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Sub-Title: If you carve Africa, Africa may carve you



The reach of the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) leaders was palpable this week, not just here in Durban where they gathered on Tuesday and Wednesday to plan investments and infrastructure, but everywhere up continent where extraction does extreme damage.

One site is the Central African Republic (CAR), where last Saturday thirteen SA National Defense Force troops lost their lives (with 27 wounded) in a fight of 200 South Africans initially against the very CAR troops they were training, according to an army trade unionist, followed by Seleka rebels who then apologized for killing the South Africans.

These tragic deaths were in vain: not in support of African democracy, for François Bozizé was such a brutal tyrant that not even France made an attempt to prop him up. Instead, over the past ten weeks, our SA troops have been defending counterproductive, repressive military investments and potential mining deals, as deputy foreign minister Ebrahim Ebrahim let on in a recent interview explaining their deployment.

A Reuters correspondent is probably correct: 'It is particularly embarrassing for South Africa, which is seeking to project itself as an influential regional power on the continent this week as it hosts a summit of the BRICS emerging states and welcomes new Chinese President Xi Jinping on his first visit to Africa as head of state.'

AN EMBARRASSING TRAGEDY

This embarrassment is not just a matter of oft-remarked military incompetence. The Resource Curse reminder is also stark, coming alongside the ongoing socio-economic and environmental chaos in Marikana's platinum mines and Zimbabwe's Marange diamond fields.

The awful news from Bangui should have been a wake-up call to BRICS heads of state, to clear their heads and contemplate the extractive-industry crises they are amplifying, hand-in-glove with Western corporations and the 15 African leaders who met just after BRICS concluded at Durban's wealthiest gated-community resort, Zimbali.

At Zimbali, by coincidence, Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe is putting finishing touches on a glorious mansion, maybe for his coming voluntary retirement. That precedent could explain the BRICS delegation's detour far north of the city, followed by their evening return back to the International Convention Centre, and then back again near Zimbali to the airport for their departures in an irrational, manic zigzag through Durban's rush-hour traffic.

CRONY CAPITALISM OF TYRANTS

The likes of Ugandan tyrant Yoweri Museveni, the most senior member of the African delegation to the BRICS-Africa Dialogue, at least had a chance to check out the local real estate market for a future nightmare scenario when Arab Spring-type democratic revolts succeed. In late 2011, after Ugandans were inspired by Egyptians at Tahrir Square, Museveni outlawed the country's famous 'Walk-to-Work' protests: the favoured Kampala tactic was simply strolling. Museveni's militarization of the territory now under oil exploration is the predictable precursor for Resource Cursed Uganda.

At Marange in eastern Zimbabwe, members of Mugabe's closest faction – including defense minister Emmerson Mnangagwa, army commander Constantine Chiwenga and others running the junta known as the Joint Operations Command – are allied with a Shanghai company via a joint venture known as Anjin, which allows the Chinese to run a tight labour regime (paying unskilled workers just \$180/month), while the military manages overall security.

Billions of dollars worth of Marange diamonds have already been extracted, with only a tiny trickle flowing back to the finance ministry in Harare. Chiwenga's many trips to China sealed military deals including a recently launched \$100 million army training school as well as arms purchases that everyone hopes are not used in coming weeks, as the national election approaches.

Meanwhile, with Johannesburg hosting the 10th anniversary of the Kimberley Process for corporate social responsibility in the diamond trade next month, we cannot forget how SA's policy manager Abbey Chikane colluded in the five-week arrest (and torture) of Farai Maguwu, who has been watchdogging the diamond trade and winning Human Rights Watch awards for his bravery.

Remarked Ian Smillie, a key architect of the Kimberley Process, 'We don't know where all the [Marange] diamonds went that were approved by Chikane. Chikane was a mistake on several levels. He was closely allied with the government of South Africa, which had demonstrated a pathological inability to be critical of Zimbabwe's horrendous human rights abuse in Marange. And he has extensive personal business interests in the Southern African diamond industry that should have disqualified him from the outset.'

There is similar resource cursing underway in platinum. In recent days, at the Farlam Commission hearings into the Marikana massacre, more Lonmin connections to the SA Police murderers have been revealed via incriminating emails from African National Congress deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa, who owned 9 percent of Lonmin at the time. The incriminating emails were sent to his political allies running the police and mining ministries the day before the killing of 34 miners last August.

