

For the Children who wash in Rivers

Report on a Parliamentary Delegation to Equatorial Guinea August 17th - 22nd 2011

This report will be filed in the House of Commons library. A copy will be forwarded to Amnesty International and the Press Association. The report is written in the hope that it may facilitate some small progress towards the improvement in the lives and living standards of the people of Equatorial Guinea (EG).

Delegation Lead - Nadine Dorries MP

Parliamentary delegation members: Steve Baker MP and Caroline Noakes MP

Accompanied by -

Ian Birrell, Investigative journalist and representing the organisation 'World Music'
Giles Ramsey, Chairman of the organisation 'Developing Artist'

Greg Wales - Triarius Foundationⁱ

Adrian Yelland - Lobbyist

The trip was paid for by the EG Government via Triarius.

None of Parliamentary members received any payment and undertook the trip in their own time during Parliamentary recess. All MPs have declared the visit in the Register of Member's Interestsⁱⁱ.

The group was accommodated at the Sofitel, Sipopo, near Malabo and in Bata, and flew to EG on Iberia.

General meetings were held with:

- Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Health and Human Rights, Solomon Owono
- Minister of Labour and Social Security, Estanislao Don Malavo
- Minister of Education, Joaquin Mbana Nchama
- President of the National University of EG, Carlos Nze Nsuga
- President of the Parliament, Angel Serafin-Seriche Dougan Malabo
- Prime Minister, Ignacio Milam Tang

Other meetings were held with:

- Vice-Minister of Agriculture, Diosdado-Sergio Osa Mongomo
- Director-General of Culture, Rufino Ndong Esono Nchama
- UK Honorary Consul, David Shaw

There were general visits to:

- Malabo Regional Hospital
- La Paz Hospital, Sipopo
- Luba port and Freeport

Background

Equatorial Guinea has a population of just under 700,000 citizensⁱⁱⁱ. The country has an undeniably appalling global reputation which is based on the President's reputation as a cannibal^{iv}, the failed coup attempt in 2004 by Simon Mann in which Mark Thatcher was implicated^v, the alleged human rights abuses^{vi}, the notorious Black Beach Prison^{vii} and the President's claim to be in direct communication with God and able to kill without consequence^{viii}.

The world view of EG is restricted by the fact that foreign media are not allowed entry visas and NGO's are not allowed access to the population. Recently, a foreign journalist who did gain entry was allegedly placed under arrest^{ix}.

However notwithstanding the above, EG was this year host to the African Union Conference. President Obiang was the Chairman for 2011.

Prior to the trip, MPs were provided with a basic briefing paper which outlined the recent political history of EG and a provisional agenda for the delegation.

We were briefed that the EG government now wanted to 'do the right thing' and that they were 'reaching out for help'. As head of a newly wealthy country the President wished to take steps towards building a true democracy. This was to be the first British delegation and was to serve a 'pathfinder' purpose towards facilitating a fresh, deeper and more accurate impression of EG to the outside world. This would be attained by unfettered access to Ministers and the freedom to go wherever MPs wanted and to speak to whoever they wished.

In the initial agenda formal visits were arranged including time with the President, a visit to Black Beach Prison, visits to schools and hospitals and two days free time to spend in various parts of the country talking to the local population.

Visits to various facilities were arranged for each individual MP in addition to a meeting with Gabriel Obiang, the President's son who oversees business negotiations and oil deals on behalf of EG.

All MPs were prepared to accept that the EG President and Government were genuine in their commitment to join the community of Nations and to discuss and consider whatever steps were necessary in order to achieve this outcome. They were also briefed that there was a genuine desire to reform and to improve the living standards for EG citizens.

Therefore, with this in mind but scant other information we undertook the visit in a spirit of hopeful anticipation. All three MPs are proud to have undertaken the visit and were united in our own primary objective which was to search for ways we could identify of improving the daily lives of EG citizens in addition to identifying opportunities for British business.

We were left with the impression that EG is a complex country of light and shade where many things are not what they seem. Our visit was hampered by the fact

that we were often provided with no background information in relation to whom we were meeting or the function of their departmental responsibility.

At no time during the visit did we venture far from our hotel unless we were accompanied by two secret service personnel who were deployed as drivers. We did manage to leave the hotel early on some mornings to go for a walk. The lack of residents on the road was initially puzzling until we discovered the reason was that local people were not allowed to enter Sipopo. If they did they had to pay bribes to travel on the roads, as the journalist within our party discovered. In Bata we drove along two or three miles of brand new beautifully built promenade upon which no one walked. It was obvious that our conversations in cars were being monitored. Visits were organised strictly and times when we would have liked to venture out on our own were spent waiting to visit a Minister. These visits usually took many hours to coordinate but were always about to happen at any minute, preventing us from doing anything else. The meeting with the President was cancelled, as was the meeting with his son. The visits to Black Beach prison, schools and the university never took place.

