

Analysis

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How Russia moved into Central Africa

When Central African Republic (CAR) pleaded for help last year to fight marauding militias, former colonial ruler France offered guns it had seized off Somalia. But Russia objected and donated its own weapons instead. By early February, Russia had sent nine planes with weapons along with dozens of contractors to train local soldiers and secure mining projects, marking the start of its highest-profile military foray in sub-Saharan Africa for decades. Muscling in on a country dominated by France for years served as a statement of intent about Moscow's renewed push for global prestige and influence, and is part of a wider campaign shaking up long-standing power dynamics on the continent.

Since Western nations sanctioned Russia for annexing Crimea in 2014, Moscow has signed 19 military cooperation deals in sub-Saharan Africa, including with Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, according to its foreign and defense ministries and state media. The continent's 54 member states at the United Nations - three of which sit on the Security Council at any given time - form the organization's largest voting bloc and one of its most coherent, making them attractive allies for Russia. "The West is not very much loved by many countries. And many (see) Russia as the country that will oppose the West," said Dmitri Bondarenko, an anthropologist and historian at Russia's Institute for African Studies.

Besides sending arms and contractors to CAR, Russian national Valery Zakharov is a security adviser to President Faustin-Archange Touadera and Russia's defense ministry said last week it planned to establish a five-person team at CAR's defense ministry. Russia's moves come at a time when the defense ministry's influence over Kremlin foreign policy is growing against a backdrop of heightened tension with the West.

Seized weapons

When CAR made its plea in 2017, there was recognition that a spike in ethnic fighting could turn into a far larger conflict and that its security forces were too weak to tackle myriad armed groups. CAR has been under a UN arms embargo since 2013 so weapons shipments must be approved by the UN Security Council's CAR sanctions committee, made up of the Council's 15 members, including France and Russia. It operates by consensus. France first offered to help CAR buy old weapons but the proposal was too expensive. France then offered 1,400 AK47 assault rifles it had seized off Somalia in 2016, according to a Security Council memo and four diplomats.

Russia objected on the grounds that weapons seized for breaching the UN arms embargo on Somalia could not be recycled for use in another country under embargo, two diplomats said. But mindful of the need for a quick solution, the sanctions committee approved Moscow's donation of AK47s, sniper rifles, machineguns and grenade launchers in December, according to committee documents and diplomats. "We presented our problem and Russia offered to help us, subject to Security Council approval," said Albert Yaloke Mokpeme, CAR's presidential spokesman. "If peace is restored tomorrow in CAR, I think everyone will be happy."

Russia's foreign ministry did not respond to requests for comment about committee proceedings. France's foreign ministry said Russia must strictly respect the terms of its arms embargo exemption to keep the weapons out of the wrong hands.

'We're not interested'

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union forged close military and diplomatic ties with many African countries. It was involved in proxy wars in states such as Angola, Ethiopia and Mozambique and helped independence movements fight Western colonial powers. Russia is now trying to revive some of the relationships that lapsed after the Soviet Union's collapse. It joins a number of countries such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates looking to set up bases in Africa, mediate in diplomatic stand-offs and strike business deals.

China has long had a major economic presence in Africa but it has shied away from any military involvement. It did go a step further last year, however, opening its first military base outside China in Djibouti. Near the world's busiest shipping lanes, Djibouti is also home to a large French base, the only US base in Africa, an Italian camp and Japan's only overseas base. Djibouti blocked Russian attempts to set up a base, however, saying it wanted to avoid becoming the terrain for a proxy war. Moscow is now planning to build a logistics center at a port in neighboring Eritrea.

While France has a military bases outside Djibouti in former colonies Gabon, Ivory Coast and Senegal and its soldiers also operate in Chad, Mali and Niger, analysts say Washington's influence is on the wane. Its trade with the continent has halved in the past decade, though much of that is due to U.S. shale replacing oil imports from Africa. Diplomatic posts have gone unfilled and a task force based in CAR tracking warlord Joseph Kony left last year.

"Our actions on the diplomatic and military side have sent a huge signal to our partners that we're not interested in Africa," said Donald Bolduc, who commanded US special forces across the continent until last year. US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy said Washington's commitment to Africa was unwavering but, "there is space for other countries to play a positive role in the region". — Reuters



Lawsuits could stall #MeToo movement

Defamation lawsuits filed by two Indian public figures accused of sexual harassment have sparked warnings from women's rights activists and legal experts that prolonged court battles could put the brakes on the country's nascent #MeToo movement. The movement, that began in the United States just over a year ago in response to accusations of sexual assault and harassment in the entertainment industry, gained traction in India in the past two weeks after a Bollywood actress complained about inappropriate behavior on film sets and complaints of improper conduct roiled India's biggest comedy group.

