INDEPENDENCE OF GUINEA-BISSAU

by George M. Houser

A new state in Africa has just proclaimed its establishment as an independent Republic and is now seeking recognition from the nations of the world. This in itself is not unusual. It has happened with frequency in Africa in the last decade and a half. What is unusual is that Portugal, the European power which has for decades claimed control over this African country, still refuses to acknowledge its right to self determination, and the liberation struggle continues. The country which has now proclaimed its independent status is Guinea-Bissau. It is about the size of Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut, with a population of close to one million people, and lies between Senegal and the Republic of Guinea in West Africa.

This summer I was fortunate enough to be able to go inside Guinea-Bissau with the PAIGC (the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), the movement which has led the struggle for freedom. I was struck by the strength and efficiency of the movement which for some time has been
operating effectively as a government for the majority of the people in that country.

The new government is not in exile. The P.A.I.G.C. has had external headquarters in both its southern and northern neighbors. But the real movement is in the country. It was the first meeting of the popularly elected National People's Assembly which, on Monday the 24th of September at a place called Madina Boe, in the eastern region of Guinea-Bissau, proclaimed the new Republic of Guinea-Bissau. The P.A.I.G.C. has established a network of administrative institutions inside the borders of their country - schools, hospitals, teaching centers, a court system, etc. which are serving the needs of the people.

1973 has been a tragic and testing year for the PAIGC. On January 20, Amilcar Cabral, who was founder and the inspired leader of the PAIGC was cruelly assassinated in a Portuguese plot to split the party and destroy the liberation struggle. My visit confirmed my conviction that the Portuguese plan had misfired badly and had in fact led to an intensification of the people's struggle. The movement, its leaders and its people were inspired by the necessity to re-double their efforts in order to make up for their tremendous loss. I even visited what had been an important Portuguese military base in the southern region, a place called Guilege which the PAIGC captured in late May.
A short while before he was killed, Cabral had announced that during 1973 the PAIGC would proclaim the existence of the state. This was not seen as a "Declaration of Independence" because they were already operating as an independent entity—but as a formal proclamation calling on the countries of the world to recognize the reality of this independence. Twelve days before his assassination, Cabral wrote a pamphlet putting the proclamation of the existence of their state in perspective. He said, "The situation prevailing in Guinea-Bissau since 1968 as a result of the national liberation struggle...is comparable to that of an independent state part of whose national territory is occupied by foreign military forces..."

Now, despite the loss of Cabral the PAIGC has carried out the planned proclamation. The struggle to establish this state has been long and hard. Formed in 1956 the PAIGC worked in the few towns of Guinea-Bissau until it was driven underground after the brutal Portuguese killing of fifty striking workers on the docks at Pidjiguiti in the capital of Bissau in 1959. The movement then embarked on a careful campaign to win the adherence of the mass of Guinea people who are peasants. A training center was established and about 1,000 people, under the tutelage of Cabral, were prepared for an active struggle for freedom over a two year period. In 1962, mass sabotage of
Portuguese installations began. In 1963 the armed struggle was initiated. By 1968 virtually 2/3 of the country was under the control of the PAIGC. Now only the few larger towns and heavily militarized bases in scattered parts of the country are still controlled by the Portuguese. In 1972 the PAIGC organized the first election in which the people of Guinea-Bissau had ever had a chance to participate and a National Assembly of 120 members was chosen. This is the legislative body which just met to proclaim independence.

I was deeply impressed by what I saw of the nation-building activities of the PAIGC in the midst of conflict. I visited two of the five boarding schools of the PAIGC. Altogether there are about 15,000 students in PAIGC schools. Only a fraction of this number were in school under the Portuguese. The discipline and organization were almost entirely in the hands of the students themselves. There was a staff of well-trained teachers to supervise. There are no discipline problems because the children are bound together by the common effort and they know how fortunate they are to be able to attend school.

I saw some of the "People's Shops", which are scattered in the forest throughout the liberated areas. Here the people are able to trade what they themselves have such as rice and the skins of animals for shoes, clothing, soap, sugar and other items.
There is a sophisticated system for estimating exchange values. One square meter of crocodile skin, for example, is worth two kilos of rice. The consumers items for exchange come from friendly countries such as Holland, Scandinavian, and Eastern European nations. Everywhere I went I saw impressive evidence of Cabral's contention, "Indisputably, Portugal no longer exercises any effective administrative control over most areas of Guinea-Bissau... It is evident that the people of these liberated areas unreservedly support the policies and activities of the PAIGC which after nine years of armed struggle exercises free and de facto administrative control and effectively protects the interests of the inhabitants despite Portuguese activities."

The PAIGC have a song which says, "We control the land...the Portuguese have only the sky." The main risk to the people of Guinea is from bombs dropped from the air.

The Portuguese are fighting colonial wars in two other territories of Africa - Mozambique and Angola. With their effective loss of control of Guinea-Bissau, the most apparent explanation of their attempt to still hold on there is the fear that to leave would have an effect on their ability to maintain morale for their ongoing struggle in the other two territories.

Now that the PAIGC has proclaimed the existence of their
state some seventy to eighty African, Asian, Latin American and some European countries will almost certainly recognize it with little delay. There is no question in my mind that the new independent Republic of Guinéa-Bissau ought to be granted international recognition. It has de facto control over most of the country and the strong support of the majority of the population. Is it too much to expect that the U.S. will be prepared to anger its NATO ally, Portugal, by granting recognition to the new State? The U.S. will not be able to side-step this issue very long. The new Republic will undoubtedly apply for membership to the United Nations before too long. The response to this application will be a closely watched public test for those who claim to oppose continued colonial domination in any area of the world.