

Missionaries or Mercenaries: The Royal-Backed UK Charity Accused of ‘Laundering’ the Reputation of an Oil-Rich African Autocrat

A Finance Uncovered investigation reveals details about a royal-backed UK charity accused of bolstering the regime that runs one of Africa’s most authoritarian and kleptocratic countries.

The findings centre on the City of London-registered [Brazzaville Foundation](#), fronted by the [Queen’s controversial cousin, Prince Michael of Kent](#), as its patron.

It was established in 2014 to tackle environmental challenges, help broker peace in Libya and raise awareness about the scourge of fake medicines in Africa - all causes about which its trustees appear to be sincere and passionate.

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But some Congolese experts and opposition activists exiled in Europe have viewed the charity with suspicion, believing some of its activities to be reputation-laundering vehicles for their country’s authoritarian president, Denis Sassou-Nguesso. Indeed, early versions of the charity’s website - since removed - described him as its “inspiration”.

These accusations are strongly denied by the charity, which says any suggestion it is “a tool to promote President Sassou-Nguesso’s interests is factually wrong and completely unfounded”.

But Finance Uncovered’s investigation into the charity’s origins have raised new concerns.

* It was set up by Jean-Yves Ollivier, a wealthy French commodities trader who

has been a friend of Sassou-Nguesso for more than 30 years;

* He established it shortly after his company received a \$60m windfall from an oil deal he brokered with Sassou-Nguesso;

* Ollivier and his company provided the bulk of the charity's initial funding, largely through invoice offsets from his personal and company expenses;

* He set it up with the help of one of Britain's most controversial PR gurus, Lord Tim Bell, who became a trustee;

* Bell's now disgraced and defunct PR firm Bell Pottinger also advised Sassou-Nguesso on how to win a constitutional referendum the following year that extended his grip on power; and

* Ollivier once boasted that the charity would be attractive to its members as a networking platform with other business and political figures.

Duncan Hames, policy director of Transparency International UK, said: "There is a risk that charities could be used or recruited to help give an air of legitimacy to those who have abused their power. That charities might be used to burnish the credentials of kleptocratic regimes is particularly galling to those who are impoverished because of their crimes."

The charity says its trustees have "complied with their legal obligations and the guidance of the [UK] Charity Commission". Its website says it uses its "network of advisers and contacts to seek high-level support and buy-in" for its various initiatives.

The alleged plundering of Congo

Under his 35-year rule, Sassou-Nguesso's inner circle is alleged to have siphoned off hundreds of millions of dollars from the country.

As recently as April this year, the [New York Times reported](#) on a [Global Witness investigation](#) alleging that Sassou-Nguesso's daughter, Claudia, used millions of dollars of Congolese state funds to buy a \$7m luxury apartment at the Trump International Hotel & Tower in New York City.

Yet the country is in an economic tailspin and trying to persuade the International

Monetary Fund to bail out its stricken economy.

Jean-Yves Ollivier, 74, has had a long friendship with Sassou-Nguesso. It stems from the signing of the Brazzaville Protocol in Congo's capital, a 1988 peace treaty in which both men played a part and which some regard as paving the way for Nelson Mandela's release.

In 2014, Ollivier named the charity in recognition of the treaty. His decision came within a year of cashing in a \$60m share windfall earned from helping his old friend negotiate the sale of a Congo oil block called Marine XII in 2011. There is no suggestion of any wrongdoing by Ollivier or Sassou-Nguesso in that oil deal.

But from [leaked documents](#), Finance Uncovered has discovered the windfall was booked in Ollivier's company, Fort Consultancy and Development Corporation (Offshore) SAL, based in the secretive financial jurisdiction of Lebanon.

And according to the Brazzaville Foundation's first set of published accounts, it was the now cash-rich Fort Consultancy and Ollivier which provided the new charity with all its early funding.

In total, Fort and Ollivier have provided the charity with two-thirds of its entire £1.45m income since it was formed.

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Of the almost £1m given by Fort and Ollivier, nearly half has been in the form of donations-in-kind - such as meeting and travel expenses incurred on behalf of the charity elsewhere. The other half has been actual cash transfers to the Foundation's bank account.

According to the charity's latest audited accounts, it disclosed a surplus income of £328,000 for the year ended April 1 2018 and employed one member of staff.

There is no suggestion of any accounting wrongdoing and the charity told Finance Uncovered it had carried out proper due diligence on the donations.

Enter Margaret Thatcher's former PR guru

As well as being the charity's dominant donor and founder, Ollivier is also chair of its board of trustees. In short, he is the main figure at the foundation with significant influence over its policy and purpose.

And it was Ollivier who set about recruiting similarly powerful men to his cause. In an interview with [Bloomberg](#) in 2015, he said an "added bonus" of the charity would be its networking opportunities, linking its members to business people and politicians.

