans who were students or cadres who had recently left university or other training centres but felt trapped there because of the socio-political developments at home after independence and so preferred to delay their return while keeping an eye on developments in Equatorial Guinea from afar. Because of the continuing instability, these people have now set up permanent home in their country of refuge. Spain is also the favoured destination of all those who dared not return to Equatorial Guinea after finishing their studies elsewhere, in countries such as Egypt, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Cuba, Venezuela or the Eastern bloc countries.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ndongo Bidyogo

After the fall of Macías Nguema, some people tentatively began returning from exile to Equatorial Guinea. This soon ceased. Fleeing into exile recommenced, Spain being the main destination. This is what we will call the new wave.

So, with reference to Equatorial Guinean refugees, there are in fact :

- all those who fled the country during President Macías Nguema's time, whether for political or economic reasons ;
- all those who were abroad when the massive post-independence repression began ;
- the new wave, more for economic reasons, of those who went abroad, mostly to Spain, after President Obiang came to power ; and
- the children of all these refugees who were born in exile and some of whom are now more than 30 years old. They have not physically experienced the Equatorial Guinean drama but they understand and are indirectly victims of it.

3.3 The Countries of Refuge

The main countries which have hosted Equatorial Guinean refugees are Gabon, Cameroon and Nigeria within Africa, and in Europe, because of historical links and the cultural and linguistic ties between the two countries, Spain.

At first Gabon was the main destination for Equatorial Guinean refugees, until the end of the regime of President Macías Nguema, because of physical proximity, ease of access, economic prosperity and because of the ethnic similarities it shares with Equatorial Guinea. Once relations with Spain were more or less normalized under President Obiang, the migratory flow towards Gabon tended to slow and the flow towards Spain definitely increased. To a lesser extent, Cameroon and Nigeria have welcomed many Equatorial Guinean refugees because of their physical proximity.

3.4 Approximate Numbers of Refugees in the Main Countries of Refuge

As there is almost no body with a specific responsibility for collecting information about the Equatorial Guineans in the various countries of refuge, including Spain, all figures relating to these refugees are no more than vague estimates. There is no precise figure nor any basic data concerning the number of Equatorial Guinean refugees throughout the world.¹⁸

At the end of 1972 it was estimated that 30,000 Equatorial Guineans were in Gabon, 20,000 in Cameroon, 3,000 in Nigeria and 5,000 in Spain and other European countries.¹⁹

Other sources estimate that around 1980, between 60,000 and 80,000 Equatorial Guineans were in Gabon, 30,000 to 40,000 in Cameroon and 40,000 in Nigeria.²⁰ According to the UN

¹⁸ Bondjale, M., leader of the Equatorial Guinean association MALEVA in Spain, living in Madrid. Personal Interview, Madrid, 21 April 2001; Fernandez Marugan, A., Leader of a Equatorial Guinea democratic solidarity association (ASODEGUE). Personal interview, Madrid, 20 & 22 April 2001; Ndjeng Mba, P., President of the Association of Equatorial Guinean Refugees in Spain (AREGE), veterinary surgeon, living in Madrid, Personal interview, Madrid, 19 April 2001; and Obama Ndong, M., Equatorial Guinean from Bata, refugee in Gabon since 1997, member of the CPDS political opposition party in Equatorial Guinea and living in Libreville. Handwritten report made in Libreville in June 2001

¹⁹ Ndong Bidyogo

²⁰ France, Ministry of Cooperation

Commission on Human Rights' Special Representative for Equatorial Guinea, 10% of all Equatorial Guineans live in Spain.²¹

To get a personal view on the subject and experience the situation first-hand, we travelled to Spain and sent other investigators to Gabon.

According to the President of the Association of Equatorial Guinean Refugees in Spain (Asociación de Refugiados de Guinea Ecuatorial en España - AREGE), Pablo Ndjeng Mba, in 2000 throughout the whole of Spain there were only 178 Equatorial Guinean refugees who were officially registered. AREGE is the only association of Equatorial Guinean refugees which is officially recognized by the Spanish state; it is accountable to the Office of Asylum and Refuge which itself is accountable to the ministries of the Interior and Justice. This is the office which grants or refuses the right of asylum and informs AREGE how many requests for asylum from Equatorial Guineans have been successful in Spain each year. Once status has been granted, the refugee may apply to the Spanish Commission for Assistance to Refugees (Comisión Española de Ayuda a los Refugiados - CEAR), an independent foundation, to request help. It is CEAR which administers the money given by the UNHCR for refugees in Spain.

