

Background- Suriname¹

Suriname is a small country (population about 530,000 in 2016) on South America's Caribbean coast that was colonized by the Dutch from the 1600s to 1975 and still struggles with the resulting ethnic divisions and lopsided economy. Politically and socially, Suriname is split between Creoles, descended from slaves and plantation owners, and Maroons, descended from slaves who escaped to the lands of indigenous peoples. Suriname also has a small population of indigenous peoples and a large population of South Asians and Indonesians, descended from indentured laborers imported after the end of slavery. Economically, Suriname is heavily dependent on mining, making its economy vulnerable to market fluctuations and the demands of mining companies. Maroons and indigenous peoples complain that the government allows mining companies to take their land without compensation, pollute their water, and prevent them from hunting, fishing, and farming.²

In the 1980s, these ethnic and economic tensions lead to an internal conflict between military dictator Desiré (Dési) Bouterse and a guerilla group dubbed the Jungle Commando. In 1980, the military conducted a popularly supported coup in response to the ailing economy and the government's refusal to allow them to unionize. When the economy continued to worsen, Bouterse led a left-wing military faction in a second coup in 1982. This coup, too, quickly lost support and Bouterse responded by ordering the murder of 15 of his opponents in the 1982 "December massacres." The Netherlands and the U.S. cut off foreign aid to Suriname, further damaging its already fragile economy. Bouterse's former bodyguard Ronnie Brunswijk began a rebellion against Bouterse, leading a guerilla force known as the Surinamese Liberation Army or Jungle Commando. Brunswijk, a Maroon, drew his force primarily from his fellow Maroons and based his rebellion in traditionally Maroon and indigenous regions. Bouterse, a Creole, responded with a wholesale attack on the Maroon community. The National Army murdered unarmed Maroon men and boys suspected of being part of the Jungle Commando and massacred entire Maroon villages, including Brunswijk's hometown.³ The war forced more than one third of Suriname's Maroon population to flee to neighboring French Guiana and also devastated the indigenous peoples who shared their land with the Maroons.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Suriname achieved a halting, fragile return to democracy and economic success. Facing mounting public and international pressure, Bouterse allowed elections and, in 1987, Suriname elected the civilian Front for Democracy and Development. The front began peace negotiations with Brunswijk, which caused many Maroon refugees to feel betrayed and prompted the military to overthrow the government in 1990. However, international pressure forced the military to allow new elections in 1991 and this time the New Front stripped power from the

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² Kaliña and Lokono Peoples v. Suriname, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 309 (Nov. 25, 2015), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/kali%C3%B1a-and-lokono-peoples-v-suriname>; Saramaka People v. Suriname, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 172 (Nov. 28, 2007), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/saramaka-people-v-suriname>.

³ Aloeboetoe et al. v. Suriname, Merits, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 11 (Dec. 4, 1991) <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/aloeboetoe-et-al-v-suriname>; Moiwana Community v. Suriname, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 124 (June 15, 2005), https://iachr.ils.edu/sites/iachr.ils.edu/files/iachr/Cases/Moiwana_Community_v_Suriname/Moiwana%20Community.%20v.%20Suriname.pdf.

military before finally completing peace negotiations and a return to democracy. Brunswijk formed a small political party and Bouterse became the leader of the National Democratic Party, which regularly won parliamentary elections and defeated the New Front for the presidency in 1996. Under the National Democratic Party, the economy deteriorated so seriously that the International Monetary Fund declared the country “practically bankrupt.” In 2000, voters returned power to the New Front, which finally succeeded in improving the economy through reforms and foreign loans. However, the economy remained heavily mining based and vulnerable to downturns in the market for its exports.

Additionally, Suriname continues to struggle with corruption and a weak justice system. During the economic problems and internal conflict of the 1980s, Suriname developed a large criminal economy that included the highest levels of the government. Dutch courts have convicted both Bouterse and Brunswijk of cocaine smuggling in absentia and both have active warrants for their arrests.⁴ In 2005, the U.S. imprisoned Bouterse’s son, Dino, for cocaine trafficking, arms dealing, and selling stolen cars and, in 2015, Suriname arrested Bouterse’s foster son on suspicion of involvement in an armed robbery.⁵ In the early 2000s, Suriname’s former Minister of Finance was convicted of using official land deals to fraudulently line his own pockets and lodged a partially successful complaint with the Inter-American Court, alleging that his trial had been unfair.⁶ Suriname’s justice system struggles to cope with crime. There are regular complaints of police violence, and, although prisons meet international standards, temporary detention centers are in dangerous condition and poorly supervised.⁷ In 1998, an Indian-Surinamese man was placed in temporary detention after being deported from the Netherlands and either was murdered or hung himself while detained.⁸ Lack of funding has caused severe backlogs in processing cases, with some defendants serving their full sentences before their appeals are heard. Courts lack physical space, administrative staff, and case management systems and both public defenders and interpreters have threatened to quit or actually quit working due to nonpayment. Suriname has filled only 19 of its 45 judgeships and has yet to create the Constitutional Court mandated by its 1975 constitution.⁹

