

The Ursuline School Model United Nations Conference

# Burkina Faso, 1987

Background Guide

## **Letter from the Chair**

Greetings, delegates!

This committee is centered around someone of great influence and admiration. Thomas Sankara isn't the average role model: he's from a whole different time period, a whole different country and continent, and he barely spoke any English during his lifetime. My life is worlds away from his, yet I can appreciate all the work he did to lift up his people. Burkina Faso is still a small country, and they still face the impacts of French colonization today. Their economy, like many other West African nations, is largely controlled by French & British traders, and their people face the day-to-day abuse of working in gold mines and surviving terrorist attacks at all borders. Like America, there is diversity in religion, race, and language, and it is often difficult for the Burkinabé people to unite because of this. Sankara was able to unite them.

His story is what makes this committee so interesting to me. Thomas Sankara is the key piece of this simulation for a reason. Everything about him, from his humble beginnings at a Madagascan military academy to his four-year run as rebel President, is laced with intrigue and charm. This was a man who lived to be no older than 38, who wrote his country's national anthem using his guitar experience from a college band, who openly expressed distaste for the majority European leaders of his time, who rejected all foreign aid in order to truly bring his country to its greatest self-made potential. I hope that you, as delegates, come to realize just how unique this man was, and how all of you can make yourselves into who you want to be. Whether you see a role model in Thomas Sankara or someone else, please have a wonderful time during this committee!

Sincerely, Maeve Reynolds (reynoldm2021@ursulinenewrochelle.org)

## Setting

While many of Thomas Sankara's important interactions involved officials from all around Africa and the world, this committee is centered in his home country of Burkina Faso. It is a landlocked nation, surrounded by West African powers such as Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Mali. Burkina Faso was colonized by French imperialists from 1897, and ninety years later, it still retains the language and customs from that period. Over three million inhabitants, the Burkinabé people, live and work in small village towns. Historically, the nation originates from the great Songhai empire of the Middle Ages. It was well-established in the gold-salt trade, along with other kingdoms in the Sahel (land between the Sahara and the Savanna) and around the Mediterranean Sea.

The French imperialist influence appears in architecture, language, and economy. Burkina Faso was known as *Haute Volta*, or Upper Volta in French, until Sankara gave it the current name in 1984. There are over a dozen different ethnic groups present in the population, and at least ten languages are spoken between them, with most of the residents being bilingual. When France arrived, official records and governmental structures were referred to with French names only, and many cities and towns were split and renamed.

Mapped straight down the middle of the nation, Ouaga is Burkina Faso's capital city and thriving center of trade. There is a hardworking population of 427,000 housed within the city borders alone. Kosyam Palace, also called the "Tropical Versailles," is exactly where this committee takes place. It is the official residence of the President of Burkina Faso, a regal structure close by the bustling financial districts and international airports, located at Ouaga 2000.



*A presidential guard stands at Kosyam Palace, at Ouaga 2000. @ Réveil FM International*

## **Economy**

As a relatively new nation, Burkina Faso has great interest in forming strong trade bonds and other economic relationships without compromising its reputation as an anti-imperialist, independent country. Interactions with France and other European powers are quick and biting; Thomas Sankara expressed great distaste in his visits to Paris. The one exception to these interactions occurred between him and Andrei Gromkyo, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. While Sankara had many criticisms of the Soviet Union at this time, they were a powerful ally to have, especially in terms of economics. It was out of the question for him to turn to the West for trade, as they rejected his leftist policies and he rejected theirs, so Cuba and the USSR were his main allies. Neighboring nations were either too poor, too unstable, or too pro-European to interact with. Sankara's approach towards the economy involved two important actions: 1) involving himself with the two aforementioned countries, and 2) involving himself with the workers of his very own country.

In the history of Burkina Faso, Sankara hosted the timespan with the highest growth rate per capita, around 2.18% for four consecutive years. Exports were dependent on environment, meaning a year with low and irregular rainfall forced crop production to take a drastic dive. Major exports included gold, cotton, sesame seeds, and livestock; major imports included capital goods, food, and petroleum. Sankara reduced the government tax on peasant production and paid them more for the exchange of goods. Along with this, he led initiatives in which peasants built their own railroads, and reorganized cotton & wheat farms in the desert to fully take advantage of the crops. This reorganization created enough wheat to feed the entire country, and within a year, there was a surplus of it; there was no longer a need for foreign aid, a concept Sankara

often expressed his distaste for. By making the population self-sustaining, Burkina Faso became independent from its European colonizers and thus became ready to make its mark on the world.

