



Kofigate: What impact on Western Sahara's peace process?

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The UN **Oil-For-Food program** (OFF) may be the biggest financial scandal in recent years. And it's becoming ever more clear that all roads lead to the doorstep of the organization's Secretary-General, **Kofi Annan**. The scandal is already tagged by some as "Kofigate".

The UN relief program was set up in 1995 to provide humanitarian supplies to Iraq, which at the time was under international sanctions. What appeared to be a complicated relief effort, later became a scam. The scam was uncovered only after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and the subsequent disclosure of Iraqi documents listing names of persons and companies involved in the fraud.

In January the Iraqi newspaper *Al Mada* published a list of influential people and organizations which supposedly received vouchers from the Iraqi government to purchase oil. Among these people - besides Annan's family mem-

bers - several important French political figures' names have surfaced; Charles Pasqua, former interior minister, Serge Boidevaix, former secretary general of Quai d'Orsay (both men have denied any involvement), and the former French ambassador to the UN and to Morocco, **Jean-Bernard Mérimée**. Also, a set of intermediaries related to the former U.N. secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, have emerged in a number of international press reports.

The most clearly exposed scheme to date is that of Mr. Mérimée and the members of Kofi Annan's family, and their connection to Morocco.

Mr **Mérimée**, who was France's ambassador to Rabat (1987-1991), and to the UN (1991-1995), told a French judge recently that "after he retired from the French foreign ministry he began working for a **Moroccan bank**, the Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (**BMCE**)". He also confessed his in-

volvement in a multi-million-dollar fraud to divert money from the UN's oil-for-food programme and take bribes from Saddam Hussein.

The former ambassador and Special Adviser to the UN Secretary General, "was hired by the president of the **Moroccan** BMCE-Bank, **Othmane Benjelloun**, as the bank's administrator", revealed the North Africa Journal, in April 2000. The weekly Maroc-Hebdo also reported, around the same time, that **Othmane Benjelloun** and **Jean-Bernard Mérimée** had joined ranks to improve the Bank's financial standing. At the time of his crooked dealings, Mr **Mérimée** was a special adviser to **Kofi Annan** but also held a seat on the board of the **BMCE**.

Recap, **Benjelloun** is the same banker who was also involved in [the saga of Hicham Mandari](#) - a former aide to the Moroccan royal family who had been in a long-running feud with King Mohamed VI and found shot dead in Spain.

Jean-Bernard Mérimée " had strong ties to the French government, he spoke with the authority of the UN...and he had the ear of the UN secretary general.", writes Claudia Rosset, a journalist who investigated and reported extensively on the UN OFF scam.

Although the UN claims that **Mérimée's** work for the UN ended in 2002, he was listed as late as this year in the organization's website as a special adviser to the secretary-general. Similar situation happens regarding his job at the **BMCE**. He allegedly resigned from this post in May 2004. However, [his name is still listed on the bank's website](#). Result of an oversight, or negligence?

The money **Mérimée** received from his lucrative contracts was used to reno-

vate a villa he owned in Ouarzazate, **Morocco**. According to *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, the property was a gift from Hassan II for "services rendered on the issue of Western Sahara", when he was ambassador in that country. Surprisingly enough, accepting such "a gift" did not imperil Mr Mérimée's diplomatic career. He was later promoted to France's ambassador to the UN. **Mérimée** told the Moroccan daily "*Le Economist*" in 2000: "[you'd] realize that I agreed to the position suggested by **Benjelloun** ... only after getting the approval of the UN secretary-general and France". Conflict of interests?

But the connection to Morocco does not ended there. Two members of the Annan clan have also surfaced. There's a possible OFF connection to Annan's son, **Kojo**, and his brother, **Kobina Annan**— themselves under investigation for their alleged involvement in the fraud. Kobina Annan is **Ghana's ambassador to Morocco**. *The Times* of London last year reported that investigators were following a lead on **Kojo Annan** for his alleged role in setting up a deal for a **Moroccan** oil company [**SAMIR**] to buy oil from Iraq. Kojo Annan and Hani Yamani, a Saudi businessman, were negotiating the sale of oil to the Moroccan company. Yamani is the son of the powerful Sheikh Ahmed Yamani, former Saudi oil minister and OPEC founder. Kojo is alleged to have travelled to Morocco to finalise the sale and was present at important meetings. The deal with **SAMIR**, while never denied, it was later abandoned, according to press dispatches.

Whatever one makes of **Mérimée**, the crucial conflict of interest of his job at the **BMCE** centers on the UN and its credibility. It is true, of course, that all the cast of characters and the multitude of misdeeds mentioned above could not be grounds enough for accusations. But there is a clear pattern of family and

crony connections, all of which converge in Morocco.

If one would only consider the comments of Mr. Annan's wife, Nane Annan - published sometime in the late 90's in Jeune-Afrique - were she expressed their desire to live in Tangiers, once her husband retires. The circumstantial evidence is, nevertheless, substantial and shocking, to say the least.

Presumably, this bazaar of corruption entail no direct link to the Western Sahara conflict but they inevitably do raise some questions that so far remain unanswered; how much did **Kofi Annan** know? What services did **Mérimée** render at the UN, if any, on behalf of Morocco, in exchange for the lavish gift(s)? But most importantly, how much did this corruption-laden business impact the peace process in Western Sahara?. There is, undoubtedly, some smoke but no flame yet.