Economy

The dominance of oil and gas in the economy of Equatorial Guinea is well understood and it was evident on visiting the Country. It was clear that oil revenues occupy the minds of politicians and that oil drives policy.

Other natural resources include rich tropical soil and seas which - from the evidence of our own eyes - teem with fish. While travelling within the county it appeared that many people are able to subsist on natural resources, particularly plantains and bush meat.

The general population is excruciatingly poor, lacking even the most basic services such as satisfactory housing and treatment for preventable diseases. Meanwhile, the ruling elite display accoutrements such as watches and handbags from the very top of the worldwide luxury market.

As a small, resource rich country EG has every opportunity to provide all-round prosperity for her people now and in the future, but it is not clear that this opportunity will be seized.

Business

The opportunities for profitable business in Equatorial Guinea are tangible. However, it is not clear whether it is possible to do business in EG within UK anti-corruption law.

The Government of EG can be seen to have invested in infrastructure and homes. We travelled on high-quality roads and saw new blocks of apparently smart flats and social housing. The Presidential Zone of Sipopo included a large number of VIP

residences, two large conference centres, a new, lavishly-equipped hospital and the 5-star Sofitel Malabo Sipopo.

Luba Free Port ostensibly provides tariff-free import and export of equipment for the oil and gas industry. It was evident that worthwhile business is done but testimony about the transparency of that business was dependent on who was party to the conversation. It seemed that business could be conducted to appropriate standards with care and prior planning but that pressure from officials was ever present.

EG offers both business opportunities and excellent infrastructure for corporate staff. There is world-class accommodation, a first class hospital (private), a good airport and there are decent roads. However, severe doubts about governance persist.

In the foyer of the Sofitel hotel we met a businessman who, during a private dinner the previous evening, had presented a bankers draft for US\$800,000 to the President's son in return for drilling rights. All business appears to be done with the 'family' as opposed to the state. We learnt that to import goods into EG at any port other than Luba involved a bribe.

Governance

The Equatorial Guinea government exists to increase the personal wealth and political power of the ruling class at the expense of the wider population. During a meeting with the Prime Minister this was stated more or less explicitly in response to our probing about otherwise unspoken "cultural differences" which we were asked to accept as non-negotiable.

There is a pretence of service to the population, particularly through an awareness that the newly rich state ought to be providing health, education and housing, but it became obvious that this is indeed a pretence, whether through acts of omission or commission. Housing seemed empty, the schools team were unconvincing and the public hospitals were shocking. It emerged that the lavish hospital at Sipopo was strictly private, notwithstanding claims otherwise.

It seemed to us that the political lessons of the Enlightenment, particularly that the state should serve the public, were not entrenched in EG. In conversations with parliamentarians and ministers it became clear that who shall govern is determined on tribal lines, in the private words of one MP, and that elections are a sham by Western standards. While we may support the notion of family as the basis of society, while we may maintain a constitutional monarchy and while Western economies may be in dire straits, we nevertheless felt that only a minority of the ruling elite in Equatorial Guinea even aspired to the ideals of good governance which we might share.

There are certainly some good ministers and parliamentarians who would wish to transform their country and serve the people. They are hampered by their own country's comprehensive lack of skills and by the preparedness of Western

corporations to exploit their poor negotiating skills and inability effectively to supervise contracts.

While it would be easy to condemn the standards of governance of EG, a generous-spirited critique must recognise the desperate need of the people and public servants for substantive help. We should not shy away from stating that the Government of EG lacks the knowledge, talent, human capital and often intent necessary to deliver the prosperity which is surely within the country's grasp.

It may be that a British mission to EG, given the willing cooperation of the Government, could facilitate a much needed transformation towards sustainable and growing prosperity.

The impression of the Parliament Chamber was that it wasn't actually used although we accept they were also on recess. There was no evidence of staff, offices, computers, telephones, desks, visitors or indeed anything which pointed towards the daily ebb and flow of a parliament or an administration.

Education

There can be no doubt that Equatorial Guinea is a country of huge opportunity and potential but with many significant challenges which, if the Government is going to capitalise upon the advantages the oil revenues have brought, it needs to address as a matter of urgency.

In the field of education there are still too many children not in education at all, concluding their education before their primary schooling is finished and adult literacy and numeracy levels are poor.

There is not a good tradition of quality education in the country but Ministers showed clear awareness of that. There is an obvious aspiration to address a skills deficit which has been recognised but not substantively assessed.