France, Russia, and America are all important Western powers to keep in mind during this committee. France looms largest over the rest: embassy visits and ambassador talks are frequent, bonding each nation's interactions. Sankara actively sought out healthy relations with Russia, in its time as the USSR, since they shared similar communist goals. An American faction of the Peace Corps entered the nation in 1966, and an American university was established in Ouaga a decade later. Somewhat surprisingly, Burkina Faso enjoys good relations with Sweden, founded on a trade of economic aid and university students studying abroad. Students have historically had great influence on Burkinabé government, standing at the forefront of protests and igniting one coup after another. The student population is important for delegates to look after and engage.

There were indeed some concerns regarding employment during the Sankara regime. Teachers began to strike in the years following his plan to eliminate nationwide illiteracy, and both parties were unwilling to compromise. He allowed anyone with a college degree to take their places, set them on a ten-day training program, and unleashed them on Burkinabé schools; the plan ultimately failed and painted a permanent blemish on his public image.

Bringing back the matter of French influence: Édouard Hesling, governor of colonial Upper Volta from 1919-1932, introduced a plan to improve infrastructure and increase cotton production simultaneously. He would drastically lower cotton prices, causing the next generation of labor to move out of the country in search of tax funds, causing an increased need for that very labor force, and the cycle would repeat itself indefinitely if not for the ultimate collapse of the

colony. Hesling was one of many French politicians sucking the land dry from cash crops that were surely vital to the global economy, but vital as well to the livelihoods of the Burkinabé people. According to a study regarding the Burkinabé cotton sector in colonial time,: “the cultivation of cotton ha[d] always had a specific place in Burkina Faso for several ethnic and social groups. Woven strips were used to pay for tradable goods (salt, kola) and cotton was processed by local craft men for domestic and ritual needs... This early specialization shaped the later interaction of farmers with officials, with the specialized ethnic groups being the first to expand cultivation and to organize collective action.” Cotton is the primary textile used in clothing and accounts for 20% of the entire economy.

The nation uses the West African CFA franc for currency, which is the same currency as Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Niger, and Togo. \$1 USD was equal to around 450 CFA francs and F6 French new francs in 1987. This means one French new franc carries less weight than a dollar, and a CFA franc carries much less weight than either currency. Over 70% of Burkinabé workers earn less than \$1 USD in a day.



*Burkinabe cotton farmers at work.*

## **Government**

Burkina Faso is a parliamentary republic, led by a President and their chosen cabinet. Heavy importance is placed on small community leadership as well as military intervention. When Sankara came to power, he instituted a regime inspired by Che Guevara's role in the Cuban Revolution. For example: he established the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, nationwide centers committed to sustaining the integrity of the Burkinabé people. Through these committees, Sankara was able to spread his far-left ideology and give agency to the people he led. As for the military, he was always accompanied by fellow soldiers whether he was giving a speech, passing by a village, or seated in Kosyam Palace, Ouagadougou. His training in Madagascar planted in him a lifelong value in the nation's special forces, and he implemented this value throughout his reign. Instead of wearing expensive suits or using government money to pay for expensive transportation, like other new African leaders, Sankara almost always appeared in his distinctive green fatigues and red beret, and only ever drove a small, common car.

Burkina Faso takes part in multiple regional committees. It is a member of the Conseil l'Entente, a West African union; the African Union; the Group of 77; La Francophonie; and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Sankara's emphasis on Pan-Africanism allowed him to reach across the continent and form bonds with nations it never would have otherwise. ECOWAS specifically helped tie Burkina Faso to the rest of West Africa. Countries often criticized each other on the basis of language and allyship, meaning it was often at odds with the likes of Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, but could align itself with Benin and Togo.



Many organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, are interested in sending aid and participating in the growth of Burkina Faso. Whether they are seeking political gain through these means is unclear to the residents; Sankara claimed the nation could survive without foreign aid, so his supporters do believe there is an underlying political motive through this aid. By sending money, food, water, textiles and other goods, these organizations are establishing a relationship between them and Burkina Faso. It is up to the delegates to determine each organization's true intentions.



*President Thomas Sankara walking alongside security on August 31st, 1986.*

## **Crisis**

Day breaks on October 15th, 1987. Ouaga is carrying on with business as usual, vendors working the streets, men and women rushing from sector to sector. The afternoon washes in, and Thomas Sankara holds a meeting in the Burkinabe chapter of the Conseil l'Entente. He is discussing improvements for his regime with his small group of advisors when the shootings begin. Within hours, the President and a dozen more are dead, and the nation is in shambles.