The assistance given to refugees in Spain seems insufficient to provide for normal living conditions and refugees' children find it particularly difficult to continue their studies. Refugee status simply provides a refugee card as a sign of the right to official recognition and a single grant of between 150,000 and 200,000 pesetas. From that point on it is for the refugee to find a way to survive as there is no regular assistance, only small payments from time to time. In this situation, if the refugee does not find work, life can be very uncertain. This explains why these refugees usually apply for Spanish nationality. This gives them access to Spanish state benefits which are much more generous and would allow them to get around the many obstacles within Spanish society and thereby develop a dignified and stable immigrant lifestyle. There is a substantial incentive for them to become Spanish citizens, despite their own judgement. They would generally much prefer to retain their original nationality if they could maintain a decent standard of living as recognized refugees.

We also met Marcelino Bondjale, President of MALEVA, an Equatorial Guinean association of the Ndowé group in Spain. This association represented Equatorial Guinea at the National Forum for the National Integration of Immigrants. Marcelino Bondjale believes that everyone who is forced to move from home because it is impossible to live a normal life there should be considered a refugee.

In fact everyone we met in Madrid recognized that the official figure of 178 Equatorial Guinean refugees in Spain is ridiculous. The number of people who should benefit from this status must be much higher but the conditions required to grant the right to asylum are very restrictive.

In response to the question of how many Equatorial Guineans currently live in Spain, the estimates vary between 40,000 and 100,000, including those who have double nationality. Apart from a few exceptions, these people still feel first and foremost citizens of Equatorial Guinea and only consider themselves Spanish by force of circumstance.

²¹ Gallón Giraldo, G., Report on the human rights situation in the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, 57th session, E/CN.4/2001/38, 16 January 2001

In Gabon we were not able to meet the Collective of Equatorial Guinean Political Refugees in Gabon (Collectif des Réfugiés Politiques de Guinée Équatoriale au Gabon - COREPOGE)²² for practical reasons. Miguel Obama Ndong, who lives in exile in Libreville because of political persecution, gave us an overview of the situation in Gabon. As in other countries of refuge, it is very difficult to know how many Equatorial Guineans live in Gabon because there is no official body which collects this information. According to his own inquiries, he believes the figure varies between 50,000 and 70,000 of whom around 4,000 have official refugee status. All those in exile who have a UNHCR “refugee status” document issued by their Regional Office in the Democratic Republic of Congo in accordance with their own criteria are considered to be political refugees in Gabon. This document is then ratified by the Libreville office which grants a “refugee certificate” which can either be permanent or renewable every two years, depending on Gabonese Government criteria.

4 The Current Situation

4.1 Human Rights in Equatorial Guinea

Through its own experts, the UN Commission on Human Rights has been following the situation in Equatorial Guinea since 1979. Such attention is quite unique. Under a UN mandate, Fernando Volio Jimenez (from 1979 to 1993), Alejandro Artucio Rodriguez (from 1993 to 1999) and Gustavo Gallón Giraldo (since 1999), have all consistently and systematically denounced the total disregard of any basic human rights in the country and the total lack of any will on the part of the regime to see the situation change in a positive way.

Throughout these 22 years, technical assistance has been given and recommendations have been made, although for the most part they have never been implemented. Year after year, the detailed reports of these experts regularly inform us of the worrying situation of human rights violations in Equatorial Guinea. The current situation is summarized in the last report by the Special Representative of the Commission, Gustavo Gallón Giraldo, presented in April 2001 to the 57th session of the Commission on Human Rights, and in the text presented by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches before the same Commission. This text covers the systematic violation of human rights within a context of authoritarianism, impunity and limitless government corruption.²³

It is worth noting that the enormous support given by powerful multinational corporations, in particular those operational in the oil sector, but also those in other fields such as telecommunicatons, forestry and public building projects, provides solid comfort to the regime in the face of these human rights violations.

As for freedom of movement, the numerous checkpoints along the country’s roads (there were reportedly seven between Bata and Koga, two mainland towns which are 145 kilometres apart) were removed a few days before the last visit of the Special Representative in November 2001. At the time this report was written (December 2001), they had not been re-established. For all people wishing to leave Equatorial Guinea, including Equatorial Guinean

²² BP 14.156, Libreville, Gabon

²³ Gallón Giraldo; World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Intervention at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 57th session - Agenda item 9, *Demande d’intensification de la pression et plus d’actions sur le régime établi en Guinée Équatoriale*, 2 April 2001

citizens, it is still impossible to travel outside the country without an exit visa granted by the security authorities.

