

On Thomas Sankara's birthday



Cribb 10

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Burkina Faso's first president was assassinated nearly 25 years ago but the identity of his killers remains unresolved. Marking the anniversary of his birth, campaigners draw attention to the continuing struggle for justice for Sankara.

October 15 was the 23rd anniversary of the assassination of Thomas Sankara, Burkina Faso's first president. His grave had been vandalised a few days earlier but no one was charged for the crime. Sankara's comrades celebrate his birthday on December 21, knowing how useful his presence would have been for 21st century Africa if he were still alive. Nevertheless, his message and work remain relevant, both for our continent and the world.

Thomas Sankara embodied the hope for change that was based primarily on the efforts of the people of his country, his fellow citizens. Theirs was the last African revolution, interrupted by the bloodshed of 1987, just as it was starting to bear promising fruit. At 37, like Che Guevara, Sankara joined the pantheon of revolutionaries. The former Upper Volta, which he renamed Burkina Faso, is landlocked; its development is externally driven and dependent on international

finance. It is a society in permanent quest for food self-sufficiency; people of working age are obliged to emigrate, continuing the country's vocation as a regional provider of cheap labour; and the elite maintains the status quo. In other words, a society with the characteristics of neo-colonial development.

Thomas Sankara, among other priorities, focused on agriculture and farmers to stimulate national revival. He sought to create an internal market for a variety of consumer goods accessible to the masses and meet the greatest number of basic needs. He promoted women's emancipation and changes in men's attitudes toward women. He took a patriotic approach to managing public funds, campaigning against debt and the impoverishment of Africa, and agitating for internationalism that challenged the subordination of Africa by the global economic system. In short, he took on many radical initiatives that confronted the norms of the global system. He quickly alienated himself from local, regional and international supporters, especially from within his own backyard in FrancAfrique.

Sankara's assassination, along with ten of his comrades, and the wave of political crimes which followed, brought a bloody end to one of Africa's last revolutionary experiences. The people of Burkina Faso, Africa and the international community are still waiting to find out how the assassination happened and who was responsible for it. It's likely there was a joint international and local plot was behind the killing of Sankara and his ten comrades. His death certificate cites 'natural causes' – at the same time as 12 other people – no explanation for their deaths has ever been given and to this day no-one knows exactly where he is buried. Suspicion for the assassination falls on his best friend, Blaise Compaoré, backed by a network of external supporters. Minister of Justice at the time of Sankara's death, Compaoré is now president of Burkina Faso.

It is in this context that the Sankara family and our group have taken a historic initiative. The impunity built into the system in Burkina Faso has been shaken by CIJS's (International Justice for Sankara Campaign) 14-year international campaign, Justice for Sankara. Having exhausted all legal channels in Burkina Faso, our legal community brought the matter to the UN Human Rights Committee, which set a precedent in Africa and within the United Nations when it recognised the violations of the state:

'The refusal to lead an enquiry into the death of Thomas Sankara, the lack of official recognition at the place of his death, and the failure to correct his death certificate constitute inhumane treatment of Madame Sankara and her sons, in contradiction of Article 7 of the agreement (12.2). The family of Thomas Sankara has the right to know the circumstances of his death (...) The Committee considers that the refusal to lead an enquiry into the death of Thomas Sankara, the lack of official recognition at the place of his death, and the failure to correct his death certificate constitute inhumane treatment of Madame Sankara and her sons...)

But the Human Rights Committee did not retain the right to demand an enquiry, nor did it demand compensation or recognition of Sankara's burial place. Paradoxically, Burkina Faso has not provided any evidence to prove the authenticity of the burial place. The compensation offered to the family came to 43,445 FCFA – around €66,231 or US\$65,000. Some experts estimate that the sum was more generous (\$650,000/434 450 FCFA) and that the State made an effort by crossing out the word 'natural' on the odious death certificate, which claimed that Sankara had died of natural causes. Despite the amendment of the figure by lawyers and the fact that Sankara pilgrims to a grave in the cemetery are not proof that he is buried there, the Human Rights Committee declared in April 2008 that it was satisfied with its findings and had no intention of taking the matter any further.

But the CIJS pursued the fight against impunity, especially as Burkina Faso continued to rack up other prosecutable violations; an enquiry should have been opened following new revelations from the protagonists in these sinister events – at the very least, they should have finally officially given their version of events.

