

A. GABOON. — Abortive Military Coup. - Intervention by French Forces. - General Elections.

President Léon Mba of Gaboon was arrested in Libreville (the capital) on the night of Feb. 17-18 and compelled to resign by a "revolutionary committee" led by four junior Army and gendarmerie officers, who on Feb. 18 announced the creation of a "Provisional Government" under M. Mba's chief political rival, M. Jean-Hilaire Aubame. On the same day, however, French troop reinforcements began to arrive in Libreville by air from their bases at Dakar (Senegal) and Brazzaville (Congo), and on Feb. 19 these troops, acting as "Community forces" under the Franco-Gabonese defence agreements, put down the rising. President Mba resumed power in the capital on Feb. 20.

The abortive coup followed developments since the beginning of 1963 tending towards the establishment of a virtual one-party system under President Mba's leadership, and culminating in M. Mba's decision on Jan. 21, 1964, to dissolve the existing National Assembly and hold new elections on Feb. 23.

The general elections of February 1961 had been won by a single joint list of candidates put forward by M. Mba's majority *Bloc Démocratique Gabonais* and M. Aubame's *Union Démocratique et Sociale Gabonaise* [see 18150 B]. In February 1963, however, M. Mba had reshuffled his Cabinet, eliminating M. Aubame (hitherto Foreign Minister) and three other U.D.S.G. members; the fifth U.D.S.G. Minister remained in the Government, but joined the B.D.G., while the only non-party Minister was also dropped. M. Aubame, who remained a member of the National Assembly, was subsequently appointed President of the Supreme Court.

Towards the end of 1963 difficulties arose over a Government proposal to cut deputies' salaries by 10 per cent and transfer the saving to the National Investment Fund; on Dec. 20 the Assembly at first refused to approve the 1964 Budget but eventually withdrew its opposition after a personal intervention by President Mba, who admonished the deputies for "resisting the public interest."

President Mba dissolved the National Assembly on Jan. 21, 1964, and announced that the new Assembly to be elected on Feb. 23 would be reduced to 47 deputies, compared with 67 in the old Chamber. It was officially stated in Libreville that the President's action was an "economy move."

According to French press despatches, however, the dissolution decision was widely believed to have been connected with an unsuccessful attempt by members of M. Mba's party earlier in the month to remove M. Aubame from the Assembly, by introducing a Bill making Assembly membership incompatible with the post of president of the Supreme Court. M. Aubame, however, had chosen to resign his Supreme Court appointment rather than his deputy's seat, and the Government was thought to have been further disconcerted by the relatively poor support which the Bill received in the Assembly.

M. Aubame's U.D.S.G. subsequently announced that it would not contest the forthcoming election, and when the campaign officially opened on Feb. 9 only a single B.D.G. list of candidates was nominated. Meanwhile President Mba had taken powers by decree to suspend or even dismiss civil servants, while the State radio laid growing emphasis on the B.D.G.'s preponderant role in the country.

The coup against President Mba was carried out by some 150 men of the 400-strong Gabonese Army under three Army subalterns and a gendarmerie lieutenant. The rebels seized the presidential palace and other public buildings in the capital and arrested M. Mba, M. Louis Bigmann (an assistant secretary-general of the B.D.G. and president of the outgoing Assembly), members of their staffs, and two senior French officers serving with the Gabonese forces. After being induced to broadcast an announcement of his resignation, M. Mba, with M. Bigmann and other persons arrested, was transferred to an Army camp near Libreville. The rebels announced later in the day that M. Aubame had accepted the presidency of a "Provisional Government."

A communiqué broadcast by the "revolutionary committee" on Feb. 18 referred to "the insecurity constituted by the reigning police regime," the futility of the forthcoming elections, and the danger of "uncontrollable manifestations" by the Opposition. It announced the dissolution of the Government and the arrest of President Mba and his "acolytes"; stated that civil liberties had been re-established and all political prisoners released; appealed for calm; instructed provincial officials to ensure public order in their areas; and gave an assurance that existing undertakings towards "individuals or groups of individuals" would be respected [an apparent reference to the extensive French investments in Gaboon].