It all reeks of the crony capitalism that characterized the gatherings between BRICS state bureaucrats and corporate interests, who crowded into the same Durban convention centre hallways this week. Pretoria's foreign ministry explicitly excluded anyone from civil society from attending, and SA's most accomplished environmentalist, Bobby Peek, was even prohibited from entering for a debate on national radio on Tuesday.

CSO PROHIBITED FROM BRICS MEETING

A few hours later on the same radio network, SA's BRICS Ambassador Anil Sukla confirmed Pretoria's refusal to send a representative to the 'brics-from-below' civil society conference, which on Monday-Tuesday was located in a church just a few minutes away from the BRICS meeting. Requests to participate in BRICS deliberations made over prior weeks by social movements, NGOs and even major trade unions were swatted away by Sukla's colleagues – yet big business has pride of place inside today.

That leaves BRICS rulers and their corporations to quietly plan the further looting of Africa, joined by the pliable guests led by Museveni. However, subsidized state funding is needed to facilitate deals because commercial banks know there are intolerable risks – like those the SANDF troops just suffered.

To facilitate, the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) is lining up to play a crucial role, and Suklal lobbied for SA to host the \$50 billion BRICS Bank that was supposed to have been launched on Wednesday. Its postponement until further talks when the Russians host the G20, appeared to reflect the lack of confidence of BRICS in Pretoria.

ESCHEWING PROGRESSIVE DEVELOPMENT IDEALS

A genuinely counterhegemonic financial strategy would have been for BRICS to instead support the late Hugo Chavez's Bank of the South. The idea was spurned, as BRICS elites apparently want an institution without any residue of more progressive development ideals.

The DBSA's team is led by former South African spy chief Mo Shaik, through its subsidiary Development Bank International. Shaik is notorious for political shenanigans dating to the government's notorious late 1990s arms deals. Still, more than \$700 million was authorized for DBSA recapitalization last month in SA finance minister Pravin Gordhan's budget, in the wake of the DBSA's \$40 million loss in part due to gambling in mining concerns like Ramaphosa's last year.

Revealing its new orientation, the pro-privatisation DBSA has, in recent weeks, been firing most of its social and environmental staff and shutting down its development journal and library. Its record of infrastructure investment - including commercialized water and toll-roads - does not bode well for people or the planet. Expect the BRICS Bank's subsidized rail, road and port credits to lubricate more multinational corporate extraction.

The major benefit of BRICS to South African extractive interests was in the railroad loans aimed at extracting coal and iron ore and shipping from our deepest port, at Richard's Bay. The contribution to climate change will be prolific, and the resource curse associated with coal-related pollution and political corruption can only intensify.

The largest coal-fired electricity generator under construction in the world today is the core of the rail-energy nexus, at Medupi in Limpopo Province, and on Tuesday the workers announced yet another strike. The plant has already been delayed two years due to unrest and supplier chaos, in spite of the World Bank's largest-ever project loan (\$3.75 billion in 2010) for the hotly contested plant. To pay for it, electricity prices for poor people are soaring, with more rioting over electricity and other municipal services the logical result.

Another source of intense contestation over coal is Mozambique's Tete Province, where the world's largest coal field was recently discovered and is being exploited by Rio-based Vale mining house (the world's second largest). Vale was named the world's worst corporation by the Public Eye People's Award in 2012, and popular resistance to mass displacement of Tete residents is already becoming fierce.

Indeed, as Pretoria's commitment to not just Medupi but also Bangui shows, when these elites carve up Africa, the backlash can be brutal. A different way is needed: with more respect for societies and nature than for the profits of BRICS corporates. There are countless forms of resistance being shared by brics-from-below activists from each of the countries and their hinterlands - and growing linkages that mean coordinated critique and campaigning can be a logical next step in bottom-up internationalism.

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Article-Summary:

Just before the BRICS state bureaucrats and corporate interests met in Durban this week to plan how to continue to extract profits, the tragedy of thirteen SA National Defense Force troops in the Central African Republic lost their lives in a vain attempt to safeguard potential mining deals. A different way is needed in which people-led activism challenges and transforms vulture capitalism

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