Finance Uncovered has established that it was Ollivier who asked Bell Pottinger and Lord Bell (right) to play an important role.

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The firm collapsed in disgrace in 2017 after it devised a potentially racially divisive campaign for the Guptas, a politically-connected business family in South Africa.

As Lord Bell became a Brazzaville Foundation trustee in 2014, Bell Pottinger was also forging a business relationship with Sassou-Nguesso.

The PR company provided polling and messaging advice to him in the run-up to a crucial referendum in 2015, which paved the way for the long-standing president to extend his grip on power.

The charity's chief executive is Sir David Richmond, a former top British diplomat who is also an ex-Bell Pottinger consultant.

The charity confirmed that Bell Pottinger had "provided initial advice to Mr Ollivier on the options for setting up a Foundation" but said it could not comment on "other matters which have no connection to its affairs".

Ollivier said: "The only services for which I commissioned and paid Bell Pottinger relate to the setting up of the Foundation."

Lord Bell, who stepped down as a trustee late last year for health reasons, was unable to comment on why he joined the charity.

The Royal Connection

Separately in 2014, Ollivier also secured the services of Prince Michael as patron to give the charity added cachet. And in 2017, the charity consolidated its links with the prince by appointing his former private secretary Nicholas Chance as a trustee.

The Queen's cousin, who separately runs his own consultancy business, would not comment on why he became patron.

But he has been active. In 2015, he and his wife, Princess Michael, were the VIPs at a successful fundraising auction in Hong Kong attended by an array of business figures - some with interests in the Congo region.

And in 2017, Prince Michael even made the difficult journey to Sassou-Nguesso's hometown of Oyo, 250 miles from the capital Brazzaville, to help launch a new project for the charity. This was despite warnings a month before from human rights organisations, including [Amnesty International, about the government's crackdown on opposition activists](#).

Finance Uncovered asked Prince Michael why he travelled to Oyo, who paid his bills for the trip and whether he has ever had any business dealings in Congo as a result of his work with the charity. But his spokesman said: "There will not be any further comment."

Finance Uncovered asked the same questions of the Foundation's trustees and chief executive, who, via their lawyer, then declined to "expend further resources answering questions".

The event in Oyo was to [launch the Congo Basin Blue Fund](#), an environmental fundraising initiative that aims to attract massive investment into the Congo Basin. At the launch, the charity described the project as a "partnership" with Sassou-Nguesso.

It is not the only initiative in which the charity's activities overlap with the Congo ruler's interests. Four out of five of the Foundation's projects in Africa involve him or his country.

Our work is ‘thoroughly worthwhile’

The Foundation’s chief executive Sir David Richmond, speaking through the charity’s lawyer on behalf of all its trustees, said: “All our work is aimed at meeting some of the key challenges facing the African continent. These are thoroughly worthwhile initiatives which have the potential to bring real benefit to people whether regionally or indeed throughout Africa.

“Neither [Sassou-Nguesso], his government nor any Congolese citizen has any involvement in the running of the Foundation. They are not represented on its advisory board and have never given money to the Foundation.

Image laundering efforts help sustain Sassou Nguesso’s rule, with all the corruption and human rights violations it entails. Sassou-Nguesso has now had his two chief opponents in the 2016 presidential election sentenced to 20 years of forced labour

“The Foundation’s various initiatives are its own. Some have involved or been supported by President Sassou-Nguesso and the Republic of the Congo, alongside many other African countries; some, like our work on migration in West Africa, have not.

“The Foundation and all of its trustees have always been and are committed to pursuing and maintaining the highest standards in all that it does.”

“The trustees have acted prudently in all respects and have complied with their legal obligations and the guidance of the Charity Commission.

Charlin Kinouani, a leading Congolese civil rights activist, said: “This foundation’s contribution to peace is unknown to us here in the Congo.”

Ollivier responded: “[Our] role is to keep channels of communication open rather than close them with overt criticism ... to influence by quiet and persuasive dialogue not to dictate via the imposition of our own values.”

A final letter from the charity’s lawyer warned that the “Foundation will not tolerate any harm done its reputation by irresponsible journalism”.

A Congo government spokesperson did not respond to repeated requests for

comment.

The Republic of Congo is currently offering 18 new oil exploration licences. Ollivier would not comment on whether he is involved in any bidding for any of them.

To be clear: Bell Pottinger is implicated in this, for it was the October 2015 referendum that subjected Congolese citizens to Sassou Nguesso's March 2016 reelection. It's a particular outrage to see the British royal family so implicated.

Brett L Carter, assistant professor in the School of International Relations at the University of Southern California, and an expert on autocratic governments, said: "Sassou-Nguesso is emblematic of Africa's kleptocrats. Congo has been among Africa's leading oil producers for decades, yet nearly half of its citizens [are estimated to] live below the poverty line.

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Editors Note: *This article originally appeared in Finance uncovered investigations on May 15th 2019*