Latest revelations on the assassination of Thomas Sankara

from The Italian documentary -‘African Shadows’

SILVESTRO: Were you there?

Of Course I was in Burkina Faso, I was part of the operation.

SILVESTRO: And were you present when Sankara was assassinated? MOMO: Of course, I was in the room when he was assassinated. SILVESTRO: What do you remember of that moment? MOMO (laughs).

SILVESTRO: Sankara was waiting to meet Blaise Compaoré?

NARRATOR: As General Momo states, Taylor was at this point working for the CIA, spying on Gaddafi and infiltrating African liberation movements that were training in Libya.
PRINCE: There was an international plot to get rid of this man, and if I tell you how this happened, are you aware the secret services could kill you?
SILVESTRO: An international plot. Because the truth would harm the current president Blaise Compaoré. In 1987 when Sankara was murdered, Compaoré was considered his best friend. Immediately after Sankara’s death, Compaoré said 'I was ill'

2009-09-03, Issue 446

http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/58463

Astounding allegations have come forth about the 1987 assassination of the former president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, through a documentary aired on Italy’s public channel RAI3. The documentary, entitled ‘African Shadows’ and by Silvestro Montanaro, details the
alleged links of the American and French secret services to Sankara’s assassins and the involvement of the current President of Burkina Faso Blaise Compaoré. This week’s Pambazuka News brings you the striking three-part transcript of the recent documentary, featuring the testimonies of well-known Liberian figures.

NARRATOR: This is an intriguing international issue. I am meeting with Liberian Senator Jewel Howard Taylor, ex-wife of Charles Taylor.

SILVESTRO: Do you think that people should be worried if Taylor tells ‘the truth’? Should important people?

LADY: Yes, absolutely. I am sure of it…

SILVESTRO: Very important people?

LADY: For sure. There is a part of this story that has remained hidden, even from me. I am certain that he still holds secrets. How did he leave the US? What deal did he make with Ghaddafi in order to train in Libya? Who were his friends, and what information did they give him?

MOMO: He had lots of friends in the US…

SILVESTRO: Important people?

MOMO: Yes, certainly, business people.

SILVESTRO: Can you give me any names?

MOMO: Ah, no. I cannot divulge their names. I am not a fool… He had friends in diplomatic circles, who have gone underground, but I know who they are, and that they would not be happy if I spoke out. Taylor did not drop out of the sky just like that. From prison to Liberia. It is them who sent him to Liberia, and they are very aware of this fact!

NARRATOR: This gentleman, also considered a war criminal by the UN, was Taylor’s aide-de-camp. Today, General Momo Jiba – one of those who know the real story – gives us a glimpse of the goings-on during the reign of Charles Taylor.

SILVESTRO: Who sent him here?

MOMO: Those who sent him know themselves. The big hand. They know everything. He did not come here alone. Taylor was in prison in the US … and all of a sudden, he was in Monrovia. How did he get out of a US prison? How was he able to escape?

SILVESTRO: The CIA?

MOMO: Eh heh… I cannot say it … a big hand, The Big Hand.

HISTORIAN: What happened in the US with Charles Taylor is quite a remarkable story.

NARRATOR: Liberia’s current minister of posts and telecommunications, Marcus Dahn, is
also one the country’s pre-eminent historians. He also suspects a third force behind Taylor’s escape.

HISTORIAN: Taylor fled Liberia after President Doe accused him of stealing millions of dollars from state coffers. He was arrested and was due for extradition to Liberia. It is noteworthy that Taylor’s lawyer, Ramsey Clarke, one of the best in the country, was attorney general under Jimmy Carter. Taylor was incarcerated at a federal prison in Massachusetts, one of the most secure. It seems to me especially difficult to escape from a federal prison… Taylor managed to escape, to come back here and launch a revolution to depose Samuel Doe.

BLEAH: It is impossible to escape from such a facility without someone’s assistance. Taylor was not a little bird. Neither was he God, or a spirit.

NARRATOR: Mose Bleah was Taylor’s vice-president, and one of his top aides. When Taylor fled, he became president for a period of a few months.