According to later eyewitness accounts, the mutineers seized control of Libreville and the nearby military camps without incidents or bloodshed. Later they released all the prisoners in Libreville gaol, numbering over 400, most of them ordinary criminals who wrecked the prison and then broke out into the town, looting a number of European shops.

At about noon on Feb. 18, however, French reinforcements from Brazzaville landed at Libreville, the rebels having had to take any steps to block the runway; more troops from Dakar arrived by air during the night, joining the small French force of some 150 men permanently stationed as "Community troops" in the country. The French troops moved into the capital on the morning of Feb. 19; early in the afternoon the Gabonese Army captain broadcast an appeal to the mutineers to surrender, stressing that—contrary to rebel claims—the gendarmerie was loyal to President Mba; and late in the afternoon it was announced that the revolt was over. Some resistance was encountered only at the military camp, where one French soldier and at least 15 Gabonese, including one of the rebel officers, were killed. President Mba, who had while been moved by the mutineers to Lambaréné (the village some 100 miles from Libreville, well known as the home of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famous medical missionary), returned to the capital early on Feb. 20.

The French intervention was first revealed by the *Quotidien d'Orsay* at mid-day on Feb. 19, the following Government statement being issued the same evening:

"On the night of Feb. 17-18 elements of the Gabonese armed forces mutinied and penetrated by surprise into the presidential palace. . . . They captured . . . President Mba, . . . M. Bigmann and their principal colleagues. . . . The legal authorities thus prevented from exercising their functions, they [the mutineers] announced that they were forming a 'revolutionary committee' and then a 'Provisional Government.' This movement of subversion was not supported by the Gabonese people.

"Since these events brought into effect its responsibilities resulting from agreements with Gaboon, the French Government was obliged to give aid and assistance to the legal Government. . . . It did so on a request presented through diplomatic channels. The French forces were given the mission of assuring the liberty and security of the President of Gaboon, a mission which they have carried out while doing everything possible to avoid the loss of human life. The mutineers and their leaders had surrendered by 6 p.m. today. They were at no time supported by the population of Libreville. As soon as President Mba has returned to the capital, the mission of the French forces will have been completed."

[The agreements mentioned in the statement were those signed on the achievement of Gaboon's independence in August 1960 [see 17612 A] and supplemented in 1961. They laid down that France and Gaboon would jointly ensure their own defence and that of the French Community—of which Gaboon has remained a member—and that Gaboon was entitled to call on French help for her internal as well as external defence.]

The Vice-President of Gaboon, M. Paul Yembit, who had been absent on an election tour in the south when the coup took place, announced on Feb. 20 that it was he who had appealed for French assistance on the afternoon of Feb. 18, and that the French authorities had sent an aircraft to him to receive his written authorization for French intervention.

The French action in Gaboon was openly approved by the Governments of Madagascar, the Central African Republic, Chad, Niger, Upper Volta, and the Ivory Coast. Among other French-speaking African leaders, the Foreign Minister of Dahomey stated that he would refrain from any observation which might be interpreted as "disobliging" towards two friendly countries such as France and Gaboon, but stressed his Government's belief in the principle of non-involvement in the domestic affairs of other States. President Modibo Keita of Mali, on the other hand, commented that "certain things are still happening which prove that the African States are not independent," while the Algerian Foreign Minister, M. Bouffika, emphasized Algeria's categorical opposition to any foreign intervention in African affairs. The Ghanaian Bureau of African Affairs issued a statement protesting against "French intervention in the Gabonese people's internal affairs."

M. Germain Mba, assistant secretary-general of the Afro-Malagasy Union (the "Brazzaville Group") and a cousin of President Mba, resigned his post on Feb. 19 in protest against the French action. He had been named by the "revolutionary committee" as a member of the projected "Provisional Government."

In a broadcast on his return to Libreville on Feb. 20, President Mba emphasized that the people as a whole had at no time backed the mutiny; thanked the gendarmerie for remaining loyal to his Government; and declared that there would be "neither pardon nor pity" for "the embittered men, the zeros" who had led the coup. On the following day he announced that a commission of inquiry would be set up to assemble all the facts on the revolt, and that no action would be taken against "certain well-known people" who