Blaise Compaore, Sankara's most trusted aide and oldest friend, is the next President. He supported Sankara as Prime Minister for four years, and stayed by his side for much longer. Compaore has an entirely different view of the future, however, one involving the acceptance of foreign aid, French power, and capitalism for Burkina Faso. He takes power swiftly and employs his new set of advisors--his brother, Francois; his wife, Chantal; military officer Henri Zongo; and major Jean-Baptiste Boukary Lingani. Sankara's wife and two children are forced to flee the country, wary of their own lives, and concerned for the people left behind. Public mourning and outrage occur hand in hand. This chaos will undoubtedly spill into the economy and quality of life in Burkina Faso: it is up to delegates to either adapt the nation to the new leadership and prevent an economic disaster, or bring about yet another coup and have a new nation be borne from the ashes.

Understand that Africa takes the world stage under intense scrutiny at this point in time. Non-Africans constantly write about and criticize the lack of civil rights, the lengthy dictatorships, the poverty, the violence, the internal wars, without stepping a foot in the far-off nations they speak over. It is vital that Burkina Faso retain its individuality and its focus without succumbing to tyranny or classism.

## Positions

*Make sure to study your position carefully, as well as others. Know who your allies are, and feel free to email the chairs for any questions regarding your powers. Position papers are strongly advised, as delegates will not be eligible for awards without them. Please submit position papers to [reynoldm2021@ursulinenewrochelle.org](mailto:reynoldm2021@ursulinenewrochelle.org) or [tusmunc@ursulinenewrochelle.org](mailto:tusmunc@ursulinenewrochelle.org).*

### **Blaise Compaore:**

Sankara's closest aide and oldest friend. He helped him form the *Regroupement de officiers communistes* (ROC) along with Henri Zongo and Boukary in 1976. He is the closest in line to succession and wields much power in the current government. Compaore is not looking for peace: he is looking for power, and the best way to regroup his nation and keep it in line with the rest of Africa looking forward. He currently controls security forces, emergency hotlines, and the plans of the presidential palace in Ouaga. He is known as the "*pompier-pyromane*," or "firefighter-pyromaniac."

### **Francois Compaore:**

The brother to Blaise Compaore. He is more fluent in French and has actively worked diplomatically with French relations. As a trusted brother to Blaise, he is experienced in economic activity and has allies in many former French colonies such as Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Mali. He is extremely hostile towards the Sankara regime and journalist Norbert Zongo.

### **Chantal de Fougères:**

As a member of a prominent Burkinabé political family, de Fougères has fostered close ties with the Côte d'Ivoire's anti-communist, pro-France president, so much so that it has been

suspected she is secretly his daughter. She married Blaise Compaore halfway through Sankara's presidency and continues to work with France and its interests to this day.

**Mariam Sereme:**

Sereme has worked alongside Sankara as his First Lady throughout his reign, providing support as he strived to make women's rights a major part of his platform. She is as popular as her husband in the region, a large cultural figure with influence on public opinion. Like Sankara, she is well-read and fluent in English.

**Roch Marc Christian Kabore:**

A Burkinabé politician and banker. He studied in Ouaga and married his wife in France; he has ties to most Burkinabé presidents as a trusted banker of them all. Under Sankara he controls the International Bank of Burkina as the General Director. His experience with Western African economics allows him to faithfully supervise the future of the nation's economy; predict ups and downs in its resources. He is alone in his support of both Sankara and Compaore.

**Henri Zongo:**

He is a military officer in the Burkinabé military. Henri was educated at the same military academy as Sankara, but rarely interacted with him. He disagrees with Compaore over economic issues but supports him in all other endeavors. Henri is a staunch advocate of decolonization. His greatest ally is Lingani, with whom he and Compaore worked to earn their places in the government. He is concerned with the state of justice in Burkina Faso, and wishes to truly put the nation on the map.

**Jean-Baptiste Boukary Lingani:**

A major in the Burkinabé military. He was born in Senegal, but began his career in teaching in Ouaga, in Burkina Faso. Lingani usually allowed his ally Henri Zongo to speak while he took notes at meetings. He is secretive about his politics, specifically the ones that clash with Sankara's. Henri was not yet aware of Blaise Compaore's plot to murder Sankara; Lingani, however, knows more information and is willing to aid Compaore. He is not afraid to betray anyone who does not align with his personal goals.