BLEAH: Many people, including some who currently occupy important posts in the government, helped us. Even our current (Sirleaf) president admitted to having assisted Taylor, and having given him financial assistance at the time.

SILVESTRO: But it was mostly the Americans…

BLEAH: Certainly…yes…

SILVESTRO: In what way?

BLEAH: How can I explain this to you… Our godfather—since some of us Liberians consider ourselves a province of the US—helped us. The US consented to Taylor becoming president.

ALLEN: You must understand that the leaders of the NPFL [National Patriotic Front of Liberia] chose Taylor. The leadership of the NPFL included the likes of Mrs Ellen Sirleaf, the current president.

NARRATOR: Cyril Allen was a leading figure in Taylor’s party, former head of the National Petroleum corporation and is now one of the top names on the UN’s blacklist.

ALLEN: They were seeking help in toppling Samuel Doe. So the Americans asked whom they had chosen to lead their revolution. Their response was immediate and unequivocal; we have a Liberian who has a bone to pick with Samuel Doe. This man has a brilliant military mind, he is intelligent and courageous… Unfortunately, he is in one of your prisons. We ask that you to let him go so he can lead the revolution. They complied, and there Taylor was…

SILVESTRO: They agreed?

ALLEN: Of course, they made it possible for Taylor to escape.

MINISTER DOE: You need to find out from the State Department, from the highest levels of the CIA, the FBI, and the political establishment…they know what happened. Listen, I never want find myself in the American prison system. It is practically impossible to escape.
Incredibly, Taylor managed to escape. Who was Taylor’s lawyer? Ramsey Clark, former US attorney general and one of the most powerful men in the world. *Taylor escapes from prison in Boston and the next thing we know, Taylor is in Africa. When Taylor got here, he had a sack-load of money. We enquired into the origins of the initial US$25,000. I had all this information on my computer, but unknown individuals destroyed it. Luckily, a friend of mine kept copies. One of the signatures on the document was that of the current president, (Sirleaf) and the other was, well, an American.*

SILVESTRO: Where were you trained, prepared?

MOMO: I was trained…

SILVESTRO: Please be truthful.

MOMO: Yes… in Libya.

Sivlestro: Who trained you?

MOMO: He he, good question…

SILVESTRO: What kind of instructors did you have? Where were they from? Which country? Please be honest.

MOMO: I cannot reveal that on camera, it is top-secret. But they were definitely instructors.

SILVESTRO: Who supplied you with arms?

MOMO: For combat?

SILVESTRO: Yes.

MOMO: He he.

SILVESTRO: The same people?

MOMO: No, no, it was a revolution, we provided for ourselves. Nobody gave us anything. President Taylor used his own resources.

NARRATOR: At this point, I ask the filming crew to leave and return with a hidden television camera.

SILVESTRO: So, who was it that trained you?

MOMO: He he … ok, I cannot tell him … besides he already knows…

SILVESTRO: The CIA?

MOMO: Yes, the CIA trained me.

SILVESTRO: How about Gaddafi … Libya.
MOMO: Don’t go there, that’s politics…

SILVESTRO: Unbelievable.

MOMO: Let’s not get into that, that’s politics.

SILVESTRO: And they gave you money…

MOMO: Money, everything.

SILVESTRO: Arms?

MOMO: Everything, everything.

SILVESTRO: The CIA.

MOMO: Don’t go there… that’s politics

SILVESTRO: Good heavens.

MOMO: You know, they are dangerous … right now they want it kept quiet … they would not appreciate us talking about it. If we do, it would be dangerous for them…

SILVESTRO: How is it possible that the CIA helped Taylor escape from prison?

LADY: I am sure that they were involved.

SILVESTRO: But after that, he was in Libya planning the war against Doe. Libya was an enemy of the US.

LADY: I believe that Taylor was nothing but a pawn in this game. The US was against Libya, but at the same time was eager to overthrow Doe. It is for this reason that they needed an ally, and authorised Taylor going to Libya for training to fight these people. Even before he triumphed and became president, he was in constant contact with the US. He was part of a scheme to topple Doe. He needed to be clear with his priorities: the Liberian question, his orientations vis-à-vis the US, the natural resources at stake, especially petroleum, from which the US would benefit. Liberia was a strategic target, and for this reason, more important than the Libyan question.

