

A frightening weekend for Mark Thatcher

By Fred Bridgland
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Margaret Thatcher's controversial son, Mark, must be a nervous man this weekend as his friend and close Cape Town neighbour, Simon Mann, begins a seven-year jail term in Zimbabwe's notorious Chikurubi Jail for offences related to an attempted mercenary coup d'état in Equatorial Guinea.

Mark Thatcher is under house arrest in Cape Town, facing charges of co-financing the coup and providing a plane that was scheduled to fly an exiled opposition leader into Equatorial Guinea to replace dictator-President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo.

Thatcher, 51, faces the possibility of 15 years' incarceration in a South African prison system that is notorious for its gang violence, overcrowding and disease. Thatcher, who has lived in Cape Town for the past eight years, will reappear in court on November 25 to answer charges that he breached South Africa's strict anti-mercenary legislation, the Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act.

A newly completed three-year commission of inquiry, under Judge Thabani Jali, said that what goes on in South African prison cells when nobody is watching is appalling. Rape is commonplace and lethal, given that most prisoners are HIV-positive. "Warders pay little or no attention to reports that it has happened," the Jali Commission reported. Amnesty International has warned the South African government it is at risk of breaching international human rights laws.

New prisoners find themselves pressurised into joining one of the gangs that control prison life, such as the 28 Gang and 26 Gang, which have chapters in each of the country's 250 prisons. Gangs use the Aids virus as a means of control – threatening those who defy them with death by "slow puncture" (repeated rape).

"If you don't belong to a gang, then you'll be victimised by pretty much everyone," said Makubetse Sekhonyane, a researcher at the Institute for Strategic Studies in Pretoria. "They effectively run prisons, bribing guards to turn a blind eye to their activities," he said.

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Sentences for those who transgress gang law are irrevocable, long-term prisoner Marius Engelbrecht, a 'major' in the 26 Gang, testified to the Jali Commission. "There is no safe place in any prison in South Africa for such a prisoner," said Engelbrecht. "Once a 'tribunal' has passed a death sentence, [it] is carried out in one of two ways – either by paying a corrupt prison official to take a gang member to the sentenced prisoner to kill him, or by putting a gang member where he can easily get to the victim. All warders are aware of the procedures."

Barring any successful behind-the-scenes intervention, Thatcher would almost certainly be housed in a typical prison dormitory designed for 27 people, but which now usually houses more than 60, forcing inmates to sleep in shifts, said Amanda Dissel, programme manager of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in Johannesburg.

"You'll often find there aren't enough beds. You get people coerced into having sex," said Dissel. "People pay gangs and influential prisoners with sex for access to better food and blankets." The Jali Commission discovered that warders accepted bribes from older and relatively wealthy prisoners to bring juveniles to the adult cells for sex. In some prisons, staff hire 'men' among the prisoners to murder 'difficult' inmates.

Thatcher, who is confined to his £4 million house in Cape Town's upmarket Constantia suburb, has been subpoenaed to appear in a magistrates court on September 20, to answer questions from an Equatorial Guinea government team about his and Mann's part in the alleged attempt to topple President Nguema. Thatcher faces a short jail sentence if he ignores the subpoena. His lawyers have advised him to turn up and refuse to answer any questions on the grounds that it would prejudice his future defence.

The saga is replete with moral ambiguities, however. Not least of these is the eagerness of the South African government, which promotes itself as the guardian of democracy and transparent governance under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), to support Nguema, probably the most oppressive and corrupt of the continent's old-guard dictators. South Africa has yet to explain by what means dictators such as Nguema, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe and Togo's President Etienne Eyadema are to be removed under NEPAD's guidelines, other than by coup. There is speculation that South Africa is as much interested in Equatorial Guinea's abundantly gushing oil, as in human rights considerations.

Nguema, who himself came to power in a coup in 1979 after executing his predecessor and uncle, MaÁias Nguema, presides over a small, newly oil-rich country, which is itself virtually one big prison.

Human rights lawyer Fabian Nguema Obono says countless numbers of political prisoners are held in Equatorial Guinea's horrific rat and mosquito-infested Black Beach

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and Evinayong prisons, where torture is the norm.

“The last time I was in prison, they whipped me with electric cables and submitted me to electric shocks,” said Obono. It was claimed that security minister Armengol Nguema, President Nguema’s younger brother, and prison security director Ondo Nkum personally directed the torture .

Vivid scars mark Obono, who two years later still cannot make a fist, straighten his fingers or write properly.

Equatorial Guinea, whose new oil wealth has seen it dubbed the Kuwait of Africa, already has an average per capita income greater than that of Saudi Arabia. Its people, nevertheless, remain among the poorest on Earth because Nguema and his immediate family siphon off most of the income with the co-operation of giant American oil companies. A newly published US Senate investigation demonstrated that hundreds of millions of Equatorial Guinea’s oil dollars had been laundered through Riggs Bank in Washington, in a complex web of 60 accounts belonging to Nguema and his family.

Sarah Wykes, of the anti- corruption organisation Global Witness, said: “Although Equatorial Guinea has the world’s fastest-growing economy on paper [an annual GDP growth of 65% a year], its human development is actually going backwards. Now we know why: the money is offshore, out of sight and out of control.”