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'They Are So Rich, and They Are So Poor'

After Long Turmoil, Signs of Progress Appear in Congo

By Beth Duff-Brown

KAMPONDE, Congo—Louis Anselme Kasamba dreams of becoming a doctor, yet he is dirt-poor by conventional Western standards. So like many Congolese determined to scratch out a living, Kasamba devised a shrewd plan of action.

The 18-year-old saved some money, then rode his bike down a dirt road to a town 100 miles to the south, where he purchased a cellphone for \$63.

Back in this central Congo village, which lacks telephones, running water and electricity, Kasamba now sells phone calls for about 50 cents a minute. He charges the phone battery when the parish priest gears up his oil-fueled generator. Today, his college fund stands at about \$100.

Villagers come and shout into the phone, which is tied to a bamboo pole in the one spot that sometimes captures a signal. When the connection is down, they sit under a mango tree and wait.

They sometimes call to wish someone happy birthday or offer congratulations on a marriage, but mostly they plead with relatives for money or food, keeping their calls to under a minute.

"I need to hustle and find ways to make money if I want to be a doctor," said Kasamba, who earns only \$20 a month as dormitory monitor of the local boarding school. He's typically paid only every few months, and never the full amount.

Still, the public university in the provincial capital 100 miles to the north charges only \$200 a year. Kasamba may one day fulfill his dream, like thousands of Congolese who are turning to cellular telephones to make some money. The demand for such phones in the Congo—which has fewer than 25,000 conventional land lines—is now among the highest in Africa.

Kasamba is a rare example of what would be considered a member of the middle class in this Equatorial African nation, where the very rich keep getting richer and the poor grow ever more despondent.

Travel northwest to the country's capital, Kinshasa, and you can dine alongside well-coiffed European madams and local politicians with their mistresses, sipping imported drinks on the terrace under a beautiful banyan tree at Chateau Margau.

Dinner and drinks at the old colonial mansion can easily cost \$100—the average annual income for a Congolese, lower than when the country gained its independence from Belgium in 1960.

Electricity and running water are spotty in the capital of 7 million people, most of whom live in tin-roofed shacks enveloped by exhaust fumes, open sewage and heaps of garbage. Hotels, restaurants and the upper class often must light their premises using oil-fueled generators.

Yet there are markers of progress. The country has its first 24-hour ATM machine, where people drive up in their imported BMWs and Mercedeses, furtively withdrawing wads of \$100 bills. They can withdraw up to \$1,000—with a \$2 fee and 3 percent interest on top of the amount of the withdrawal—with a Visa card.

ProCredit Bank, which operates the cash machine, isn't just for the well-heeled.

The micro-credit establishment, which opened last year, offers small loans and savings accounts to individuals who cannot afford the big banks. It's the first in Congo to offer Visa cards for a \$50 annual fee and no big deposit down.

"There are some people who just don't believe that there is such a thing in Congo," says Tamaris Ngandu Mwabala, the 32-year-old branch manager of ProCredit Bank. "I believe some people want the Visa cards because it just makes them proud; they just want to show off."

Mwabala says the bank—whose backers include the International Finance Corp., an arm of the World Bank—hopes to branch out to other Congolese cities as the country stabilizes and expands its devastated road grid, of which only about 300 to 400 miles are paved. Since opening last year, ProCredit Bank has attracted more than 20,000 customers, all members of the country's middle-class minority trying to pull themselves up.

Yet most Congolese are villagers who farm small plots of manioc, or cassava, corn and beans and typically grow only enough to feed their families.

Congo abounds in diamonds, gold, cobalt, copper, tin and coltan—the last being the essential ingredient of the cellphones that now rule communications in the country. It is also rich in coffee, palm oil and the rubber that colonial ruler King Leopold II of Belgium once exploited so ruthlessly on his personal plantations.

But in virtually every corner of the Congo, nearly a decade of turmoil has run ordinary people into the ground. At least 4 million people died during six years of armed rebellion, leading to hunger and disease and making it the deadliest conflict since World War II.

"The contradiction is that it's one of the richest countries on the planet," notes Mario Zamorano, a spokesman for the large, expensive U.N. mission trying to maintain peace during the first democratic vote for a leader in 46 years.

"All the elements are there: copper, gold and diamonds," Zamorano says. "They are so rich, and they are so poor."

Though civil war officially ended in 2002, about 1,000 people still die each day due to the remnants of that violence, half of them children, one in five of whom will die by age 5.

One of those who is soon likely to die is Kabuanga Marie Mutanga, who lies emaciated on a rattan mat in a dark mud hut in Kamponde, the village where Kasamba sells cellphone calls.

Her mother says she has tuberculosis or parasites, but the Catholic nun who runs the village clinic says she's beyond help, dying of the "four-letter word," or AIDS. Her husband is long gone, and her three children are in the care of their grandmother, once the village prostitute.

"We're on our own," says the mother, Kamilongo Kamukenji, propping up her daughter's bald head to better see a foreign visitor. "The village has done nothing for us. People are just more concerned about struggling for a living."

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