With regard to freedom of expression, the slightest perceived criticism of the system can be construed as an insult against the President of the Republic and can give rise to punishment designed to intimidate. Even priests have been personally threatened when their sermons do not please the authorities. The few publications which are independent of the Government are subjected to constant harassment. The opposition has no access to national television and radio which are used as permanent propaganda machines for the Government and its party, the Equatorial Guinea Democratic Party (Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial - PDGE).

Doubtless, however, it is in the labour sector where discrimination is the most blatantly obvious. Whether seeking a job in the public sector or in major private companies, it is indispensable to hold a ruling party membership card. It is important to note that the multinational companies are complicit in this abusive and inadmissible practice.²⁴

Detainees are systematically subjected to forced labour without any remuneration.

With regard to justice, it is a simple fact worth repeating that it is totally non-existent in Equatorial Guinea. Judicial power, just like all other state powers, depends directly on the personal will of the President of the Republic and those close to him. Judges, who mostly lack appropriate training, are arbitrarily appointed by the President of the Republic and remain under his orders. It is the Government which carries out the judicial functions and contradicts or annuls judicial decisions. Civilians are judged by the military. Those responsible for the repression enjoy total impunity and are usually rewarded by appointment to posts of public responsibility.

The regime is most intransigent with regard to the right of association. There is indeed a law to regulate associations though it was made to restrict the right of Equatorial Guineans to freely associate with each other. The authorities are mistrustful of people or organized groups who are not under their direct control and so the slightest attempt to create an association is systematically viewed with suspicion. There is institutional corruption in the education system, in particular there is an almost official illegal market in grades. Grades can be changed in exchange for sexual relations with female students. It is also the case that the children of some opposition figures are prevented from attending school normally and that teachers are recruited on the basis of political criteria. The health sector suffers from insufficient properly trained technical staff. This lack is made worse because the requirement that all workers show active support for the ruling party has become institutionalized and it is difficult, even impossible, to obtain basic diagnostic tests or essential medication. In

²⁴ For example, it is necessary to be able to demonstrate membership of the ruling PDGE party in order to obtain employment in any business that is closely linked to the State (which means nearly all). There are other examples of concrete action that demonstrate the collaboration between multinational companies and the government. For instance, the French-owned telecommunications company GETESA has on numerous occasions been accused of cutting off telephone communications from members of the opposition. Moreover, it is well known (though unfortunately without demonstrable evidence) that opposition politicians are subjected to systematic telephone tapping. At the beginning of the large scale court case against the opposition, which began on 25 May 2002 and still continues in Malabo, access to the Internet was cut off for several days without any apparent reason.

Equatorial Guinea, the ordinary citizen can fall victim to a preventable death, while the rich members of the regime are comfortably cared for abroad.

AIDS is spreading rapidly through the population, particularly the young, not least because of an increase in the levels of prostitution. The poverty that affects the majority of the population is the principal reason for this development. The arrival of multinational companies, with very much greater resources than the local population, has led to a steep increase in the cost of living without any corresponding increase in local purchasing power, and the presence of numerous expatriate oil company employees has also helped encourage prostitution.

There are persistent frequent threats against the person in Equatorial Guinea. Torture during police interrogation is almost systematic. Intimidatory physical punishments and prison are commonplace for real or alleged dissidents and political opponents. Some fifty members of the Bubi ethnic group who were implicated in the 21 January 1988 uprising are still rotting in the Black Beach prison of Malabo and the prisons of Bata and Evinayong which are both on the mainland. The elimination of troublesome people is systematic in Equatorial Guinea.

4.2 The Current Political Situation in Equatorial Guinea

The current political situation in Equatorial Guinea is no more than an extension of President Macias Nguema's regime, that is a dictatorship, continued by his nephew President Obiang and modified because of his links with the West. The system appears less brutal, but is in fact just as authoritarian and intolerant. Under Macias, just as much as under Obiang:

- political opposition is not tolerated, but instead severely repressed;
- presidential personality cult is the norm;
- certain parts of the population are systematically excluded from the process of government, which instead remains centred on a clan and family structure;
- there is no respect for human rights;
- the population is everywhere subject to intimidation and surveillance by the president's security forces.

In certain other respects matters have changed since Obiang came to power:

- unlike his predecessor, Obiang maintains close relations with the West and in particular with the US;²⁵ one aspect of this is that students are beginning to be sent abroad to study at Western universities;
- by and large the population is still poor, but at the same time some individuals are able to build up considerable wealth;
- corruption is reaching hitherto unimagined levels;
- there are fewer political assassinations than under Macias; however there are still some.