NARRATOR: As General Momo states, Taylor was at this point working for the CIA, spying on Gaddafi and infiltrating African liberation movements that were training in Libya.

MOMO: It was a CIA operation.

SILVESTRO: The fact of the matter is that Taylor was working for the CIA, and had been sent expressly to infiltrate African liberation movements that were training in Libya.

MOMO: Those are the facts.
SILVESTRO: Are you sure about that?

MOMO: Absolutely. I was working with him, and we spoke about these issues. I am not in the habit of lying.

SILVESTRO: And how did Taylor go about spying on Gaddafi for the CIA?

MOMO: One … a key area was Burkina Faso.

SILVESTRO: Taylor’s mysterious escape path crosses with the fate of Thomas Sankara, the young president of Burkina Faso. Some time ago, Liberian senator and former warlord Prince Johnson, told the Truth Commission that he and Taylor had been involved in Sankara’s death. I approached him so he would explain the story.

PRINCE: But this is not part of what you have written here…

SILVESTRO: It is part of the last question.

PRINCE: No, it isn’t. And in any case, you must stick to the agenda you prepared here…

SILVESTRO: Excuse me?

PRINCE: You cannot raise a new issue that was not mentioned before.

SILVESTRO: Is it that difficult for you to answer the question?

PRINCE: No, no, it does not work like that.

SILVESTRO: So, what actually happened in Burkina Faso?

PRINCE: No, we … once an issue has been dealt with one, two, three times…

SILVESTRO: The issue of Thomas Sankara?

PRINCE: This is getting tedious.

SILVESTRO: Excuse me?

PRINCE: I went to the Truth Commission, I gave an interview to the French media that was broadcast worldwide, and I will go on repeating what I said about Burkina Faso.

SILVESTRO: I understand, but please answer the question.

PRINCE: Right, after I spoke, the president of Burkina Faso faced all kinds of problems, and I do not want to end up there again. Besides, if you really want to know what happened in Burkina Faso, why don’t you go there and ask President Blaise Compaoré … you are part of the international media, you are like a doctor, to whom the truth must be told. Therefore, go to Burkina Faso… (bursts of laughter).

NARRATOR: Then, with the camera ostensibly off...
PRINCE: There was an international plot to get rid of this man, and if I tell you how this happened, are you aware the secret services could kill you?

SILVESTRO: An international plot. Because the truth would harm the current president Blaise Compaoré. In 1987 when Sankara was murdered, Compaoré was considered his best friend. Immediately after Sankara’s death, Compaoré said 'I was ill'.

NARRATOR: Momo and Allen recount to me what exactly happened.

ALLEN: Gambian President Yahya Jammeh, Blaise Compaoré, Thomas Sankara, Domingo Guengeré, and ... Foday Sankoh, as well as the man from Chad, whose name I can’t recall, had all been trained in Libya and were all friends. They are the ones who actually organised the Burkina revolution and installed Sankara as president. Once in power, he set about putting in place his plans. The next thing you know, the US had infiltrated the liberation movements and set about overthrowing Sankara, who was leaning too far left. The Americans were not happy with Sankara. He was talking of nationalising his country’s resources to benefit his people. He was a socialist so he had to go.

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This section contains a sequence of archive images. What follows is the commentary accompanying the images.

NARRATOR: Video showing Sankara: Thomas Sankara was president of Upper Volta from 1983–87, and renamed it Burkina Faso, meaning 'land of the honourable'. To avoid foreign dictates, he refused aid from the IMF and the World Bank. Burkina Faso was semi-arid, hungry, indebted and had one of the highest infant mortality rates, with no hope of going it alone. He had to fight desertification, achieve food self-sufficiency, and provide healthcare. The new motto was 'two meals a day and ten litres of water a day for all every day'. The whole country, especially women, were mobilised to achieve this goal: to consume only what the country could produce on its own, without unnecessary imports and military purchases, end waste, privilege and corruption. He led by example.

