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## Will the French Indict Cheney?

by Doug Ireland

**Y**et another sordid chapter in the murky annals of Halliburton might well lead to the indictment of Dick Cheney by a French court on charges of bribery, money-laundering and misuse of corporate assets.

At the heart of the matter is a \$6 billion gas liquification factory built in Nigeria on behalf of oil mammoth Shell by Halliburton--the company Cheney headed before becoming Vice President--in partnership with a large French petroengineering company, Technip. Nigeria has been rated by the anticorruption watchdog Transparency International as the second-most corrupt country in the world, surpassed only by Bangladesh.

One of France's best-known investigating magistrates, Judge Renaud van Ruymbeke--who came to fame by unearthing major French campaign finance scandals in the 1990s that led to a raft of indictments--has been conducting a probe of the Nigeria deal since October. And, three days before Christmas, the Paris daily *Le Figaro* front-paged the news that Judge van Ruymbeke had notified the Justice Ministry that Cheney might be among those eventually indicted as a result of his investigation.

According to accounts in the French press, Judge van Ruymbeke believes that some or all of \$180 million in so-called secret "retrocommissions" paid by Halliburton and Technip were, in fact, bribes given to Nigerian officials and others to grease the wheels for the refinery's construction. These reports say van Ruymbeke has fingered as the bagman in the operation a 55-year-old London lawyer, Jeffrey Tesler, who has worked for Halliburton for some thirty years. It was Tesler who was paid the \$180 million as a

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"commercial consultant" through a Gibraltar-based front company he set up called TriStar. TriStar, in turn, got the money from a consortium set up for the Nigeria deal by Halliburton and Technip and registered in Madeira, the Portuguese offshore island where taxes don't apply. According to Agence France-Presse, a former top Technip official, Georges Krammer, has testified that the Madeira-based consortium was a "slush fund" controlled by Halliburton--through its subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root--and Technip. Krammer, who is cooperating with the investigation, also swore that Tesler was imposed as the intermediary by Halliburton over the objections of Technip.

Tesler is a curious fellow: A veteran operator in Nigeria, he was the financial adviser to the late dictator Gen. Sani Abacha and controlled his personal fortune, while at the same time working for Halliburton. Abacha's former Oil Minister, Dan Etete--who is suspected of having used some of the alleged bribe money to buy himself fancy apartments in Paris and a chateau in Normandy--was deposed by Judge van Ruymbeke in December. According to the *Journal du Dimanche* (a large Sunday paper), Etete's testimony seemed to confirm the judge's suspicions that Tesler laundered the \$180 million through offshore and other accounts, and that part of the money wound up in dictator Abacha's coffers. Tesler's bank accounts in Monaco, Switzerland and elsewhere have been subpoenaed in an effort to find out where the money went.

Judge van Ruymbeke's authority for his transnational investigation comes from a law France passed in 2000 against "bribing foreign officials," following its ratification of a convention adopted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development prohibiting bribe-giving in the course of commercial transactions. The notion that the judge's targeting of Cheney might be in part retaliatory for the Bush Administration's exclusion of France from Iraq reconstruction contracts is unlikely: Van Ruymbeke is notoriously independent, and his previous investigations have been aimed at politicians and parties of both right and left. He's also no stranger to the unsavory world of oil-and-gas politics, having previously investigated bribe-giving by the French petrogiant Elf--indeed, it was in the course of his Elf investigation that van Ruymbeke stumbled upon the Nigerian deal.

The suspected bribe money was mostly ladled out between 1995 and 2000, when Cheney was Halliburton's CEO. The *Journal du Dimanche* reported

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on December 21 that "it is probable that some of the 'retrocommissions' found their way back to the United States" and asked, did this money go "to Halliburton's officials? To officials of the Republican Party?" These questions have so far gone unasked by America's media, which have completely ignored the explosive *Le Figaro* headline revealing the targeting of Cheney. It will be interesting to see if the US press looks seriously into this ticking time-bomb of a scandal before the November elections.

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