Suriname’s problems recently culminated in Bouterse’s return to power as president and in an ongoing economic crash. In 2008, Suriname began prosecuting Bouterse and others for the 1982 December massacres. Bouterse swiftly rallied his supporters to win the 2010 presidential elections and pass a 2012 law granting amnesty to himself and his co-defendants. Bouterse also appointed family members to lucrative government jobs, including appointing his son Dino as commander

⁴ M.W., *Guerrilla, Rapper, Gold Miner...President?*, THE ECONOMIST (Apr. 10, 2013), <http://www.economist.com/blogs/americasview/2013/04/politics-suriname>; Mat Youke, *Prime Suspect*, SLATE (Dec. 18, 2015, 10:31 AM),

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/roads/2015/12/suriname_s_president_is_the_prime_suspect_in_a_1982_murder.html.

⁵ Tom Coyne, *Police Arrest Suriname President's Foster Son in Robbery*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Nov. 15, 2015), Newswires Database.

⁶ *Liakat Ali Alibux v. Suriname*, Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 276 (Jan. 30, 2014), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/liakat-ali-alibux-v-suriname>

⁷ *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015: Suriname*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE (2015), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=253043>.

⁸ *Gangaram Panday v. Suriname*, Merits, Reparations and Costs, Judgment, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (ser. C) No. 16 (Jan. 21, 1991), <https://iachr.ils.edu/cases/gangaram-panday-v-suriname>.

⁹ *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015: Suriname*, *supra* note 6.

of Counter-Terrorism. Dino was soon re-imprisoned in the U.S. after he sought over \$2 million from undercover U.S. Drug Enforcement Agents to help traffic cocaine, sell arms, and establish a Hezbollah base in Suriname.¹⁰ Despite this, Bouterse remained popular, thanks to the continued growth of the economy and his initiatives to increase the minimum wage and expand healthcare. In July of 2015, parliament appointed him to a second term as president with no opponents running. However, over the next year and half, Bouterse's popularity collapsed as his trial dragged on and the economy crashed. In December 2015, a Surinamese court declared the amnesty law unconstitutional and announced that the trials for the 1982 December massacres would continue.¹¹ In June 2016, Bouterse responded by ordering the attorney general to stop prosecuting him but the court said it would consider continuing the trial without the attorney general's participation.¹² At the same time, prices for Suriname's principal mining exports dropped and the largest mining company in Suriname, Alcoa, announced its closure.¹³ As of late 2016, Bouterse's popularity had dropped to 17 percent, food prices had soared as Suriname's inflation became the third highest in the world, and healthcare facilities struggled to obtain medicine and basic medical supplies.¹⁴

More information

Additional background was provided by the sources below.

For historical background, see the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#), [BBC Country Profile](#), and [New York Times articles on Suriname](#).

For information on the state history, people, government, economy, geography, communications, transportation, and military, see [Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook](#).

For an overview of Suriname's current human rights situation, see the [U.S. Department of State's 2015 Human Rights Report on Suriname](#).

For information about Human Rights, including all relevant treaties and legal documents, see [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#).

¹⁰ *Suriname President's Son Sentenced in New York over Hezbollah Proposal*, THE GUARDIAN (March 10, 2015), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/suriname-presidents-son-sentenced-hezbollah-proposal-new-york>.

¹¹ Pieter Van Maele, *Suriname High Court Says President's Murder Trial to Resume*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Dec. 2, 2015), Newswires Database.

¹² Will Macdonald, *Suriname President Again Avoids Being Tried for 1982 Deaths*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (June 29, 2016), Newswires Database; Pieter Van Maele, *Court: Murder Trial Against Suriname President Must Continue*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (June 9, 2016), Newswires Database; Pieter Van Maele, *Suriname President Acts to Again Avoid Trial in 1982 Deaths*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (June 29, 2016), Newswires Database; Pieter Van Maele, *Suriname Court Postpones Decision on Leader's Murder Trial*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (June 30, 2016), Newswires Database.

¹³ *Alcoa Corp. to Permanently Close Suriname Refinery and Mines*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, (Jan. 4, 2017), Newswires Database.

¹⁴ *Suriname Lands \$478M IMF Loan to Boost Economic Reform Plan*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (May 28, 2016), Newswires Database; *Suriname's Ailing Economy to Contract by 9 Percent*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Nov. 18, 2016), Newswires Database; Pieter Van Maele, *Suriname Slides Into Economic Abyss, in Shadow of Venezuela*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Sept. 21, 2016), Newswires Database.