

## AFRICA

# *Thousands mourn Guinea dictator*

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**CONAKRY, Guinea** — Allies of the dictator who ruled Guinea for nearly a quarter-century mourned him Friday, but the leader of the coup that followed his death did not attend the ceremonies.

Captain Moussa Dadis Camara had promised a "grandiose funeral" for the dictator, Lansana Conté, a day earlier, and in a broadcast he called on Guineans to show up en masse.

Camara's presence would have been a demonstration of his control over Guinea - his absence surprised many mourners and caused widespread speculation about the reason.

Tens of thousands of mourners packed a stadium where Conté's body was brought after a eulogy in Parliament. The junta's No.2 leader was there - the only coup representative seen Friday.

Colonel Toto Camara, who is not related to the coup leader, did not explain why Camara was not in attendance but said the junta "reassures the people of Guinea that we will guarantee your well-being."

Conté's body was being taken next to the Grand Mosque in Conakry before interment in his village about 100 kilometers, or 60 miles, away.

Conté died Monday after ruling the West African nation since 1984. He himself had seized power in a coup after the previous leader died. He was widely seen as corrupt and authoritarian. Hours after the announcement of Conté's death, Camara's group declared a coup.

Camara has declared himself interim leader, and he has promised not to run in an election that he said would be held in December 2010.

A service inside Parliament on Friday was heavily attended by members of Conté's former government, including the deposed prime minister, Ahmed Tidiane Souaré, who surrendered to coup leaders and stepped down along with dozens of other government leaders on Thursday.

In a radio interview, Souaré said he and other members of the former government were ready to work with the coup leaders, Reuters reported.

"Mr. President, members of the National Council for Democracy and Development, we thank you and we put ourselves at your disposal," he said in comments broadcast by Radio France International.

Sitting in the front row of the service was Facinet Touré, Conté's comrade-in-arms during the 1984 coup. He told mourners: "I ask the people of Guinea to forgive the general for all that he did that was not good."

Conté's coffin sat on a stage with two of his three wives, who wore dark sunglasses and clutched tissues. Also attending were the presidents of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea-Bissau, as well as the African Union commission chairman, Jean Ping.

The leader of Parliament, Aboubacar Somparé, who had been next in line to be president under the Constitution, remained at large following the expiration of a deadline that coup leaders set for government members to present themselves.

Presidential guards used belts to beat back mourners who wanted to push their way in.

Many in the international community have said December 2010 is too long to wait for a presidential election. The European Union has urged Guinea to hold "democratic and transparent" elections within the first three months of 2009.

A French Foreign Ministry spokesman, Frédéric Desagneaux, said that foreign diplomats would meet in the Guinean capital, Conakry, on Saturday.

Guinea has been in rocky waters for years. It had immense promise at independence, with gold, diamonds, verdant banana fields, seemingly limitless aluminum ore and rivers ideal for hydropower. It was considered one of the gems in the French colonial crown.

But Guinea slipped into obscurity under its first ruler, Ahmed Sékou Touré, a revolutionary who espoused Marxist policies and shut out the West. After Touré died, Conté's military coup was very similar to the one that took place this week.

Conté kept Guinea relatively stable, compared with its neighbors like Liberia and Sierra Leone. But thanks to corruption and mismanagement, the economy was still a shadow of its potential. Conté's health steadily declined, and so did the country.

Paralyzing strikes erupted last year, and dozens of people were killed. In May, junior army officers mutinied, kidnapping a senior officer and demanding better pay.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/26/world/africa/26iht-guinea.3.18940690.html>