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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Economic Changes in Guinea

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Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter,

Around the world today, much attention is riveted on countries undergoing major political and economic changes, such as in Eastern Europe and Nicaragua. Some similar changes are also in progress in African countries such as the Republic of Guinea. The transformation of the Guinean economy has been fairly rapid and generally encouraging. After visiting so many countries in Africa where change seems to come slowly, if at all, Guinea is refreshing. Of course, the changes seem even more remarkable considering what had gone before.

Guinea is located in West Africa (see Map). Guinea made its mark in African history when, in 1958, the people voted for immediate independence, rather than join other French Territories and Overseas Departments in a Franco-African Community. The French colonialists pulled out right away, leaving virtually no infrastructure in their wake. Some buildings that were under construction, such as a hospital in Conakry, were sabotaged and left in ruins. Many French plans for Guinea, which among the French colonies had been considered the "Pearl of West Africa," were transferred to Cote d'Ivoire.

Ahmed Sekou Toure ruled the country from 1958 until his death in 1984. During the First Republic, the government followed a socialist model, whereby the government ran everything. Farmers were heavily taxed, and collective farms were promoted. Markets were closed, and all agricultural produce had to be sold through the government. As a result, agricultural production declined drastically. Some ethnic groups, such as the Fulani who live primarily in the Fouta Djallon highlands, were persecuted during the First Republic, and many fled to work and live in neighboring West African countries.

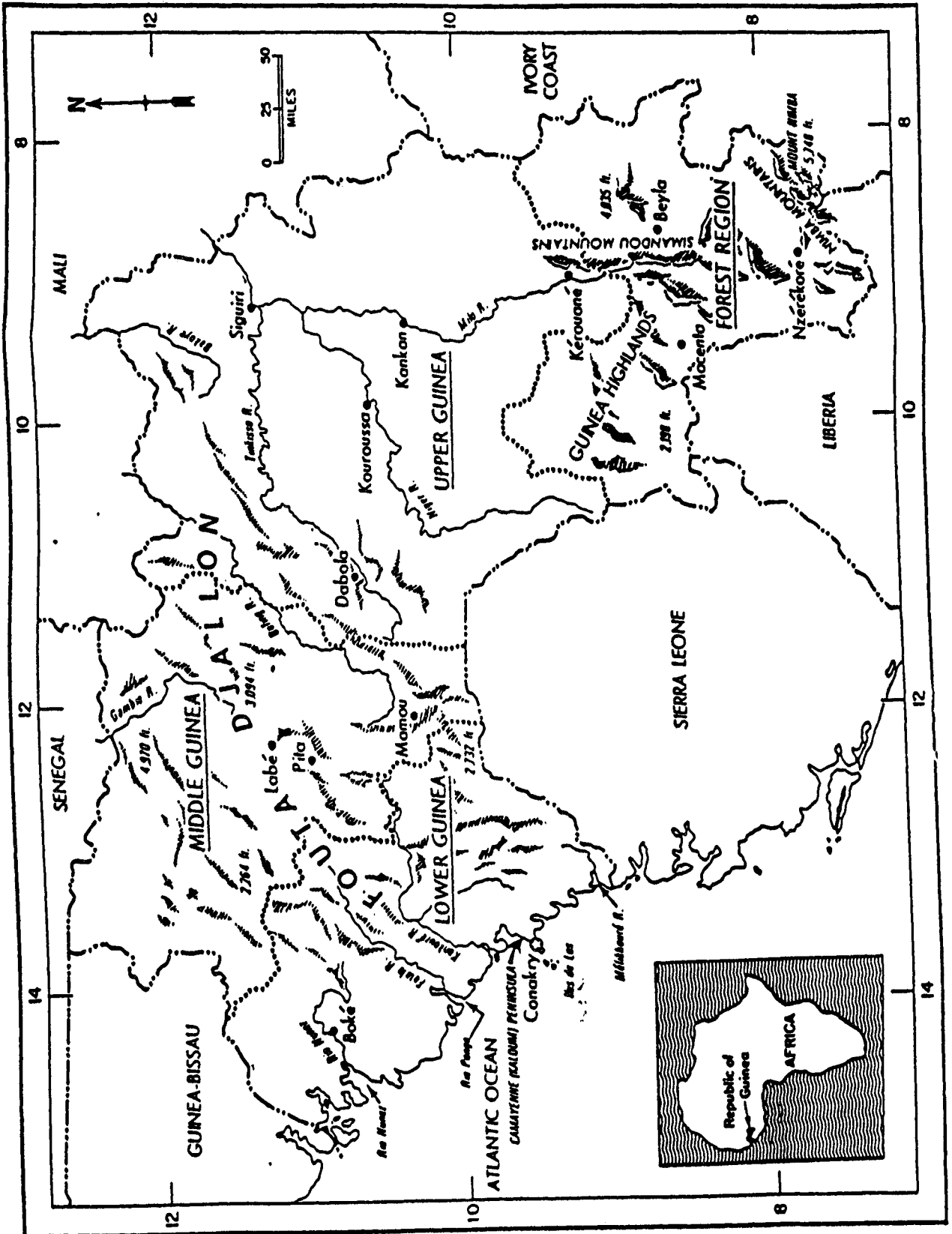
On 3 April 1984, less than one week after Sekou Toure's death, the military seized power and proclaimed the Second Republic. Lansana Conte became President. Many policies of the First Republic were changed. The new government set about restructuring the economy, moving to a more capitalistic model. Opportunities were opened for business and private entrepreneurs, and agricultural taxes were reduced. Individual freedoms of speech and of movement were instituted.