There is no political freedom despite a law which recognizes the right of all Equatorial Guineans to freedom of association,²⁶ and despite the National Pact which the Government and political parties signed in March 1993 with the aim of establishing the rules for a multi-party system in a democratic society.

²⁵ Apart from France, the only other countries with which Macias maintained political and diplomatic links were those with communist regimes.

²⁶ Equatorial Guinea, President of the Republic, *Ley de Amnistía*, N° 2/1992, 6 January 1992

The system of hunting down political opponents which was introduced under Macías Nguema continues in the same way under his successor. It has become more intensive now that it has extended its operations beyond the frontiers of Equatorial Guinea. Even within the limit of quite recent times there have been some notorious examples :

- From 17 June to 18 August 2000 Augusto Mba Sa, a Spanish citizen of Equatorial Guinean origin, was arrested and tortured when he returned to the country to pay a visit to his family. He was accused of being involved in conspiring to overthrow the Government. He managed to escape and sought refuge at the Spanish Embassy in Malabo. After his escape, another Spaniard of Equatorial Guinean origin, Jesús-Miguel Ondo Miyone, was arrested on 22 August 2000 and held hostage at Malabo prison.²⁷
- On 18 May 2002, Aquilino Nguema Ona, leader of an opposition political party who had sought refuge in Gabon, was kidnapped by three members of the Gabonese security forces after an agreement was reached with the Equatorial Guinean authorities, in exchange for a large sum of money. He was eventually expelled from Gabon and managed to flee to Spain where he remained at the time of finalizing this report.²⁸
- Santiago Eneme Ovono, known as *Alandi*, who was the blood brother of the President of the Republic, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, former diplomatic advisor to the President and former Ambassador to Cameroon, admitted that he had received orders to kidnap six Equatorial Guinean refugees in Cameroon and had refused to carry out the orders. He fled to Gabon on 17 January 2000, when he was warned that he risked being killed himself, and from there went to Spain where he remains in exile.²⁹ The person who had received the order to carry out his assassination, Enrique Angüé, was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment in August 2000 by an Equatorial Guinean court for the murder of a French volunteer worker in 1993.³⁰
- In May 1998 the Equatorial Guinean security services attempted to kidnap Delfín Eteo Sorizo, an Equatorial Guinean of the Bubi ethnic group who was a student at Owerri university in Nigeria.
- On 2 December 1997 a delegation from the Equatorial Guinean Ministry of Defence went to Yaoundé to negotiate the clandestine extradition of six Equatorial Guinean army officers based there. The delegation comprised General Antonio Mba Nguema (the President's brother), Santiago Eneme Ovono (Equatorial Guinean Ambassador to Cameroon), Julián Ondo Nkumu (Malabo Security Director) et de Enrique Nsué (2nd Secretary at the Embassy in Yaoundé). The mission failed.³¹

²⁷ Gallón Giraldo

²⁸ Email interview, December 2001

²⁹ Fernandez Clemente; France, Ministry of Cooperation; Ndjeng Mba; and Equatorial Guinea, President of the Republic

³⁰ Gallón Giraldo

³¹ Agence France Presse, Guinée équatoriale: Les autorités de Malabo dépèchent une délégation auprès de M. Biya, December 1997; Benkabouche; Esono Masie, P., Letter to Rafaela de la Torre, of Radio Extérieure d'Espagne, unpublished document, Yaoundé, 3 December 1997

- On 5 November 1997 the Equatorial Guinean security forces seized Felipe Ondo, former President of Parliament, and Guillermo Nguema Ela, former Economy and Finance Minister, in Gabon where they were refugees under the protection of UNHCR, and deported them blindfolded on the presidential plane to Malabo.³²
- On 23 November 1994 Marcos Manuel Ndong Owono, an Equatorial Guinean economist resident in Spain and member of the Convergence for Social Democracy (Convergencia para la Democracia Social - CPDS) opposition party, was arrested in Bata and accused of involvement in opposition political activity. He was imprisoned and expelled to Spain.³³
- On 28 December 1990 the Equatorial Guinean Ambassador in Libreville, Crisantos Ndong Abaha Mesian ordered the assassination of Carmelo Modú Acusé, leader of the Democratic Social Union (Unión Democrática Social – UDS), when he was a refugee in Gabon, although he is currently a member of the Government. A team of killers, led by Asumu Ali, Ndong Bikene, Marcelo Nve Mba and Manuel Mba, was given the task of carrying out this mission.³⁴

This list could continue for much longer....