Since then, more than a dozen men in politics, media, entertainment and the arts have been accused of a range of offences, with several prominent figures either resigning or being suspended as a result. The cases have transfixed India, published on newspaper front pages and becoming a key talking point on prime-time television news shows in a conservative country where discussions about sex are still taboo for many.

But two of those accused, former junior foreign minister M J Akbar and veteran actor Alok Nath, this week launched criminal defamation suits against their accusers. Lawyers and women's groups said that could act as a deterrent to more victims coming forward. Unlike in many countries, where defamation is a civil offence, Indian law also has provisions which classify it as a criminal offence punishable with a jail term of up to two years. Cases typically drag on for years in India's overstretched legal system. Legal experts say defamation lawsuits, in particular, are sometimes used as a tool to stall opponents, especially against those who won't have the wherewithal to respond effectively to such cases.

"Criminal defamation is usually an arm twisting tactic and works as a deterrent because nobody wants to be potentially embroiled in court for years or face a jail term," said Samudra Sarangi, a partner at Indian law firm Panag

& Babu which represents clients in defamation lawsuits. "Sometimes this law is used to suppress a victim's voice. Not all victims have the emotional fortitude to withstand the rigors of a criminal trial in India."

Late on Monday, more than one hundred female authors, journalists and media figures signed a letter to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi calling for Akbar's resignation and a government probe into the allegations. "A criminal defamation charge is a clear attempt to bully,

unanswered yesterday. However, Maneka Gandhi, minister for women and child development in Modi's cabinet, has previously said a panel of judges will be set up to look into "some" of the #MeToo cases. The opposition Congress party is piling pressure on Modi, who faces a series of big state elections later this year and a national election that is due by May 2019. "We want to ask the prime minister on which side he stands. Is he with the women or against them?" Congress spokesman RPN Singh told reporters on Tuesday.

Akbar, who founded and edited several newspapers before joining politics, has been accused of inappropriate behavior by at least a dozen women who had worked with him. He has called the accusations "wild and baseless". On Monday, he filed the defamation suit against one of his accusers, journalist Priya Ramani, at a Delhi district court. Ramani had "intentionally put forward malicious, fabricated and salacious" allegations to harm his reputation, the suit alleged. Ramani said in a statement on Twitter on Monday that she was ready to fight the defamation allegation "as truth and the absolute truth is my only defense".

Ramani's husband, journalist Samar Halarnkar, wrote a column on Tuesday saying the lawsuit was being used to "intimidate her, and through her to intimidate the others who have spoken up and silence others who have not". Meanwhile, Indian journalist Sucheta Dalal called for crowd-funding Ramani's legal costs in a Twitter post that received more than 3,000 likes, although an official fundraising campaign is yet to be set up. Akbar resigned yesterday.

The other defamation case was filed by well-known screen and television actor Nath against writer and producer Vinta Nanda, who recently accused him of raping her in 1999. Nath's lawyer Ashok Sarogi has said the allegations against his client were false. He did not respond to a request to comment on the defamation suit on Tuesday. Nath and Nanda could not be reached for comment. — Reuters

Akbar and Nath both sue accusers

intimidate and silence those who are bringing to light systemic abuse of women by men in powerful positions," said the letter, written by the Network of Women in Media, the Foundation of Media Professionals and the Brihan Mumbai Union of Journalists. "By ignoring this defining moment, and watching silently while a government minister sues a woman who has spoken out, your government is giving a regressive message: that the fundamental right to life, safety and dignity of a sizeable section of the workforce does not matter," it said.

Accused fight back

Modi is yet to publicly speak on the matter and calls to three spokespersons of his Bharatiya Janata Party were

Who would want to be an Afghan MP?

Doctors, mullahs, sons of warlords, feminists and even a prison inmate are among a motley crew of candidates contesting war-torn Afghanistan's Oct 20 legislative election. The more than 2,500 candidates campaigning for the third parliamentary ballot since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 have turned the political scene into a game of Where's Wally. Digitally-enhanced photos of political hopefuls, many of them running for the first time, have been plastered on blast walls, lamp posts and restaurant facades next to their symbol - such as a palm tree or a cricket bat - to help the largely illiterate population identify them.