When I first visited Guinea, in August 1988, I was really struck by the social and economic conditions. The capital city, Conakry, looked like little had been done in 30 years since the French left. The train station, the terminus for trains to Kankan, looked utterly abandoned. Many buildings in the city were crumbling. Being the rainy season, most facades were covered with a film of green mold and mildew. Conakry gets an enormous amount of rain -- over four meters, or 160 inches, per year most of which comes between June and September. The storm sewer system is inadequate, so the streets turn to rivers during the rains.

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Map of Guinea.

(Adapted from: Nelson, Harold D. et al 1975 Area Handbook for Guinea 2nd Ed Foreign Area Studies Series, American Univ Washington US Govt Printing Office)



Everyone assured me that the situation had improved enormously in the previous four years. Some businesses, such as small shops, private pharmacies, and restaurants, had been started by local or foreign investors. People were beginning to renovate some of the crumbling buildings.

The new government had, for the most part, instilled a great deal of optimism and hope amongst the population, as well as the outside donor and investment community. The government had agreed, under the tutelage of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other donors, to undertake a program of economic restructuring. This program included, among other things, a massive cutback in government employment of civil servants. The government had, for example, recently held an examination for all government-employed agronomists -- on the basis of the test results, two-thirds were to be dropped from the government payrolls. Those losing their jobs would be left to their own devices -- to find work in the newly-emerging private sector, or perhaps employment with development projects or new non-governmental organizations.

When I returned to Guinea in February 1990, many changes were evident in Conakry. The Catholic Diocese of Conakry had just celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. The cathedral has been greatly spruced up, although renovations are still underway. Many streets in the downtown core of Conakry have been outfitted with new brick sidewalks and drainage systems. Many more private businesses had opened, and the economic life seemed bustling. The big market and bus station, located between the downtown area and the airport had been moved, thus greatly facilitating the flow of traffic into the downtown area. The downtown is built on the tip of a peninsula, so traffic congestion has long been a problem.

Some impatience, however, seems to be developing. Some people feel that changes are not happening fast enough. In mid-March 1990, for example, student and teacher strikes and riots occurred at the University and elsewhere in Conakry, and some people were shot and killed. Besides dealing with its own population, the government in early 1990 was also confronted with a large population of political refugees from Liberia, who had come across the border into the Forest Region near Nzerekore.

Changes have been a bit slower to become evident in the countryside. The government is, however, committed to rural development. Along with economic changes have gone plans to encourage decentralized, grassroots development. Local governments are being provided with half of their local tax monies, to spend on what they perceive to be their priorities for development. The Ministry of the Interior and Decentralization is also trying to help local communities obtain technical assistance and other sources of funding to undertake development efforts.

To ensure that agricultural development can be sustained, particular attention is being devoted to management, conservation, and rehabilitation of the natural resource base. A national Tropical Forestry Action Plan has recently been developed and adopted by the government. Currently work is underway on a national Environmental Action Plan.

In different regions of the country, more specific activities are underway. In the highlands of the Fouta Djallon, in Middle Guinea, a large Integrated Management of the Fouta Djallon Watersheds (IMFDW) Project is underway. In addition to the

the IMFDW Project, similar umbrella watershed management projects have been started elsewhere in Guinea. One is located in the upper Gambia watersheds, in the northern central Guinea, and the other in the upper Niger watersheds, in Upper Guinea.

Upcountry some changes are already evident. Both in 1988 and again in 1990, I visited the Fouta Djallon. When I first visited the Fouta, I was amazed at how isolated and undeveloped certain areas were. I had traveled, for example, to the village of Linsan. Linsan serves as the seat of the Sub-Prefecture of Linsan. The Sub-Prefecture has a population of approximately 6,000 inhabitants and is located within the Prefecture of Lelouma. Linsan is located 120 kilometers (75 miles) from Labe, which takes approximately four hours over rough roads. In several places, vehicles have to ford rivers, as the bridges have fallen apart and have not been repaired.

Residents in Linsan all complained of their isolation. Typically only one or two vehicles per month arrives in Linsan. A market is held in Linsan once a week, every Tuesday, to sell local agricultural produce, local handicrafts, such as cotton-indigo cloth, pots, and mats, and limited manufactured goods, such as cigarettes, matches, and batteries. For the entire sub-prefecture, three primary schools were functioning, each with only two or three classes, instead of a full cycle of six.

In 1988, Linsan had a health center, but it was virtually non-functional, as the nurse rarely had any medicine. Very sick people had to be transported to either Labe or Lelouma, and often died before they could get help. While I know that more remote and isolated locations exist elsewhere in Africa, this town was the first I had visited where the inhabitants seemed so cut off from the outside world. It was the first place in Africa I'd seen where people have to travel more than 100 kilometers for rudimentary medical care.

When I returned in 1990, the situation had improved slightly. The health dispensary had been renovated and upgraded to a health center. The local district had used the returned local taxes to help finance the renovation. The center was in the process of being stocked with medicines and vaccines, as part of a World Bank funded national program. A new medical chief had just been posted to the center two months earlier. Another market, in a village 8 kilometers from Linsan, which had been closed for many years, had reopened three weeks earlier. Of the three primary schools, however, only two were currently operating.

During my visit, the Prefet had come to Linsan for local elections. He had also brought a metal foot locker that contained the local tax money being remitted to the district. During the district elections, the population all endorsed the idea of using this year's tax monies to rehabilitate the Sous-Prefet's office and home. One of the Prefet's assistants had then opened up the foot locker and taken out 1,900,000 Guinean francs (\$3,000), which were handed over to the newly-elected District Chief.

It is certainly too early to tell how well the pace and pattern of changes can be maintained. But after seeing so many situations in Africa where economic conditions seem to be barely holding their own, or declining, it has been refreshing to see signs of hope in Guinea.

Sincerely,

*Paula J. Williams*

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