Equatorial Guinea can be defined politically as a tiny oil-producing dictatorial state, which is theoretically rich, but where 65% of the population do not have the means to provide for their basic needs. As it is practically ignored by the outside world and supported by the Western powers which exploit its oil, Equatorial Guinea is protected from scrutiny and therefore free to systematically violate human rights. It is a country which has hardly ever known free elections and where institutionalized corruption reigns.³⁵

In Equatorial Guinea there is no distinction between the ruling party, the state and the Government. All three are mingled together into one entity which is led by the President of the Republic.

With regard to political activity as such, there are thirteen political parties which are recognized and which should theoretically be able to exercise their rights :

- Equatorial Guinea Democratic Party (Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial - PDGE), in power since independence in 1968 and led by the President of the Republic
- Convergence for Social Democracy (Convergencia para la Democracia Social - CPDS)
- Popular Union (Unión Popular - UP)
- Convergence for Social and Popular Democracy (Coalición Social Democrática y Popular - CSDP)
- Democratic Social Union (Unión Democrática Social - UDS)
- Liberal Party (Partido Liberal - PL)
- Equatorial Guinea Socialist Party (Partido Socialista de Guinea Ecuatorial - PSGE)
- Equatorial Guinea Popular Alliance (Alianza Popular de Guinea Ecuatorial - APGE)

³² Benkabouche; Ondo Obiang, F. and Nguema Ela G., Sworn statement, Malabo, 27 December 1997 (unpublished document)

³³ Amnesty International, *Equatorial Guinea : A Dismal History of Broken Promises*, London, July 1995

³⁴ Ndong Abaha, C. [Equatorial Guinean Embassy in Gabon], letter ordering the physical elimination of a political leader, a refugee in Gabon, Libreville, 28 December 1990 (unpublished document)

³⁵ Gallón Giraldo

- Party for the Social Democrat Coalition (Partido de Coalición Social Democráticos - PCSD)
- Progressist Democratic Alliance (Acción Democrática Progresista - ADP)
- Democratic Liberal Convention (Convención Liberal Democrática - CLD)
- National Democratic Union (Unión Nacional para la Democracia - UDENA)
- Social Democrat Party (Partido Socialdemócrata de Guinea Ecuatorial - PSD)

Other political parties and movements exist within the country but are not legally recognized :

- Republican Democratic Force (Fuerza Demócrata Republicana - FDR)
- Movement for the Self-determination of Bioko Island (Movimiento por la Autodeterminación de la Isla de Bioko - MAIB)
- Independents' Party (Partido de los Independientes - PI)

Finally, other parties operate outside the country. The following are the best known :

- National Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (Alianza Nacional de Restauración Democrática - ANRD) in Switzerland
- Union of Independent Democrats (Unión de los demócratas independientes - UDI), in Spain
- Union for Democracy and Social Development (Unión para la democracia y el desarrollo social - UDDS), in Spain
- Democratic Coalition Party (Partido de la coalición demócrata - PCD), in Spain
- Equatorial Guinea Liberation Front (Frente de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial - FRELIGE) in the US
- Progress Party (Partido del Progreso - PP) in Spain, disbanded in Equatorial Guinea in 1997 because of an attempted coup

Amongst the 13 legalized political parties only two have real capacity to oppose the current regime. The 11 others were either created by President Obiang to distract attention and give the impression of a multi-party system and therefore a democratic state, or they are virtual parties which are very small and can only make representations but have no membership base. Of the two real opposition parties, the UP has been subjected to the regime's destabilization tactics and is currently divided into two opposing factions. It is the CPDS alone which remains intact and fights against the regime in a significant manner, which means its leaders and members are persistently victims of discrimination and harassment by those in power.