SANKARA: Our ministers can only fly economy, not first class. We have abolished presidential immunity, and are in the process of lowering civil service salaries. There are court proceedings against those who are robbing our country, and these are taking place in public.

NARRATOR: Sankara ate millet, like the peasants in his country, travelled around in a small ordinary car, always wore traditional dress, and never had any personal property. His presidential salary was a pittance, and he shamed every other statesman in the world and at home. His example was not followed with enthusiasm. Roads, railways, schools and hospitals were built, agricultural production grew and desert was reclaimed. In the space of four years, the goal of two meals a day and ten litres of water was a reality. But the spectre of external debt racked up by past corrupt governments loomed. Sankara was fighting on the global stage against this new debt-slavery.

SANKARA: We must speak in one voice, saying this debt cannot be paid. And since I am the lone voice, I will be assassinated. We must say together, we cannot pay, because we have to
work to build a future for our people. If only Burkina Faso refuses to pay, I will not be here at the next conference.

Silvestro’s comments: Sankara did well, and did it for all. He called into question the delicate power dynamics of the time. It was an issue that needed to be tackled. Momo Jiba and Cyril Allen, Taylor’s closest allies, recount what happened.

The interview continues

MOMO: My boss told me to approach Sankara for help in taking power in Liberia. In return, he offered lucrative business opportunities. Thomas Sankara told him he was not interested and asked him to leave the country. He told him that he would not help and asked him to find another staging point for his rebellion. Guengere, who is currently Burkina Faso’s minister of defence, Blaise Compaoré, Charles Taylor, and Chad’s current president … you know who he is?

SILVESTRO: Yes.

MOMO: Yes, him too.

SILVESTRO: Yes.

MOMO: They all met in Mauritania for a whole day … after a while they were joined by a white man from Paris. The discussions carried on, and then there was another meeting in Libya, where the Sankara problem was discussed some more. What emerged was that if we were to use Burkina Faso as a launching pad, Sankara had to be eliminated. Blaise Compaoré, would become president, and he would help us …

SILVESTRO: And was Gaddafi okay with the plan?

MOMO: Yes, yes … please remember, this must all remain confidential.

SILVESTRO: Yes, yes…

MOMO: If Gaddafi helped Taylor, and France sent word that they were in support of the coup d’état … better yet, if France provided funds and indicated that they would recognise Compaoré’s government, then all was well. Blaise told Guengere, the current Burkinabe army chief to avail a group of commandos, Taylor provided other troops, and the coup was staged.

SILVESTRO: Was France the only country involved?

MOMO: France was totally involved.

SILVESTRO: What about the US and the CIA?

MOMO: I am not sure of that … I don’t want to tell you lies.
ALLEN: The Americans and the French sanctioned the plan. There was a CIA operative and the US embassy in Burkina Faso working closely with the secret service at the French embassy, and they made the crucial decisions.

SILVESTRO: So the CIA and the French secret service…

ALLEN: And the French secret service decided to eliminate Sankara. Those are the facts.

MOMO: They sent their men, some commandos, and then there was Prince Johnson, and myself. We communicated by walkie-talkie, we had all the information on Sankara … when he left home, and when he returned … everything was planned.

SILVESTRO: Were you there?

MOMO: Of course, I was in Burkina Faso, I was part of the operation.

SILVESTRO: And were you present when Sankara was assassinated?

MOMO: Of course, I was in the room when he was assassinated.

SILVESTRO: What do you remember of that moment?

MOMO (laughs).

SILVESTRO: Sankara was waiting to meet Blaise Compaoré?

MOMO: No, it was not a meeting … there were important discussions taking place.

MOMO: And Blaise Compaoré, after seeming to have returned home at exactly midnight, was there, ready to act with the others … he entered the room and fired.

MOMO: I was right there when Thomas Sankara said, 'Blaise, you are my best friend, I call you my brother, and yet you assassinate me?' Blaise made an irritated gesture and said something to him in French – I don’t understand French very well – and then he fired a shot.