**Francois Mitterand:**

Mitterrand is most known for his role as President of France since 1981. He started his presidency a leftist, somewhat similar in opinion to Sankara's rule, but quickly shifted his interests to the center and to Western economies. Sankara criticized Mitterrand's policies towards former African colonies, accusing him of neocolonialism by making nations dependent on France rather than self-sustaining. The president is currently promoting French-African relations as democratic and gaining economic support from the region.

**Norbert Zongo:**

A journalist with much experience in Burkina Faso. As a teenager, he created his first newspaper, *La Voix du Cours Normal*. He later became a teacher in northern Ouaga. He is very critical of both Compaore's roles in the Burkinabé government and is a pioneer in investigative journalism. Due to his previous exposure of government corruption, in the reign before Sankara's, he is popular with the public and is aware of a plot against him from the Compaore's.

**Charles Ghankay Taylor:**

A Liberian government official experienced with foreign relations and war. He was educated in America, like his father, and fled there after the 1980 Liberian coup. He was arrested

and escaped from jail by sawing through his window with his fellow inmates, eventually finding his way back to Africa through Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire in 1985. In this year, 1987, Taylor was denied Burkinabé funding for war efforts in Liberia and so he holds resentment towards Sankara. He currently has the support of the Liberian organization, the Revolutionary United Front (RUC) along with Prince Yormie Johnson.

**Emile Nakoulouma:**

He is the main bodyguard for Thomas Sankara. He knows him very well and knows him to be a good, honest man who speaks his mind. Working with Sankara built a distrust for France for him and many other government officials. Nakoulouma has profound experience with guarding personalities and making sure the president of Burkina Faso is secure. His main goal is to protect Burkinabé independence along with the independence of Africa.

**Prince Yormie Johnson:**

Despite his name, Johnson is not a prince of any kind. He is a Liberian politician known for working with Charles Taylor to violently overthrow the government in a 1980 coup. He received military training in the United States and holds very strict self-discipline policies. He and Taylor are currently both in Burkina Faso for diplomatic work with Blaise Compaore, but they are not above throwing him under the rug for any illegal doings.

**Fidèle Toé:**

He is the Minister of Public Service in Burkina Faso. He has put his entire trust in Thomas Sankara and his policy of incorruptibility, not taking bribes and staying original. He is interested in the construction of schools, medical dispensaries, and new cities. He is in charge of

social security and can control government spending for the public. Toé is cautious that his association with Sankara could bode badly for his life.

**Felix Houphouet-Boigny:**

He is the first President of Côte d'Ivoire. As a direct ally of France, he was able to allocate resources to help his own country prosper, making it well known in the world market while keeping to the status of decolonization. Boigny concentrated his efforts on the nation's agricultural market, upping prices of cocoa and coffee to keep up with the world market. Despite being involved in anti-colonial, pro-communist organizations prior to his presidency, Boigny later rejected any ties to communism and embraced the Western economic model, sometimes violently. His relations with Sankara were highly strained, as they were with other African leaders, and he was suspected of aiding South African apartheid efforts with weapons and soldiers.

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9. "U.S. Dollar to French Franc Spot Exchange Rates for 1987 from the Bank of England." *Pound Sterling Live: Today's British Pound, Euro and Dollar News, Forecasts and Data*, <https://www.poundsterlinglive.com/bank-of-england-spot/historical-spot-exchange-rates/usd/USD-to-FRF-1987>.

## Helpful Resources!

*You might need Google Translate for some of these (assuming you aren't fluent in French). ☺*

Thomas Sankara/1987 coup d'état:

- <http://www.thomassankara.net/?lang=en>
- <https://thewalrus.ca/thomas-sankara-tried-to-liberate-his-country-from-the-west-then-he-was-murdered/>
- <https://www.dw.com/en/thomas-sankara-the-upright-revolutionary/a-43454171>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34277045>

Burkina Faso:

- <https://www.britannica.com/place/Burkina-Faso>
- <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uv.html>
- <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ac21>

Some positions help:

- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/african-history-biographies/felix-houphouet-boigny>
- <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/126433/politique/fran-ais-compaor-l-ombre-du-grand-fr-r-e/>
- <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article79893>
- <http://www.thomassankara.net/thomas-sankara-intime-confidences-de-proches/>
- <https://www.cnn.com/2013/04/26/world/africa/charles-taylor-fast-facts/index.html>
- <http://www.thomassankara.net/jean-baptiste-lingani-et-henri-zongo-le-parcours-de-deux-chefs-oublies-de-la-revolution/>