A National Pact was signed by the Government and political parties in March 1993 after the political congress which took place between 10 February and 16 March 1993. It aimed to establish the rules for a better coexistence between the different political parties in the context of a democratic society.³⁶ The Pact was revised for the first time between 10 February and 25 April 1997 and again in September 2001. This second revision was no more than a masquerade which shows the regime has no will to create the conditions necessary to really establish the rule of law. It lasted only one week and the topics proposed by the CPDS and listed below were not even discussed :

³⁶ Equatorial Guinea, Prime Minister's Office, *Pacto Nacional : acuerdos entre gobierno y partidos políticos*, Malabo, 18 March 1993

- the condemnation of abuses committed by the authorities responsible for the outlying areas, especially the country's mainland where the lack of an international presence prevents any supervision of the human rights situation ;
- legalization for those political parties which have applied ;
- the lifting of restrictions on freedom of movement for citizens, by abolishing military checkpoints spread throughout the country, removing the requirement for nationals to obtain exit visas ;
- liberalization of the broadcast media and communications,
- the creation of a body to oversee how far the agreements between Government and the political parties are respected and to bring to justice those who contravene the agreements ;
- judicial reform with the assistance of the Special Representative of the UN Commission on Human Rights ;
- revision of legislation and electoral procedures, etc.³⁷

4.3 Ethnic Conflict

Several ethnic groups live together in Equatorial Guinea each with their own language :³⁸

- The Fang are the majority ethnic group in the country. Indigenous to the interior of the country's mainland, they represent between 80% and 90% of the total population and are divided into two sub-groups : the Fang-Okak in the South and the Fang-Ntumu in the North according to the theoretical horizontal demarcation line of the Wélé river. The Fang ethnic group is socially organized along the lines of family clans.
- The Bubi or Bohobé are the indigenous ethnic group from the Island of Bioko, where they are in the majority. The Bubi are far less numerous than the Fang.
- The Ndowné are a heterogenous collection of sub-groups sharing a common coastal heritage and living along the mainland's coast. They comprise the Combé, Benga and Bapuku and are very close to the Buiko, One, Mara and Igara.
- The three ethnic groups which are called "semi-coastal" are the Bisio, Balengue and Bassèque who are culturally between the inland Fang and the coastal Ndowné.
- The Annobonais, from the Island of Annobon who speak Annobonais or Fa d'Ambo.
- The Fernandino are not an ethnic group in any geographical sense; they are the descendants of those who had been enslaved in countries such as Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Benin, and who became the local bourgeoisie under colonial rule.

The inter-ethnic conflicts which primarily involve the Fang and Bubi, the two largest ethnic groups in the country, have basically occurred as a result of interference by Spain as the colonial power which started as soon as the country revealed its aspiration for independence.

We have already made clear above that since independence the Fang have had total control of all political power. Because of their crushing numerical majority without doubt they behave in a socially domineering manner. It is important to understand the basic difference between the country's political developments and the ethnic demands which have surfaced as they are often confused. In fact it is the Fang Essangui clan from Mongomo district which has been in

³⁷ CPDS : Propuestas para la revitalización del Pacto Nacional, Bata, 21 September 2001 (unpublished document)

³⁸ Amnesty International, *Equatorial Guinea: A Country Subjected to Terror and Harassment*, London, January 1999

charge of the country since independence, not all Fang. It is this clan which has subjected all Equatorial Guineans to its command. Both of the country's presidents have been from this clan. Since the country's independence all ethnic groups have been represented within Government and within all State bodies. But this apparent balance is only for the sake of form because in fact all the power is concentrated within the executive which is controlled with a rod of iron and without any sharing of power beyond the President of the Republic, his family and his close friends. No break with this working principle is allowed under threat of grave consequences. All those who come from other ethnic groups or from disadvantaged parts of the country are only in government for presentational reasons and have absolutely no power.³⁹ A particularly good example is the post of Prime Minister which is almost always held by a Bubi but which has no autonomy to make political decisions.

This explains why we feel it would be more accurate to speak of systematic discrimination by those in power against all those who do not unconditionally surrender to its will, and in particular the Bubi, rather than ethnic conflict in the sense of a direct attack between different ethnic groups on account of their identity. This discrimination between those who work with and maintain those in power and those who reject their unshared domination occurs at all levels.

The Bubi ethnic group which is the largest outside the Fang is therefore first in line for such discrimination and abuse. They justifiably consider they have been excluded from power as well as from economic resources since the country became independent. To this day they are the only ethnic group which is capable of clearly articulating firm demands for their rights.

In November 1993 a movement to express and defend the Bubi cause was formed, clearly in response to being victim to this systematic policy of exclusion in their own country and in their own land: the MAIB has always been considered illegal by the regime in power and remains so today. To be a member of MAIB or to support it is a punishable offence in Equatorial Guinea.

