

## This week in history: December 22-28

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

22 December 2024

### 25 years ago: Military coup in Côte D'Ivoire

On December 24, General Robert Guei led a successful coup against the President Henri Konan Bédié of Côte D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast). Guei and his military supporters arrested Bédié's cabinet, but allowed the deposed president and his family to board a French helicopter to Togo. Additional government officials escaped by road.

Mutinying soldiers rioted in the streets, looting and stealing luxury vehicles and racing through the capital of Abidjan. Radio and TV stations fell under control of troops supporting the coup, and checkpoints were set up throughout the country.

A principal demand of the mutinying soldiers was the release of political prisoners from the main opposition party, the Rally of the Republicans (RDR). After Bédié refused, Guei and his delegation told journalists that Bédié was no longer president. Soldiers immediately released the prisoners and opened the jails, causing a stampede that killed 24 inmates.

Although Côte D'Ivoire had a reputation as the most economically developed and politically stable of the former French colonies in Africa, the imposition of an IMF structural adjustment program had resulted in severe cuts in public spending and growing poverty levels. On the world market, the price of cocoa—the main ingredient in chocolate production and the major export of Côte D'Ivoire—nosedived. The economic distress, combined with a government imposing a market privatization scheme, unleashed a farmers boycott on the selling of cocoa beans.

The deteriorating economic situation, strikes and protests, and widespread corruption sealed the fate of Bedie and his Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) ending almost 40 years of rule. Reports surfaced that crowds of people chanted “No more Bédié” and that soldiers had received general support from the population—an indication of mass hatred for Bédié and his ruling clique rather than overwhelming support for the coup leaders and the RDR.

Guei, who had been the country's military chief from 1990 to

1995—in which capacity he had been responsible for leading the torture of students involved in the protest movement of 1990—announced a junta with himself as president. He swiftly guaranteed to carry on Côte d'Ivoire's subordinate status to France and international finance capital. “We are maintaining international agreements and they will be scrupulously respected,” he said.

### 50 years ago: Battle of Phuoc Long announces final phase of Vietnam War

On December 26, 1974, major fighting began in the Battle of Phuoc Long in Vietnam between the northern People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the southern Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Phuoc Long was the first major battle in the Vietnam War after final withdrawal of US forces in March 1973. It proved a decisive victory for North Vietnam.

PAVN forces initially carried out many smaller operations in Phuoc Long province prior to launching the main siege on ARVN fortifications around Phuoc Binh, the capital of the region. Heavy fighting would last until January 6, 1975, when the ARVN troops withdrew and those remaining surrendered. With about double the manpower, the PAVN forces overpowered the southern army. The battle was the first in a series of swift victories for the North that would continue until the capture of Saigon and the reunification of Vietnam in April 1975.

Without the backing of the US military, Washington's southern puppet regime teetered on the point of collapse. Throughout 1973 and 1974 skirmishes between PAVN and ARVN forces broke out along the front but did not develop into larger battles. Many of these were initiated as provocations by the South hoping to elicit a response from the North that would then force the Nixon administration to redeploy US forces.

North Vietnam's selection of Phuoc Long, a relatively minor

territory strategically, as the jumping off point of the final phase of the war was intended to test the waters and see if there would be a response by the White House, four months after Richard Nixon resigned and was replaced by Gerald Ford. In the battle's aftermath, when it was clear that there would be no return of US military forces, the North began its preparations for the operations that would retake Saigon and finally remove the US-backed regime in the South.

### **75 years ago: South Korean Army massacres over 80 civilians in Mungyeong**

On December 24, 1949, two platoons in the South Korean Army's 3rd infantry division committed a massacre of 88 unarmed civilians, including 32 children, in the city of Mungyeong, in the North Gyeongsang district of South Korea.

The victims were residents of the Seokdal village, killed for their alleged communist sympathies. The villagers reportedly did not "welcome" the presence of the soldiers who would later execute them. The community was branded a "communist village."

One of the few survivors of the massacre, Eui Jin Chai, reported witnessing as a child the killing of nine of his family members on that day. Chai was left for dead under the corpse of his murdered older brother.

For decades, the South Korean military and government covered up the war crime, denying responsibility for it and presenting the slaughter as having been committed by communist guerillas. It was not until the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 2007 that the Korean government would finally acknowledge the massacre as "a clear illegal act in which the military indiscriminately and mercilessly massacred unarmed civilians without any selection process or legal basis."

The Mungyeong massacre took place in the context of anti-communist repression under the government of Syngman Rhee, whose regime served as a client state of US imperialism in its intensifying Cold War against the USSR.

Rhee's dictatorship sparked mass opposition by the Korean working class, such as the Jeju uprising in April 1948, which was brutally put down with tens of thousands killed. The suppression of the Juju uprising served to normalize future massacres against those deemed by the state to represent any political opposition to it, including the villagers of Seokdal in 1949. In total, hundreds of thousands of Koreans, predominantly left-wing, were estimated to be murdered in the prelude to and the early days of the Korean War.

### **100 years ago: Mussolini accused of personally organizing violence**

On December 27, 1924, the Italian newspaper *Il Mondo* published an open letter by prominent fascist Cesare Rossi that accused Benito Mussolini, the fascist leader and Italian prime minister, of organizing violence against his opponents. The letter cited documentary evidence to support these allegations.

Rossi had been an early companion of Mussolini in organizing the fascist movement. He was, like Mussolini, a socialist who had become a nationalist. He was a frequent contributor to the fascist daily *Il Popolo d'Italia*, was party boss in Tuscany and the head of the government Press and Propaganda Office after Mussolini came to power in 1922. He had played a major role in suppressing anti-fascist politicians after the 1924 election and was linked to the assassination of socialist opposition leader Giacomo Matteotti in June since one of his henchmen, Amerigo Dumini, had been a part of the group that carried out the murder.

The murder of Matteotti had shaken the country and the fascist regime itself and caused opposition parties to boycott parliament.

The Rossi letter deepened the crisis of the Italian state. Several days later, 30 leaders of the fascist paramilitary gangs met with Mussolini and told him that if he didn't suppress enemies of the regime, they would do so. Mussolini would later admit that he could have been overthrown by a coup at that time. He maneuvered, however, to allocate all power to himself and in a speech on January 3, admitted he was responsible for all violence and justified violence as necessary. It is from that date that his personalist dictatorship began.

Rossi was forced to flee Italy for Switzerland. He was lured back to Italy in 1928, when he was imprisoned and then exiled to a small island by Mussolini. The allies arrested him in 1943 but after various trials, including one for the murder of Matteotti, he spent the remainder of his life in freedom.



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