During our visit we were not able to look at schools or question teachers, but were provided with the opportunity to meet a number of key influencers within the country, the Education Minister Joaquin Nbana Nchama, the Minister for Labour Estanislao Don Malavo and representatives of business interests operating in EG today. Further we were able to question the Prime Minister and the President of the Parliament on some of the key issues pertaining to educational achievement and provision.

EG is a small country, with a population just under 700,000. The lack of accurate census information makes it impossible to say how many school age children there are with any precision. However, it is a young population; the average life expectancy is only 50 years of age but this is celebrated by the Government as an improvement on recent history. It might therefore reasonably be assumed that there is a school age (5-16) population in the region of 150,000.

These children are widely spread and there is great disparity between the conditions and provision for schooling in urban and rural areas. When directly questioned as to whether there was transport to school available for children in rural areas the Education Minister admitted there was not and indicated the availability and choice for children in the towns was far greater than for those in rural areas. We were not told of any programmes to deliver more educational opportunities to rural parts of the country.

The Minister for Labour was very open in his assessment of the problem of a skills gap and acknowledged the need to 'up-skill' the local population in order to reduce reliance on foreign labour for skilled and semi-skilled trades. Much of the building work in the country is carried out by contractors from abroad, especially China, and there is a sense from the Government of EG that this has been expensive yet of poor quality. With 1,300 state funded building projects happening at present, the lack of adequately skilled EG workers to oversee both the financial and practical aspects of these projects is a serious deficiency. The EG Government is aware of that, and has a sensation of being 'ripped off' by foreign contractors and workers, but the Minister admitted that they lack capacity to resolve the problem.

The Labour Minister told us of five vocational colleges being established in the country, but there was no information forthcoming as to where and how far developed the plans (or indeed buildings) were. At the Education Ministry there was no reference to these schemes.

However, much emphasis was placed by both the Chancellor of the university and the Education Minister on the establishment of the national university. This is, in part, being funded by companies operating in the oil industry, under a programme which seemed not dissimilar to Section 106 monies which would be levied in the UK. This is, in principle, a good idea, leveraging in contributions from those benefiting from the natural resources of the country. However, there are a number of aspects which merit further investigation.

Who will attend the university? The language of the oil industry is English (due to US domination) which is the 4th language of EG, behind Spanish, French and Portuguese. There are very few native EG who speak English.

- Only 31.9% of EG children enrol in secondary school - it is difficult to perceive how investment in a university will benefit the 68% who finish their education at 11.
- Many of the affluent elite send their children out of the country to study - largely at US Universities. That is simply not an opportunity available to the vast majority of the country's children.
- Companies operating in the oil sector have diverted funds from their own training programmes as their contribution to the national university, which has resulted in a reduction in training opportunities.

What the University will not provide is the semi-skilled workforce needed to service the oil industry. Foreign companies operating in the region indicated that they struggle to find the semi-skilled operatives needed to function from the local

population. This deficit could well be addressed by the vocational colleges referred to by the Labour Minister but there is, as yet, no sign of college graduates coming through the system.

Lonrho has its own training programme but only for existing employees, there was no mention of any sort of apprenticeship scheme and certainly no readily available information to young people living in the rural areas as to how they could apply for a training place. The company has reduced places on this scheme since being obliged to contribute to the University.

Lonrho, in common with some other companies operating in EG, has taken its social responsibility to the local population quite seriously. They not only provide refuse disposal for the residents of Luba, but also provide a pre-school for local children aged 3-5. This gives the children a safe and clean environment in which to play and develop their early skills.

One of the aspects of education in EG that left us with significant concerns was the attitude towards the education of girls. The Prime Minister, laudably, argued that there should be no discrimination, and that equality of opportunity was what mattered. He did not advocate positive discrimination towards girls but wanted to ensure there should be the same opportunity for girls and boys. This was in stark contrast to the Education Minister, who claimed girls left school earlier because of biology and because they wanted "an easy life".

However, they have achieved significant progress in the area of female representation in their parliament with now 20% of MPs being female. Their affluence and success is in marked contrast to the situation the rest of the population experiences.

Health

A number of hours were spent with the health Minister and his team who reassured us of the commitment the Equatorial Guinean Government has towards improving healthcare provision and delivery.

We were told of programmes to assist with river blindness, malaria and AIDS. The Minister was proud that Malaria in children had reduced by 56% over the previous three years. This reduction had been brought about by the American Oil company, Marathon, who had introduced a programme of regular spraying on the island.

A visit to the 'public' hospital was agreed for the following day which turned out to be shocking. Torn between displaying polite gratitude to our hosts and incredulity at what we were being told and shown, the visit took place in a surreal atmosphere.