ALLEN: He fired the first shot … Sankara was seated and Compaoré was across the table. Then there was a second shot, Sankara sank into the chair and died … a few seconds before that, he had been speaking to Compaoré.

ALLEN: If Blaise Compaoré had not shot Sankara, Guengere would have done so, and would now be president. All of this was part of America’s interest in controlling Burkina Faso.

NARRATOR: Whatever the case, one thing is certain: The good will is gone and Burkina Faso is once again one of the world’s poorest countries.

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SOME COMMENTS

We hope this documentary will contribute to the search for the truth, and lead to more vital
We do not fully believe the version of events where Sankara was assassinated at midnight in the presence of Blaise Compaoré, who fired the fatal shot. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the assassination took place between 16:00 and 17:00. However, we must remain open to this.

For a long time, Liberians have been suspected to have been implicated in the death of Sankara. Up to this point, not a single Liberian had offered an explanation as to what their role was. We have serious doubts as to the veracity of this account of the day he was assassinated, but the Liberian connection is confirmed.

We unearthed a fresh confirmation of the accusations against France and Libya.

Of great importance here is the implication of the CIA. Neither is this the first time that Liberians have confirmed it in detail. Charles Taylor would surely have collaborated with the CIA to infiltrate African revolutionary circles.

There are already several accounts that express surprise at Taylor’s escape from the US. Shortly before the release of this documentary, Taylor himself recounted his surreal 'liberation escape' during the Special Tribunal on Sierra Leone, and confirmed that he had received assistance.

The producer can confirm that this documentary was shot before the release of the Liberia Truth Commission report that implicates the current president and several other personalities.

BROUGHT TO YOU BY PAMBAZUKA NEWS

* Silvestro Montanaro is an Italian journalist working for RAI3.
* This documentary was aired on 15–29 July 2009 on RAI3. The content is also available at Farafinamag. The Italian version is available from Thomas Sankara and RaiTV.
* Translated from French by Josh Ogada
* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org or comment online at Pambazuka News.

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**Readers' Comments**

Let your voice be heard. [Comment on this article.](#)

It very interesting the revelations made by this documentary but as a South African i would like to have a copy of the vidio tape of it, Is it possible that you send me the cost in South African currency of this vedio?

*Mokgapi wa Phaahla ANC/SACP*

This is very bad to learn I just learned of Brother Thomas about 3 months ago. And to see the nasty behavior that our people have done to each other is sickening. How can we become a respected people being the jack ass for the white people! How did Africa become so backward it's because the enemy you allow this bastard to continue to use you. Wake up damn it! Shake the shackles off and become real we look to y'all as home but your conducting yourselves like slaves. Get it together!
And they all come and tell us they love the continent--Ghaddafi (who's calling for a United States of Africa), Sirleaf, Taylor and all those rogues--It is saddening. I do hope they did not arrange the killing of Dr Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem too.

But, the darker it becomes, the more hope I get.

An African tragedy, the assassination of Cde Thomas Sankara. I remember, some 10 days before this tragedy, a German official TV Chanel (ARD or ZDF) broadcasted a documentary film about Burkina Faso and Thomas Sankara. After he passed away with violence, a German TV team went to Ouaga, to interview Sankara's mom, the team showed pictures of Sankara's grave taken with a hidden camera. She said, it was very hard to believe that her son, Blaise, killed by her other son Blaise, because Blaise was staying and living together in her house, when they were going to school. Anyway, very interesting German documentary films to be (re)showed.

There are 4 comments on this article.

As the Charles Taylor trial continues, African historian Carina Ray looks at the possibility that Taylor was complicit in Sankara's assassination.

In January 2008, after much delay, the trial of former Liberian president, Charles Ghankay Taylor, is scheduled to begin at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Taylor faces an 11-count indictment for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other violations of international humanitarian law. These charges stem from his involvement in the atrocities committed during Sierra Leone’s armed conflict dating back to 1996, and more specifically his support of the main rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), headed by Foday Sankoh. The brutality of the war and its direct toll on the civilian population are most visible today in the thousands of amputees throughout Sierra Leone whose limbs were hacked off in a bid to stifle civilian resistance through fear. While Taylor’s path of destruction arguably came to its apex during the war in Sierra Leone, his history prior to that also deserves our scrutiny since we know his much longer record of wanton destabilization in West Africa is precisely what allowed him to wield so much power within the RUF.