Statements made by General Tarnue, already assigned as evidence by CIJS, have been corroborated by unpublished revelations by Liberia's Senator Johnson at a reconciliation commission, charging President Compaoré and his regime with the murder of Sankara, in conspiracy with former Liberia president Taylor.

In Taylor's final cross-examination at the criminal tribunal at the Hague on 25 August 2009 ([see page 27602](#)), he denied involvement, alleging that he was under arrest in Ghana at the time, but he erred on the guilt of Compaoré during his interrogation, before retracting his statements. ('I was still in jail when Blaise Compaoré killed them -- during the killing of Thomas Sankara, because I can't say he killed, but he didn't do it himself. I was in prison in Ghana...')

In RAI's documentary '[Ombre Africane](#)', another Liberian General Momo Jiba who was Compaoré's bodyguard, follows in the direction of Tarnue and Johnson, providing new insights into Sankara's assassination and claiming, in front of a hidden camera, that Compaoré fired personally during the killing, and that the coup was an international plot supported by the CIA. In [an interview with journalist Keith Harmon Snow](#), his colleague Norbert Zongo – since assassinated by the Compaoré regime – also reported the involvement of Mossad and the CIA in the assassination.

All these witnesses said they feared for their lives and refused to give more details about the matter. The truth must be known so that the Burkinabe can move on from an era of impunity.

President Compaoré, Sankara's suspected killer, has recently been named mediator in the Guinea crisis. On Radio France International, he declared without

missing a beat: 'We cannot tolerate that there are still discussions in Guinea about disappeared people whose bodies have not been found'.

Thomas Sankara's body was never found and that's why Me Nkounkou introduced a confinement request procedure, which the authorities still have not responded to.

Following up on UN decision, CIJS is still waiting for the authorities to prove that the supposed tomb of Sankara is indeed his. On 15 October 2009, the legal committee of the CIJS, represented by Me Nzeppa, filed a request for a subpoena and order for the DNA of the corpse in the sepulchre, erected by the Burkina Faso government, to be compared with that of Sankara's children.

We are still waiting for the state to make a decision on our request; it is possible that the act of vandalism against Sankara's supposed tomb is linked to our request. But the fight against impunity must continue. Impunity perpetuates the assassination of internationalists who dare influence the development of their people towards meeting basic needs. Sankara embodied a self-directed, Pan-African development; making a radical break with the previous disorder but also from rigid cultural attitudes. A project which needed popular support, the enthusiasm of the masses, a sense of sacrifice by the 'haves' – in short a set of conditions that made of Thomas, like certain other of his illustrious pan-African predecessors, visionaries ahead of their time. Not that their vision of society is not still valid. It is just as vital to have national and popular support; vicious episodes are inherent in any break with compradorisation' and capitalist globalisation, in which many laudable initiatives across the continent have perished. Thomas's mistake was perhaps to believe that he had strong enough alliances, but also to have underestimated the reactionary fringe that was plotting against him.

Recently French comrades [issued a petition](#) calling people to support our campaign and demanding an inquiry into France's role in the Sankara affair. We encourage you to [sign it](#), on the occasion of the birthday of Thomas Isidore Sankara.

In a thank-you letter to GRILA and the lawyers, Thomas' widow Mariam Sankara, wrote: 'You are pioneers in defending the memory of my spouse. If many others have taken up the torch again, it is thanks to you. You have the merit and the courage to continue my quest for the truth about the assassination of Thomas Sankara... this quotation from Seneca illustrates it: 'It is not because it is difficult that people don't dare. It is because we don't dare that it is difficult'.

In a message addressed to her people, Mariam Sankara, repeating the popular saying, insisted, 'Whatever the length of the night, the day will appear'. She continues to call for unity, resistance and determination, remembering how much Sankara's message and objectives remain current. In Latin America, new forms

of regional integration still resonate with the Africa-Latin America Summit, where Venezuela's Hugo Chavez quoted Sankara at length in his 1984 speech:

'We could look for the best forms of organisation, better suited to our civilisation, rejecting in a clear and definitive way all forms of external imposition, to create proper conditions, to match our ambitions. No longer focused on surviving, we release the pressure, free our campaign from mediaeval inaction, democratise society, awaken our minds to a universe of collective responsibility, to dare to invent the future.'

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