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Pricey Potomac street boasts mansions linked to African rulers

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 By **Ben Mook**
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POTOMAC — Neighbors on Bent Cross Drive, a quiet street of gated mansions and immaculate lawns, include the usual suspects for one of Maryland’s priciest ZIP codes — professional basketball players, doctors, business executives and ... African dictators?

This tony community close to Washington, D.C., has always been attractive to power brokers from the nation’s capital. But a review of tax records and

details of investigations carried out by Gambian journalists has indicated that at least two African dictators with documented histories of human rights violations own homes here.



Reports that Yahya Jammeh, president of Gambia, had purchased a \$3.5 million mansion in Potomac hit the expatriate Gambian press in late August. The home was purchased in September 2010 by an unincorporated entity called the Trustees of the My J Family Trust, which has been linked by many Gambian expatriate news agencies and the country’s main opposition party to the Jammeh family.

The purchase was cited as evidence that the leader of the country of 1.7 million, whose average worker makes \$653 a year, had been squandering his country’s resources or growing rich on the backs of the people.

“You have absolutely to wonder where he can get that kind of money, to

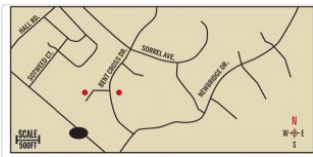
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buy a house like this in the U.S.,” said Yahya Darboe, a Gambian immigrant living in Silver Spring. “That is a lot of money for a poor country like Gambia, which doesn’t even own its own embassy building. It’s ridiculous.”

Darboe’s brother, Ousainu Darboe, leads the United Democratic Party in Gambia, and is seen as the leading opposition to Jammeh in the country’s Nov. 24 election.

Also on Bent Cross Drive is a house owned by Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, president of Equatorial Guinea. According to state tax records, Mbasogo and his wife, Constancia Mangué de Obiang, own the \$3.6 million gated mansion a short walk from Jammeh’s residence.



Equatorial Guinea President Teodoro Obiang Nguema (center)

Mbasogo owns a second home in Potomac on Bit and Spur Lane.

Equatorial Guinea and Gambia have long records of human rights violations, including unlawful killings, repression of the press and kidnappings.

The Gambian and Equatorial Guinea embassies did not return calls for comment for this article.

‘Not chump change’

“The amount of money that kleptocrats garner is not chump change, and they love to spend it on mansions in D.C., Los Angeles and all over,” said George B.N. Ayittey, president of the Free Africa Foundation and author of the recently released book “Defeating Dictators: Fighting Tyranny in Africa and Around the World.”

“They don’t care about their people living in abject poverty,” he said. “They just loot the treasuries and live sumptuously abroad. It’s appalling and maddening.”

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the average home in Potomac is worth \$870,900 and the median income in Potomac is \$157,738.

In Gambia, a former English colony, the unemployment rate is not released but is estimated to be above 10 percent. According to a report prepared for the Gambian government, 69 percent of the population lives below the poverty level and unemployment among urban youths is as high as 44 percent.

Primarily an agricultural economy, Gambia’s primary export is peanuts. A significant part of the country’s income comes from money wired home from Gambians living and working abroad.

Darboe, who operates Leigh Direct LLC, a money exchange and wire service in Silver Spring, deals primarily with sending money back to Gambia. He said \$3.5 million for a mansion might not seem like a lot to some people, but for the average Gambian, it is a staggering sum.

“You’re talking about an amount that is like one-tenth of Gambia’s budget,” Darboe said.

Jammeh reportedly purchased the home from former Washington Wizards basketball star Calbert Cheaney and his wife, Yvette. The 8,818 square-foot

home sits on 2.3 acres of well-manicured, lightly wooded property in a small cul-de-sac.

The house has six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a guest house, an in-home movie theater, a heated pool and a seven-car garage, according to the original real estate listing.

A spokesman for the University of Indiana, where Cheaney is the director of basketball operations, took a telephone message for Cheaney but the call was not returned.

The annual property tax on the home comes to \$37,458. The average Gambian makes \$1.79 per day, according to a 2007 U.S. Department of State report.

The dictator next door

Despite the presence of homes reputedly owned by two dictators, there has been little outcry from neighbors or elected officials in Montgomery County, a largely liberal jurisdiction that has its own Office of Human Rights.

Requests for comment from U.S. Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), who represents the Potomac area, were declined. Calls to Montgomery County Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Bethesda-Potomac) were not returned.

While their reputed owners are well known, the homes themselves draw little attention in the neighborhood. The mansions along Bent Cross Drive are spacious and well-spaced from each other, and many are gated.

