

Introduction

The majestic mountains, high plateaus and crystal waterfalls of the Republic of Guinea have helped earn the country the title of the 'Switzerland of Africa'. Guinea is a nation with a rich vibrancy of culture, a wealth of diamonds, gold and other metals, and a hospitable people. Yet, lurking beneath the glittering potential of this breathtaking country is a history and a people scarred by corruption.



History

From the tenth century onwards, various empires ruled Guinea, including the Mali Empire (13th – 15th centuries). Europeans came to the area as part of the slave trade in the 16th century. Three centuries later, in 1890, Guinea, as it is known today, became a colony of France and by 1895 the country was incorporated into French West Africa.

European colonisation was met with resistance by the charismatic leader Samor Touré, who became the political and spiritual leader of the Guinean people in 1870. He led confrontations with French troops between 1886 and 1898 but was later captured and deported to Gabon, where he died.

Sixty years later, in 1958, Touré's hope of independence was realised when the Guineans overwhelmingly rejected de Gaulle's proposal of semi autonomy in a new French community in West Africa. The Guinean leader Sékou Touré, a descendent of Samor, declared, "We'd rather be poor and free than rich and enslaved". The French responded by immediately withdrawing from Guinea without organisation of a government, army or police force, sabotaging the few industries that were in the country and blocking all trade. The newly independent nation was left with little infrastructure, virtually no technical expertise and the daunting task of building a new nation state without external aid.

For the next two decades Sékou Touré built the country on socialist economic policies and on

the suppression of opposition and freedom of expression.

After Sékou Touré's death in 1984, Lansana Conté became President of the Republic of Guinea, taking over power during a military coup. He immediately rejected Sékou Touré's economic policies but still kept a firm grip on power.

Elections were held for the first time in 1993 but their results, and subsequent election results, were disputed. An attempted coup in 1996 led to Conté replacing all his ministers and bringing in outside expertise. The new administration promised to abolish corruption and develop the infrastructure of the country. Two years later the Prime Minister was sacked and Guinea's serious economic problems continued.

By 2005, Guinea was in danger of becoming a failed state. The Prime Minister was removed in April 2006, and Conté, elderly and in failing health, did not reappoint until January 2007, during which time there were mass strikes by government workers and trade unions. The eventual appointment of former UN ambassador, Lansana Kouyaté as Prime Minister has proved popular, and has brought an end to the strikes, but whether this will result in long term improvements remains to be seen.

Current challenges

- ▶ The healthcare system is rudimentary. The lack of training for staff and basic medicines mean that hospitals are lacking in the necessary medical personnel and supplies. The death rate among pregnant women is at a level rarely seen outside a war zone.
- ▶ Refugees, smuggling and banditry spill into Guinea from neighbouring countries. In 2000 over half a million refugees escaped to Guinea fleeing fighting in Sierra Leone and Liberia, placing increased strain on the economy and fuelling suspicion and ethnic tension.
- ▶ The European think-tank, International Crisis Group, have warned that Guinea runs the risk of becoming a 'failed state'. Instability amongst the neighbouring countries, uncertainty over the successor to the authoritarian president and severe economic troubles have left the country vulnerable.

BMS involvement in Guinea

BMS World Mission has been involved in health work in Guinea since 1993, and church work since 2004.

Health work in Macenta

BMS nurse Sarah Hall is seconded to work with Mission Philafricaine at the Medical Centre in Macenta. She is helping to promote better health practices and training for Guinean nurses. She was joined in 2007 by BMS worker, Sarah Harris, who is a project assistant. Rob & Gen Eldred joined the team in May 2008.

Church planting

Simon and Solange Wood will shortly be working in Guinea, following a time of preparation at IMC and language study in France. They will be joining the ministerial training team working alongside the Guinean Evangelical Church.

Background information

The land

Guinea is situated on Africa's west coast with Guinea Bissau and Senegal to the north, Sierra Leone to the south, and Mali and Ivory Coast to the west. The water source for the Niger, Senegal and Gambia rivers is found in Guinea.

The country can be divided into four main areas: the coastal plain of lower Guinea with its lagoons and mangrove swamps; the Fouta Djallon hills, Guinea's best-known geographical feature, rising to over 1,500 metres; the dry lowlands of upper Guinea with the Niger River flowing through it; and the mountainous forest region of south-east Guinea.

Guinea's population is just under ten million with 50 per cent of the population under the age of 16. Eighty per cent of the workforce is involved in agriculture.

The nation has extensive iron, bauxite and diamond deposits although currently its only major exports are bauxite and aluminium. Guinea has enormous potential for hydroelectric power.

Religion

Guinea is one of the least evangelised countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Over 85 per cent of the population are Muslim, with under five per cent Christian. Most of the Christian population are found around the capital city, Conakry, and in the south-east.

The former government's pro-Islamic and Marxist worldview led to the severe suffering of Christians, especially Catholics. The death of Sékou Touré in 1984 brought religious freedom which allowed mission workers to enter the country. However, stories of religious persecution continue.

Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the Church, which is a small minority in a largely Muslim country, to have a powerful, transforming impact on their communities and be strong despite growing intolerance.
- ▶ Pray for the millions of Guineans who don't know Christ, that the Holy Spirit would lead them to the truth of who Jesus is.
- ▶ Guinea is one of the poorest countries in west Africa with poverty, low school enrolment rates, adult illiteracy and high maternal mortality rates all contributing to the country's problems. Pray for wisdom and integrity as the government seeks to help end poverty in Guinea.
- ▶ Crises in neighbouring countries place huge strain on resources and prevent implementation of reform programmes. Pray for the conflict in the southern regions of West Africa to cease.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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BMS World Mission
PO Box 49 Didcot OX11 8XA
T: 01235 517700
E-mail: mail@bmsworldmission.org

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