

Mabiala feels at the mercy of economic interests

Land of Hope and Glory

As a number of African Americans look to the continent for inspiration, an exiled African looks for something similar in the US. Jon Rosen reports

As he sits inside a Washington DC coffee shop, Isaias Mabiala, a softly spoken man of 42, hardly fits the stereotype of an African rebel army's top brass. Yet as president of the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (Flec), which has fought since the 1960s to bring independence to the tiny former Portuguese protectorate, Mabiala is just that. Since 1975, when Cabinda was incorporated into newly independent Angola after an invasion by Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) forces, Flec has waged a low-intensity guerrilla insurgency against the Angolan army in this oil-rich enclave. Commanding troops while lobbying Washington, Mabiala is a unique incarnation of present-day ties between the US and Africa.

The US, where Mabiala has spent the past 12 years in exile, has long been given credence as a haven for the oppressed, an 'asylum for mankind' in a world where 'freedom hath been hunted,' as Thomas Paine wrote in his famous revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense*. In 1968, the US became party to the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and in the post-Cold War era, asylum-granting is less often conducted on ideological grounds. One consequence is that America's borders are now open to dissidents of regimes that Washington openly supports.

Mabiala is in a similar position, as leader of a movement that finds a sympathetic ear among officials, yet is ultimately at the mercy of larger American strategic and economic interests. At the heart of the matter in Cabinda is oil. Though less than one per cent of Angola's land mass, Cabinda produces more than 60 per cent of the country's oil.

With a population of just 300,000, an independent Cabinda would see more than

\$70,000 of annual oil revenue per capita at current prices – an astounding figure for a territory with one of the lowest standards of living in Angola. Still, Mabiala insists that his movement is not about control of resources, but long-denied liberty of the Cabindan people.

The Angolan government has reportedly made assurances that a significant proportion of oil revenues from the area will be reinvested and hopes to contain the insurgency by the signing of a peace deal with an offshoot of Flec in 2006.

But Mabiala remains defiant – showing how impossible the Angolan government's task is. "Cabindans are not Angolans. We are forced to be Angolan. We do not even share a common border. We speak a different language and have a different history," he says.



Mabiala's task in the US is to sell the Cabindan cause – in particular, to convince the American government to pressure Luanda into greater transparency surrounding the Cabindan issue and to engage in direct dialogue with Flec. This is not an easy pitch to the Washington establishment. Today, Angola is America's fifth-largest source of crude oil, trading an average of 595,000 barrels per day for the first four months of 2009 – more than top African producer Nigeria and any Gulf state save Saudi Arabia. A handful of American firms also have large stakes in Cabindan oil through joint ventures with Sonangol, the Angolan national oil company. Chevron – the world's fourth-biggest non-governmental energy firm – has been in the enclave since 1955.

"I go to Congress, to the State Department, and they listen," Mabiala says. "They under-

stand – the truth is there. But the issue is economic. The American government does not want to abuse its contract with the government of Angola."

When asked about his reception among African Americans in particular, Mabiala is also cynical.

"I've met many African Americans that sympathise with our cause," he says, "but they don't have power in their hands. I go to African-American NGOs and they tell me to speak with the State Department. I've met with members of the Congressional Black Caucus, but they are working as American not African representatives. Most African Americans do not even know where they came from. I believe they are brothers, but in terms of politics there is nothing they can do to resolve African issues."

"Some say Obama's roots will help change things," he continues. "But I don't think his focus will be on Africa. It will still just be a territory to pump resources to the West."

Challenges notwithstanding, Mabiala insists he would be nowhere other than Washington. He has certainly seen the other side, fleeing Cabinda for a Zairean refugee camp at the age of nine and working as a Flec representative in Kinshasa until 1997 when the Zairean president and long-time Flec patron, Mobutu Sese Seko, was overthrown with the help of Angolan armed forces.

"I like living here because I have freedom," he says. "I can move. I can have the chance to meet with American entities and express what I think. I wouldn't have that freedom in any African country."

"I have to live here," he continues. "I have no choice if I want to fight for the Cabindan people. The day the US changes its policy toward Cabinda is the day we get peace. I grew up in a UN refugee camp and can tell you that it cannot resolve a single issue. But if the US were to say 'enough is enough' people would listen."

Jon Rosen is a freelance writer in Washington DC