

An invasion (followed by drinks) is held

By James Fox

A REFUGEE from the west African state of Benin (formerly Dahomey) has described the bizarre circumstances of the "invasion" by foreign mercenaries of the capital, Cotonou, last weekend, which led to a state of emergency and the imprisonment of between 500 and 600 foreigners, mostly Europeans.

The refugee, a French scholar who wishes to remain anonymous in the hope of continuing work in Benin, was interviewed by The Sunday Times in Abidjan, capital of neighbouring Ivory Coast. While in detention he was assaulted and, he also claims, deprived of food and water.

Foreign journalists have been barred entry since the official radio of Benin's "scientific socialist" government announced a "vast plot of international imperialism" last Saturday morning and urged a hunt for "traitors."

According to the refugee, who also talked to diplomats and witnesses while in detention, there is no doubt that at around 7 am last Saturday an aeroplane arrived at Cotonou airport and discharged a unit of soldiers, white and black, who then advanced through coconut groves on the western edge of the capital and reached the grounds of the president's palace, which lies between the airport and the centre of the town.

The soldiers were shooting indiscriminately, but the only casualties appeared to be the watchman of an American residence, who was shot dead, and his wife, gravely wounded. Buildings were damaged by gunfire, but there was never any sign of the Benin army coming to meet the aggressors in the four hours they spent on Benin soil.

The mercenaries even had time to hold a "drinks party" in a thatched chalet in the grounds of the Hotel de la Croix du Sud, which borders on the grounds of the palace. Towards 11 am they retreated to the airport and flew to an unknown destination. Benin radio reported the aeroplane as a long-range DC-8 jet. Other reports say it was a shorter-range turbo-prop.

The reactions of the Benin government, however, aroused suspicions that the invasion was something less than a surprise. Only one hour after the attackers left, President Mathieu Kerekou was delivering a speech on the radio, describing the attack as a "diabolical assault which the imperialists have dared to unleash openly and powerfully against our revolution." The "glorious victory" was also hailed by President Sekou Touré of neighbouring Guinea and President Boumedienne of Algeria.

The radio urged "militants" to go to the airport with knives and stones to defend the state. Then what the refugee describes as a "witch-hunt" for foreigners took place. Amid increasing tension, between 500 and 600 were rounded up by Sunday morning, stripped to their underclothes and locked in a military camp. They were told variously that they would be held incommunicado for five days, shot at five am the next morning or tried by a military tribunal. Most of the foreigners were released after 48 hours. One died of a heart attack.

The affair has still not been fully explained, but to most observers it appeared to be a staged affair closely linked with diverting attention from serious domestic clashes in Benin between the powerful forces of tradition in the country and "scientific socialism," which officially arrived in 1972.