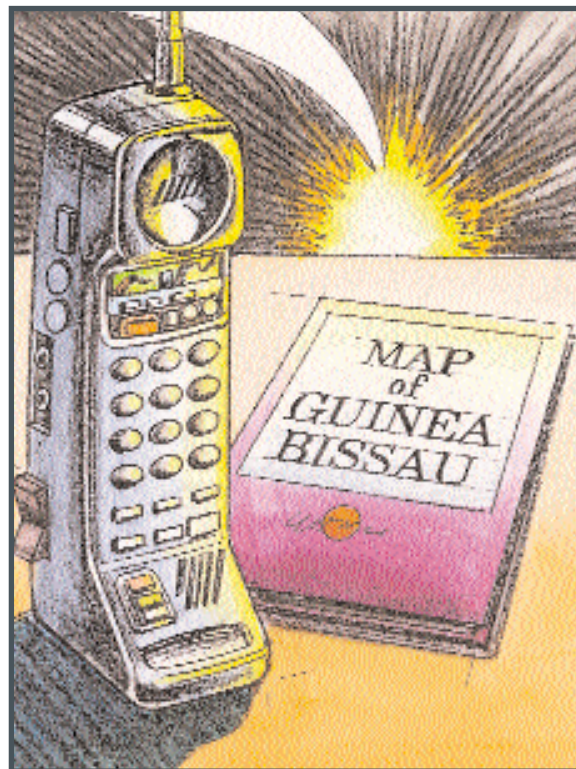


A COUP IN GUINEA-BISSAU BISSAU, 1998



Russell Charpentier

WHAT STARTED AS A QUIET SUNDAY MORNING FOR AN AMBASSADOR ABOUT TO DEPART POST AFTER THREE YEARS QUICKLY TURNED INTO ANYTHING BUT THAT.

BY PEGGY BLACKFORD

In June 1998, I was looking forward to my imminent transfer back to the U.S. after three years as ambassador to Guinea-Bissau, one of the world's poorest nations. U.S. interests were modest in this former Portuguese colony. The small mission staff had two goals: to strengthen democratic institutions by providing training to the media and funding programs that empowered women, and to help create a more modern and stable economic development climate. One of our most successful programs was training Guineans in the simple technology required to process the cashew nuts that grew abundantly on trees all over

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town. Family income among some program participants had increased an astounding 700 percent. Peace Corps Volunteers focused on agriculture and English language teaching.

It was quiet in Bissau, perhaps too quiet. The president and his government were widely viewed by Guineans as ineffective and corrupt, albeit democratically elected. Change was inevitable, but neither diplomats nor Guineans were predicting immediate or violent change.

At 6 a.m. on Sunday, June 7, 1998, my doorbell began to ring incessantly. It was U.S. Agency for International Development Mission Director Nancy McKay, who reported that en route to her usual early-morning birdwatching, she had encountered armed men and heard automatic weapons fire.

The mission staff quickly assembled at the embassy. We learned that the chief of staff of the army, fired for his part in an arms smuggling scandal, had decided not to go quietly. Illiterate and unable to communicate in Guinea-Bissau's official language, Portuguese, he had been held under house arrest for some time and was little known to expatriates. Nevertheless, he was a hero of the bitter struggle that freed his country from Portugal and was revered by many in the military. They rallied to his support. The rebels quickly achieved control of two key military bases, one nearly adjacent to the embassy and blocking the only access to the airport.

Peggy Blackford served as ambassador to Guinea-Bissau from 1995 to 1998. She joined the Foreign Service in 1972 and also served in Nairobi, Sao Paulo, Harare, Paris, Bamako and Washington, D.C. She retired in 2000 but continues to accept short assignments from the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs. She has taught at City University of New York and lectures on foreign affairs to various interested groups in the New York area.

This account, along with numerous others, can be found in the 2003 edition of AFSA's Inside a U.S. Embassy: How the Foreign Service Works for America.

***Enroute to her usual
early-morning birdwatching,
the USAID mission director
encountered armed men
and heard automatic
weapons fire.***

An evacuation by air would be impossible. Office Management Specialist Diann Bimmerle, a veteran of several coups elsewhere, offered her experience and kept us connected to the State Department Operations Center in Washington. The U.S. military had no ships or aircraft close by.

Throughout the day, Vice Consul Bryan Hunt, a first-tour officer, fielded frantic inquiries from U.S. citizens and the press

while at the same time tracking down all the Americans in the country, advising them to stay at home and in touch. Popular wisdom held that the coup attempt would blow over in a day or two. We had to question that assessment almost immediately when, early on Monday morning, the shelling nearly blew us out of bed. Americans and others began seeking sanctuary on our residential compound across from the embassy.

Most people reached the embassy without incident but two Peace Corps Volunteers called desperately seeking our help. They were trapped in a hotly contested area of town. The local people were evacuating. Could we get them out? As I tried to decide whom to send on this dangerous mission, Nancy McKay spoke up. It was her neighborhood; she knew it well and would go. As the embassy vehicle pulled out of the compound, shelling began. The next hour, until everyone returned safely, was one of the longest of my life. Soon we were sheltering more than 50 people: Peace Corps Volunteers, missionaries, businesspeople and tourists. While they ransacked our homes for food, blankets and towels and prepared meals for our growing army of refugees, Peace Corps Medical Officer Karen Glucksberg treated an epidemic of stomach disorders and headaches brought on by nerves. Our newly-arrived summer intern, whose internship was to be short but memorable, spent hours destroying classified and sensitive documents. The staff moved mattresses to the embassy and we slept in our offices along with our eight cats.

The Portuguese Embassy informed us that a Portuguese freighter would take refugees to Dakar, Senegal. Space was available for our citizens. It seemed our best bet. On Wednesday, June 10, after a

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harrowing eight hours on the dock while shells went off around them, the vast majority of the Americans in Bissau, led by McKay and Peace Corps Country Director Brian Cavanagh, boarded the ship for a grueling but safe trip to Dakar. Those of us left in the capital drew a quick sigh of relief before setting to work to find evacuation routes for the 17

Peace Corps Volunteers who lived outside the capital city. One by one we coordinated with authorities in Washington to extract them by air from tiny dirt airstrips or by roads heavily patrolled by the Senegalese and Guinean military. The last volunteer was airlifted out on Saturday, June 13. We gathered up the consular seals and took the cash from the safe. It was time for us to go as well.

Sunday morning, June 14, just one week after the

Taking advantage of a lull in the fighting, we drove to an isolated dock where we were picked up by a dinghy from a small tanker.

coup began, we emerged from the embassy. The crumbling colonial town was deserted. Almost everyone had fled to the countryside, mostly on foot. Taking advantage of the mid-morning lull in the fighting, we drove to an isolated dock where we were picked up by a dinghy from a small tanker. Each of us boarded with a cat or two in one hand and a change of

clothes in the other and set sail for Banjul, capital of neighboring Gambia. Twenty-four hours later, our adventure was over. Meanwhile, back in Guinea-Bissau the war raged on for more than a month. Four of our homes were burned to the ground; the rest were looted. We lost almost all our prized possessions, yet we were the lucky ones. It took more than a year to broker a stable cease-fire, and for the Guineans it will be many more years before they truly recover. ■

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