On 21 January 1998 several military camps were attacked on the Island of Bioko by groups of young Bubi who were armed with rudimentary weapons, and three soldiers and some civilians were killed. The authorities reacted to repress the attacks with disproportionate violence against the whole Bubi population lasting several weeks, which resulted in large-scale arrests and extrajudicial executions. Inevitably, the MAIB was accused of being behind the attacks. In May 1998 a war council (the name given to military tribunals in the Spanish-inspired legal system), which flouted most of the standards or international legal guarantees, tried more than 110 Bubi accused of these attacks, and a very large number of those sentenced were still in prison at the time this report was written. In March 2000, 41 of them were moved to Evinayong prison on the mainland far away from their families and their birthplace without official explanation, and most of them remain held there today.

This discrimination and abuse by the authorities which very often has a interethnic appearance is without doubt directed against the Bubi. However, it is not only the Bubi who suffer. Others are just as virulently attacked such as the Ndowé of the mainland coastal zone, the Annobonais and some Fang groups who are opposed to the authorities (in particular those from the coastal fringe of Bata, Mbini, Kogo and those from the southern mainland areas of Acurenam and Evinayong). Thus the problem also assumes an intraethnic dimension.

³⁹ Nguema Esono and Balboa Boneke

4.4 The Possibility for Exiles to Return

4.4.1 Official Legal Measures

Just after the 1979 coup the Government published a presidential decree (N° 45/1979 of 10 October 1979) which granted amnesty to all exiles provided that they abstain from any political activity. The Government made it very clear that it was incompatible for anyone to claim they wanted to reconstruct the country and at the same time get involved in politics.⁴⁰

Much later the amnesty law (N° 2/1992 of 6 January 1992) put a stop to all political crimes and persecution and in theory allowed all Equatorial Guineans to actively participate in the process of the nation's political development.

4.4.2 The Welcome Offered to Exiles Who Returned to Equatorial Guinea

After each of these two amnesties, many decided to give up exile and return to Equatorial Guinea. However, very rapidly they met clear hostility from their compatriots who had remained in the country during the Macías Nguema period. The majority of those who had stayed found it difficult to disguise their antipathy towards the "returning fugitives". Everyone still remembers the scornful name given to all exiles who returned to Equatorial Guinea around 1980/1981 "*donativo*", which likened them to opportunists and profiteers who had fled the country when it was in the grips of a bloody dictatorship and who now came back in large numbers to benefit from the gifts of international aid.

It seemed that there was a mixture of deep anger and envy on the part of the population which had remained in Equatorial Guinea. On the one hand the least privileged members of the population who suffered badly during the dictatorship and who received little attention from the international community, were jealous of the returning exiles because they often returned materially and economically better off than those who had not been able to leave. On the other hand, the more comfortable members of the population and the political leaders who had directly or indirectly been associated with the abuses of the last regime, looked unfavourably on those returning because of fears they might demand that those responsible for acts committed during Macías Nguema's dictatorship be held to account. However, it must be noted that many of those who had ruled with Macías Nguema retained positions of authority under the new regime.⁴¹

It is also true that the exiles who decided to return generally felt excluded from their own circles where they were often denied their rights, although they had expected a much more open welcome. The immediate result was disappointment, discouragement and often a return back into exile. This situation is symbolized by the double message from the political authorities which varies between declarations of goodwill towards exiles and measures which aim to prevent their return. This continues to this day and explains why there is such a persistently high number of people in exile.

Currently in Spain, as in most of the countries where Equatorial Guineans have settled, the first generation of refugees is very well settled and integrated into local society. They have formed family units, have responsible jobs and the vast majority of them have been granted the country's nationality. So many face the dilemma when touched by the irrepressible urge to return to their country, of whether to leave all that behind or to stay in exile because their

⁴⁰ France, Ministry of Cooperation.

⁴¹ Nguema Esono and Balboa Boneke

homeland does nothing to welcome them back, offers no social guarantees and shows nothing but hostility towards its nationals who return. For most children born of this first generation, they have acquired the nationality of their country of refuge and have only a distant interest in the problems of Equatorial Guinea. Students who left the country in the 1980s and the others who have since left tend to settle in their country of asylum waiting for better days in their home country.

Marcelino Bondjale believes Spain should play a role, the details of which would need to be decided, in helping Equatorial Guineans who have become naturalized Spaniards and who express a wish to permanently return to Equatorial Guinea because simply their presence in the country would be an important pressure on the regime. Also, to make their return easier and to ensure that they reintegrate, Spain should accept that Spaniards of Equatorial Guinean origin return on a voluntary basis to the country.

