

Grim Fate May Await Mann in Equatorial Guinea

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Lawyer fears that if his client is extradited, he will be tortured and denied treatment for a hernia that would end up killing him.

The fate of Simon Mann, accused of planning a coup to unseat Equatorial Guinea president Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, may be sealed within days. According to an intelligence source, he will be extradited from Zimbabwe to Equatorial Guinea in September to stand trial for the alleged attempted coup, which is said to have been foiled in 2004 by the Zimbabwe government.

Mann completed the requisite three years of his four-year jail term - for breaking Zimbabwean firearms and immigration laws - on May 9 but was immediately redetained pending his extradition. His lawyer, Jonathan Samkange, of Byron Venturers and Associates, has been fighting the extradition ever since, arguing the move would amount to a death sentence. His appeal against an extradition ruling, which was handed down in May, is expected to be heard early in September.

President Obiang was in Harare this week, officially to open the annual Harare Agricultural Show. However, the intelligence source said the president is also here to finalise a kind of "barter trade" in which he has offered to supply Zimbabwe with fuel in return for Mann.

Zimbabwe has been in the grip of a fuel crisis for the past eight years caused by serious foreign currency shortages. Equatorial Guinea is rich in oil and has signed a bilateral agreement to supply fuel to Zimbabwe.

Relations between Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea have strengthened recently with officials from the latter visiting Zimbabwe on several occasions in the past few years. The Equatorial Guinea president himself was in Zimbabwe in March on a state visit when it is said the fuel-for-Mann deal was penned. Early in June Zimbabwean state media reported that Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea had signed an energy trading agreement. At the time, observers noted that Zimbabwe was failing to pay for fuel imports from its traditional suppliers and even close allies such as Libya, due to the lack of foreign currency.

Mann was accused of planning to overthrow the government of Equatorial Guinea by leading a mercenary force into the capital Malabo in an effort to kidnap or kill the president. In November 2004, he was convicted in Equatorial Guinea in absentia, but will stand trial there, according to international law, once he is extradited to the country.

"Equatorial Guinea desperately needs Mann to serve as an example to other would-be coup plotters and also to see if they can persuade him to name the people who were really behind the coup," said the intelligence source.

His lawyer said extradition would lead to Mann being tortured and denied treatment for a hernia that would end up killing him. Samkange said last month, "He is so ill he should not be extradited. He will not be able to withstand trial. Equatorial Guinea does not send its prisoners for treatment. It only allows doctors to visit inmates. If he is sent, it will be like he is being sent to die."

Mann, 55, is described in the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, as a "security expert, mercenary and former British Army officer, and South African citizen". He set up a private security company which guarded oil fields in Angola during that country's civil war.

On March 7, 2004, Mann and 69 others were arrested in Zimbabwe when their Boeing 727 was seized by security forces during a stop-off at Harare airport where the aircraft was due to be loaded with 200,000 US dollars worth of weapons and equipment. Mann argued that the men and the weapons were on their way to the Democratic Republic of Congo, to guard diamond mines. However, the men were charged with violating the country's immigration, firearms and security laws and later accused of engaging in an attempt to stage a coup-d'etat in Equatorial Guinea.

Mann and his colleagues were put on trial in Zimbabwe, and on August 27 Mann was found guilty. Sixty-six of the other men were acquitted, and eventually repatriated to South Africa. Mark Thatcher, son of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, was named as the chief backer of the coup plot but did not stand trial in Zimbabwe. Instead, he drew a suspended sentence and a hefty fine in a plea bargain with South Africa authorities regarding his financing of a helicopter to be used in the alleged plot.

A year after Mann's trial, an Amnesty International report highlighted the prosecution's failure to produce conclusive evidence that a coup attempt had actually taken place.

Once in Equatorial Guinea, Mann is likely to be incarcerated in the Black Beach prison, which is notorious for bad conditions. Inmates rarely get medical treatment and are often starved and tortured. One of Mann's alleged co-conspirators has already died at Black Beach. A newspaper report last May described Black Beach prison as follows, "There are no human rights, no proper access for lawyers, no regular family visits, no medical supervision; in fact, almost no contact whatever with the outside world from behind the barbed wire and the guard towers.

"The jail, situated on the tropical volcanic island of Bioko, is a black hole into which prisoners disappear – often in mysterious circumstances – or die of chronic disease after being beaten."

Analysts say the effect on Zimbabwe if Mann is extradited will be a further loss of international goodwill from the few countries which still sympathise with the country.

Obiang "is well known for his cruelty and sending a sick man like Mann to a sure fate would not be seen as a good thing to do by the rest of the world", said a lawyer in Harare.

He said the world already put presidents Obiang and Robert Mugabe in the same league of cruel dictators and it would not be in Mugabe's interest to reinforce the perception by sending Mann to certain death.

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