In particular, Taylor’s return to West Africa from the United States in 1985 and the events that followed deserve our attention. Taylor arrived in Ghana after escaping from a prison in Boston, Massachusetts where he was being held pending extradition to Liberia on embezzlement charges levied against him by the Doe regime. Ghanaian authorities eventually jailed Taylor twice for his increasingly subversive activities. By 1987, however, he had arrived in Burkina Faso. The approximate timing of his appearance in the country coincided with the assassination of President Thomas Sankara, the charismatic revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso, on 15 October 1987.
While it is commonly accepted that Burkina Faso’s current head of state, Blaise Compaore, ordered Sankara’s assassination after their once close relationship soured, for years people have also been linking Taylor to the assassination. In 1993 Liberian economist, S. Byron Tarr, published an article in the respected academic journal, Issue: A Journal of Opinion, on the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group’s (ECOMOG) intervention in the Liberian civil war (1989-1996). Therein Tarr gave the most detailed account to date of Taylor’s movements prior to Sankara’s assassination. According to Tarr, in 1987 Taylor approached the Burkinabe embassy in Accra to ask for assistance in overthrowing the Doe regime in Liberia. The Burkinabe ambassador to Ghana, Madam Mamouna Ouattara, a Compaore loyalist, appears to have solicited Compaore’s assistance in getting the Ghanaian authorities to release Taylor into Burkinabe custody. This was facilitated by the fact that Ghana neither wanted to hand Taylor over to the Americans nor to Doe, and so Rawlings apparently released him to Compaore who had come to Accra as part of a mediation process Rawlings had undertaken to resolve the mounting disagreements between Sankara and Compaore. Tarr, notes that “Not long after Taylor was delivered to Compaore, Sankara was murdered.” In exchange for Taylor’s assistance in carrying out Sankara’s assassination, Tarr suggests that Compaore provided assistance to Taylor who was in the process of organizing the guerilla war that would eventually lead to the overthrow of the Doe regime. Crucially, Compaore is believed to have introduced Taylor to Libyan president, Muammar Qaddafi. Taylor and his recruits subsequently traveled to Libya where they underwent guerilla training and formed a strategic alliance with Qaddafi who supported his desire to overthrow the Doe regime. The training he gained there was critical to his ability to launch the Liberian civil war in 1989 from his base in Ivory Coast. This general version of events has been echoed more recently in articles that have appeared in several other forums, including the Liberian Democratic Future’s (LDF) on-line newsmagazine, The Perspective, and The Liberian Mandingo Association of New York’s website.

It must be pointed out, however, that this version of events has been called into question. Ghanaian political scientist Eboe Hutchful who serves as the executive director of the Accra-based NGO, African Security Dialogue and Research, has suggested that his Ghanaian informants dispute the idea that Ghana released Taylor to Compaore; rather they contend that he was taken to the Ivorian border and released there. From Ivory Coast he is said to have made his way to Burkina Faso, “where the Libyans introduced him to Compaore,” rather than the other way around. Moreover, Hutchful suggests that Sankara may have already been killed by the time the Ghanaian authorities released Taylor.

The striking aspect of each of these sources is that they treat Taylor’s possible involvement in Sankara’s assassination as a side note. To date, the question of what role he played in organizing and carrying out Sankara’s murder has not been the focal point of investigation. In March 2006 the United Nations Human Rights Committee ruled that Sankara’s family has “the right to know the circumstances of his death.” Any attempt to shed light on these circumstances, therefore, must seriously consider whether Taylor was involved in the assassination, and if so, to what extent and under whose direction.

*Carina Ray is Assistant Professor of History at Fordham University in New York City, where she teaches African and Black Atlantic History. She is also a monthly columnist for New African magazine.

Tundanonga