According to some refugees in Gabon, the reasons that the Equatorial Guinean refugees do not return are many, in particular:

- the regime's repression of the population in general and in particular of cadres and intellectuals whom they find more difficult to subjugate;
- the lack of respect for and restrictions on the rights of citizens;
- discrimination in the workplace and low salaries which are incompatible with the country's standard of living;
- the harassment of opposition political party members;
- the abuses carried out with impunity by the authorities and members of Presidential Security;
- arbitrary arrests and detentions;
- the lack of judicial guarantees;
- the daily climate of insecurity experienced by Equatorial Guinean in their home country, including oppression, terror, intimidation and fear⁴²

Miguel Obama Ndong states that it is not known how many Equatorial Guineans have been naturalized in Gabon today.

When he visited Madrid in November 2000, the Special Representative of the UN Commission on Human Rights for Equatorial Guinea was able to meet a large number of Equatorial Guineans in exile or resident in Spain, in particular members of the opposition political parties, social organizations as well as other individuals who form part of this exiled community. They proposed the idea that the UN Special Representative could act as mediator with a view to reaching agreement with the Equatorial Guinean authorities about how to install a democratic process based on the will of the people, which would include a general amnesty, the release of all political prisoners and the return of all exiles.⁴³

4.4.3 The Fears of the Political Authorities

The main fear of the political authorities is that the returning politicians and intellectuals would be difficult to control and would certainly be likely to disagree with the authorities. Most of the men in power in Equatorial Guinea are mediocre types, often incompetent and

⁴² Bibang Engonga, D., Equatorial Guinean from Kogo, aged 43, refugee in Gabon since 1975 and an employee in Libreville. Personal interview, Bata, 4 August 2001; and Obama Ndong

⁴³ Gallón Giraldo

submissive, or villagers “spontaneously” transformed into men of power whom the President can manipulate with ease. To find a decision-maker or political leader with senior responsibilities who is completely illiterate is not exceptional in Equatorial Guinea.

During the 33 years of dictatorial rule in Equatorial Guinea, the number of intellectuals, university professors, trained and competent cadres and politicians who are familiar with democratic systems has increased considerably and represents a real threat to the regime’s survival. It therefore has no interest in allowing the brains to return as this risks importing dissent and a wide range of demands. Its policy is to not encourage the exiles to return but rather to encourage the brain drain.

5 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, although Equatorial Guineans experienced exile during the colonial period this affected only a few people and was motivated by the legitimate struggle for independence. At that time, there were only a few political refugees and no economic refugees. Equatorial Guineans were almost proud to have that type of refugees.

Since accession to independence in 1968, the number of Equatorial Guineans in exile has been much greater, relentless and detrimental to the country’s development. It is motivated by bad management of the national resources and the dictatorial and bloody nature of the political regimes which have successively held power since independence and which have subjected their population to political terror, poverty and dependency on handouts. This accounts for the large number of political refugees, but particularly the economic refugees.

However, the future does not look promising. The forthcoming elections, in February 2003, which are described as “democratic” are anything but democratic. Obiang is letting it be known and understood that he has already won these future elections. The court case that is currently underway at Malabo against 144 supposed opposition members, who have all been brutally tortured, has no other aim than to finally remove the political parties that could possibly threaten his position: the CPDS (a legally registered party) and the FDR (not yet legalized). All members and activists belonging to these two parties are constantly risking their lives in this country. Obiang’s plan is to be the only serious candidate in the elections, with no competitor worth the name, and in this way produce the impression of a pseudo-transparent electoral process. For this reason he is extremely disturbed that Celestino Bacale has been put forward as a candidate by the CPDS.

One might reasonably expect that just about anything (for instance an uprising or a violent reaction) might happen at any one moment in this country, before or after the coming elections. Obiang knows that he can count on the solid support of the Americans, who want to protect their oil interests. The only thing that might change the current situation is the fact that his health is failing. His eventual demise would open the doors to a merciless succession war between all those who are at present close to him, starting with the most influential elements in the army and moving on to all the heavy-weights in his regime, including his own son. Of course, should the social and political situation so permit, the CPDS would put forward its candidate in the forthcoming election, with the aim of changing the country, and if the elections were held under genuinely transparent conditions, there would be few who would vote for Obiang and his party, the PDGE.

If today’s socio-cultural situation does not improve, the phenomenon of Equatorial Guineans in exile will continue for ever. Efforts by the international community to encourage the return

of refugees must therefore give priority to the restoration of a democratic government which respects the rights of its citizens with the active participation of *all* Equatorial Guineans. The independence which the people aspired to in 1968 has still not been achieved.

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