Improving security and stamping out corruption are among the lofty promises made by candidates as they compete for the 249-seat lower house, which is widely derided as a lazy, ineffective body full of gangsters. "I am a medical doctor so I know the pathology of society, where the problems lie and how to solve them," said Ahmad Tamim Rahman, who is among more than 800 candidates contesting the 33 seats allocated to Kabul. "I am frustrated with the situation, with the never-ending poverty, war and misery."

But campaigning for public office is challenging in a country where daily life is stalked by the threat of suicide attacks and fierce fighting between militants and government security forces. Hundreds of people have been killed or wounded in the months leading up to the long-delayed ballot. At least 10 candidates have been killed so far, including Jabar Qahraman who was blown up Wednesday by a bomb placed under his sofa in the southern province of

Helmand. The Taliban have warned candidates to withdraw from the ballot, which it has vowed to attack. Kabul women's rights activist turned candidate Wida Saghary said she was not intimidated. "I have always risked my life to fight for the rights of people, in particular women," Saghary told AFP. "I am not afraid now that I am running for a seat in parliament."

Money means votes

There are lucrative incentives for taking the risk to contest Afghanistan's lower house, which is tasked with making laws and overseeing the government. An MP receives a monthly salary package of at least 200,000 afghanis (more than \$2,600), including an allowance for bodyguards and other expenses - a fortune in a country where more than half of the population lives in poverty. Immunity from prosecution also keeps them out of jail if MPs fall foul of the law and there are plenty of opportunities to exploit their powerful positions in business deals.

And many MPs have a record of sparse attendance in the chamber and often stay in Kabul rather than travel back to their home provinces. At least one candidate hopes he can represent his constituents from a prison cell. Convicted fraudster Abdul Karim Shafaq is still in the race for the western province of Farah even though he is serving a two-year jail sentence, a spokesman for the attorney general's office confirmed.

Sitting MP Kobra Mustafawi, who represented Kabul in the previous parliament and is seeking another term, said she was different. Mustafawi said she had always defended the underprivileged and would "continue to fight for their rights", she told AFP. Rahman, who has pledged to make "streets from gold, schools from diamonds and universities from emeralds" if elected, said he was not after power or privilege either. Afghanistan was lagging behind its neighbors and "I am trying to find a way to change that", he said. — AFP

Climate change pushes girls into prostitution

Four years ago, when her family's home in central Bangladesh was washed away by floods, Pakhi and her family migrated to Dhaka to look for work. But with many families arriving in an already overcrowded city, with jobs hard to find, and with the family struggling to eat, the teenager eventually took one of the few jobs available. "I was around 14 years old when I joined the sex industry," said Pakhi, now 18. "I did it only for the money. I had to buy food. I had to survive." Today she is the main provider for her family, bringing in between \$120 and \$180 a month, she said, or occasionally as much as \$240. But "there's a limit to what my body can manage," she said.

The work hasn't brought the family a better life, however. Pakhi - who asked that her real name not be used - still lives with her parents and younger siblings in one cramped room, and most of her income goes to pay the rent and for her siblings' education. She blames their plight on the changing weather that claimed their home. "The flood took everything away from us by destroying our house. We are in this situation because of the flood," she said, before turning silent.

As it brings stronger floods, storms, droughts and heatwaves, climate change is making life harder for many of the world's poorest - including driving some women and girls into prostitution. Every year, more than 20 million people, on average, are forced to leave their homes and migrate elsewhere, either temporarily

or permanently, to escape the ravages of an ever-more-extreme climate, according to a 2018 report by the Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Often it is women and girls who suffer most from such displacement, said Alexandra Bilak, the director of the centre.

More pressure

Linnea Engstrom, a Swedish member of the European Parliament, said displacement magnifies pressures women already face. "Women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate displacement because of already existing inequalities in society," she said in an interview in Stockholm. "The poorest people tend to be very vulnerable and that's usually women and girls," she said.

Much of the displacement associated with global warming so far is happening in poor countries, and "a large proportion of the migrants that come from rural areas to Dhaka come because of climatic reasons," said Saleemul Huq, director of the Dhaka-based International Centre for Climate Change and Development. "Poor countries are facing a greater problem than richer countries, both because they happen to be living in areas that are more vulnerable and also because they are poorer and have less ability to deal with the impacts of climate change," he said.

In Bangladesh, considered one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change impacts, hundreds of thousands of people a year are forced to leave their rural communities and migrate to urban slums as a result of sea level rise, violent storms, erosion and floods, Bilak said. "Bangladesh is a country that has high exposure to natural hazards (and) densely populated areas that are already at risk of being affected by these hazards," she said. As one of the poorest countries in Asia it "doesn't have the capacity to cope", Bilak said. — Reuters