When Giselle and Benjamin Huberman decided to move from their city apartment in Washington to something offering a little more in the way of space and a pastoral view, they picked Potomac. In June, the couple purchased the home next door – relatively speaking given the size of the yards – to the Mbasogo property.

Giselle Huberman said that since they moved in, there has been little activity in the neighborhood associated with the home.

“We haven’t seen any limos or movement, flags flying or anything like that,” she said. “You wouldn’t know anyone was there.”

She said she was surprised to learn that the couple’s new home was a stone’s throw from one owned by the leader of Equatorial Guinea.

“We had no idea when we were looking,” she said. “The only way we know now is because we came across the name while we were doing some research on the neighborhood.”

International notoriety

Jammeh, officially known as The President, His Excellency Sheikh Professor Alhaji Dr. Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, has led the West African country often called The Gambia since taking power in a bloodless coup in 1994.

In recent years, Jammeh has gained international notoriety for his negative stance on homosexuality and his claim to have invented a cure for HIV/AIDS, a paste using “naturally available forest products such as fruits, leaves, branches and roots of trees.”

The treatment replaced traditional retrovirus therapy in Gambia. Its efficacy – outside of claims of widespread success from Jammeh – has not been verified. The herbal treatment Jammeh invented is also now being used in the country to cure diabetes, sickle cell anemia, asthma and, most recently, female infertility.

In a July report, Amnesty International said the human rights situation in Gambia was “dire.” The agency said that torture is “used routinely” in Gambia to force confessions and punish detainees.

In 2009, the organization released a report detailing a literal witch hunt in the country, where more than a 1,000 people suspected of being witches were taken from their villages and forced to consume hallucinogenic drinks.

In July, coinciding with a Gambian national holiday, Amnesty International called on Jammeh to end the “climate of fear” the agency said existed in the country. Amnesty International said there were enforced disappearances, killings and torture in Gambia that needed to stop.

“President Jammeh marks July 22 each year as ‘Freedom Day’ and yet Gambia is ruled with an iron fist by a government that ruthlessly quashes all forms of dissent,” said Tawanda Hondora, Amnesty International’s deputy Africa director, in a statement at the time. “Instead of celebrating ‘Freedom Day,’ the Gambian authorities must act to end human rights abuses and the culture of fear.”

The Mbasogo homes

Mbasogo’s two homes in Potomac were part of a stinging financial scandal over suspect transactions with millions in Equatorial Guinean oil dollars that rocked the former Riggs Bank of Washington, D.C., which closed in 2005.

According to documents produced by the U.S. Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, in 1999, the bank helped arrange loans to buy both homes, which were valued at a combined \$3.7 million at the time.

The Bent Cross Drive home is a 9,261-square-foot mansion that sits on 2 fenced-off acres. The house was built in 1990 and acquired by Mbasogo’s wife in January 2000 for \$2.6 million.

According to tax records, the home has an assessed value of \$3.6 million and the annual property tax amounts to \$38,076.

The second home, on Bit and Spur Lane, was purchased in December 1999 for \$1.1 million. The 4,962-square-foot mansion was built in 1985 and sits on 2 wooded acres. According to tax records, the home is valued at \$1.8 million and carries a \$20,485 annual property tax bill.

Mbasogo has led Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony, since seizing power in 1979 in a bloodless coup. Rich oil fields off of the West African nation’s coast have pumped billions in oil revenue into the country.

Critics contend that the bulk of that money resides in the hands of Mbasogo, his family and friends. Despite the wealth brought in from oil, unemployment in the country stands at 22.3 percent.

Mbasogo has been criticized for human rights violations over the years. A report posted on the U.S. State Department says the “human rights record and democratic performance remain poor” in the country, which is also rife with corruption. The department said that while things have improved, the country remains to be dominated by Mbasogo and his circle of friends, family and advisors.

The U.S. Department of Justice on Oct. 9 filed a notice in the U.S. District Court for California to seize more than \$70 million in assets belonging to Mbasogo’s son, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue. The assets include a \$35 million Malibu mansion, a Gulfstream jet and a jeweled glove Michael Jackson used in his “Bad” concert tour.

According to a 2010 follow-up report from the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, from 2004 to 2008, Mbasogo's son moved more than \$110 million in "suspect funds" into the U.S. and is the subject of an ongoing federal criminal investigation that included the Malibu property seizure.

"We are sending the message loud and clear: The United States will not be a hiding place for the ill-gotten riches of the world's corrupt leaders," U.S. Assistant Attorney General Lanny Breuer said Wednesday.

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