The hospital was a building full of empty rooms with outdated, unusable equipment. For example, there was a special care baby unit with a cot and a box of very dated drugs but no other equipment, not even the most basic equipment such as giving sets, IV fluids, medicines, dressings, linen, cleansing fluids etc. The

resuscitation rooms were locked. Upon enquiring we were told that if a patient came in with a heart attack the room would be unlocked. We requested that it be unlocked but were told the man with the key could not be found.

We met two doctors with no patients, sat in pristine white gowns behind immaculate tables, as if waiting for us to arrive. The bins were all empty (as noted by Ian Birrell) and the floors spotless.

A patient was wheeled past on a trolley as though having come from an operating theatre. It appears he was wheeled into the car park. We were not shown an operating theatre.

The entire visit was bizarre and had obviously been staged for our benefit.

The following day, Ian and Giles who had greater freedom to roam than the MPs went into the town and spoke to local people. They also went back to the hospital and found a quite different scene although one which is more 'normal' by 'African' standards (accepting there is no such thing as 'standard African' and that each country is diverse in its own right). They reported long, patient queues of mothers sat on dirty floors with babies waiting for help, dirty bins and an absence of the 'Casualty' tableau to which we had been treated the day before.

We were taken to the new hospital in Sipopo itself which was built and is run by an Israeli company. This hospital is one any British town would be proud of and the technology was they very latest.

We were informed that this was a reference hospital, i.e. should someone be admitted into the public hospital in the town who cannot be catered for within the ability of that hospital, the patient would be sent to Sippopo.

Having seen what we had at the public hospital this was an immense and immediate relief.

We later discovered that a young boy who had developed a brain tumour was taken to the new hospital. He was refused entry until those who had taken him handed over \$2,500. The people who took him didn't have this much money but they managed to secure a small amount and he was allowed in, where he later died.

Future Steps

If Equatorial Guinea wishes to enter the Community of Nations then there are certain preliminary steps which need to be taken.

The ruling family need to relinquish their hold on power and accept the premise of free and fair elections.

NGO's should be allowed access to the population and funding should be provided to various external organisations such as the British Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to provide specialist healthcare programmes and training.

Foreign journalists should be allowed entry visas and be allowed to travel without fear or hinderance.

Healthcare needs to become a priority and the EG government, in the initial phase, needs to buy-in expertise and establish a robust healthcare service as an investment for the future.

If EGs native population are to benefit from the oil industry they need vocational training to be able to work in the service industries springing up around the oil companies. Vocational colleges are an urgent priority.

Numeracy and literacy rates are poor and a low proportion of children even start secondary school - investment is required in primary and secondary education and means of getting children in rural areas to school.

Access to texts and IT - historically we were told there has been an issue with availability of relevant texts in Spanish, IT makes this a great deal easier and investment in IT equipment for the country's school children could make a significant difference.

Adult education - provision of evening classes in languages and practical skills to give those of working age a chance of being involved in the infrastructure building projects and to support the oil industry etc - whilst there needs to be a focus on traditional 5-16 education the opportunity to improve the education of the adult population should not be overlooked.

Teacher training - what the new national university certainly has the potential to do is to improve and increase the level of teacher training, thereby extending the range and quality of educational opportunity for future generations of children

The oil revenues of EG will not last forever and it is very sad that the vast sums of money being earnt now appear to be channelled into one man and his extended family.

An oil worker told us that the President's son will drive past workers in one of his many Ferraris as they hand out shoes to the children who suffer from puncture wounds to the feet which become infected.

The population of EG is under 700,000 people. The cost of laying fresh water pipes is insignificant compared to the wealth of the nation.

It could be a first step of commitment towards the people and a demonstration of intent to turn around the lives of the population as well as the ruling family.

EG could be a land of milk and honey for all its inhabitants and use its wealth to invest in the long term future prosperity of the nation. It has the potential in

human capital but it needs the leadership to demonstrate the will to relinquish power, to share the wealth and to understand the concept that the oil and minerals belong to all the people in EG. That the revenue from the same should be channelled into a viable functional state existing solely for the greater public good.

“As you look out of the window you see children bathing in rivers knowing full well that, rather than cleaning themselves, they are contracting any amount of awful diseases such as river blindness and then you hear within the hour that Obiang has just bought himself a £500 million New York apartment”.

References

ⁱ <http://trariusfoundation.org/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmregmem/contents.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ek.html>

^{iv} <http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Obiang-will-eat-my-testicles-20040311>

^v <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3996243.stm>

^{vi} <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/af/118999.htm>

^{vii} <http://web.archive.org/web/20070617150549/http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR240032007?open&of=ENG-2AF>

^{viii} <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3098007.stm>

^{ix} <http://allafrica.com/stories/201106200153.html>