



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** The Democratic Republic of the Congo covers 905,563 square miles (2,345,410 square kilometers), an area roughly the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River. Most of Congo lies within the vast lowland basin of the Congo River, the world's fifth largest river and one of Africa's most renowned waterways. The country features tropical rain forests in the central and western regions, grasslands in the north and south, and mountains in the east. The Mitumba Mountains, on Congo's eastern border, are part of Africa's Great Rift system. Other major mountain ranges include the Ruwenzori and Virunga, both in the northeast. The Garamba National Park, on Congo's northeastern border, shelters rare species such as the okapi and white rhino.

Congo is situated almost entirely within the equatorial zone. Temperatures in the eastern mountains and the southeastern savanna are cool from May to September, and they occasionally drop below freezing. The rain forests experience high humidity and warm temperatures throughout the year. Annual rainfall varies from 40 inches (100 centimeters) in the south to 80 inches (200 centimeters) in the central Congo River Basin. The dry season is from June to August, when southern temperatures cool. Otherwise, temperatures average between 70°F and 85°F (20–30°C) all year.

**History.** Bantu peoples from western Africa migrated into the Congo Basin thousands of years ago. Several kingdoms existed in the centuries before Europeans arrived. The Kongo Kingdom controlled the southwest when the Portuguese arrived in the late 1400s. Little European intervention took place until the late 1800s, when Leopold II of Belgium formed an international trading company to exploit the Congo region's rich resources. The so-called Congo Free State, recognized by

the Conference of Berlin in 1884, became, in effect, a feudal estate. Leopold enslaved the people and plundered the land. His harsh treatment of the region inspired Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, Mark Twain's *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, and other publications. These eventually aroused an international outcry, and the Belgian Parliament was moved to seize the domain from King Leopold in 1908. The area then became known as the Belgian Congo.

After World War II, and following the trend in much of Africa, the Congolese negotiated with Belgium for their independence. In 1960, the new country was named the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was a champion of the independence movement and is still revered as a hero today.

Soon after the first elections, the Katanga province in the southeast seceded, Lumumba was murdered by political rivals, and unrest spread throughout the region. UN troops could not restore peace. Mobutu Sese Seko eventually seized power in 1965 with help from Western nations. In 1971, he began an "Africanization" campaign and renamed the country the Republic of Zaire, after the Portuguese name for the Congo River. Zairians were told to reject foreign influences, and cities and individuals were required to replace their Christian or other foreign names with African names. Western-style clothing was banned.

Mobutu ruled a one-party dictatorship through the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR). He robbed the national treasury, living in luxury while ignoring the needs of his people. Under pressure from the political opposition in 1990, he lifted the ban on political parties and allowed a 1991 national political conference to draft a framework for a transitional

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government and free elections. Unfortunately, Mobutu refused to accept most of the conference's decisions as binding. He did agree initially to the appointment of his chief rival, Étienne Tshisekedi, as prime minister. But when Tshisekedi began challenging Mobutu's authority, the two became locked in a power struggle. Much of the nation's infrastructure stopped working. Rampaging underpaid soldiers, corruption, and a collapsed economy plunged the country into chaos.

Total collapse was averted with minor political reform in 1994, but the war in Rwanda began to spill over into Zaire. One million Hutu refugees from Rwanda swelled makeshift camps in eastern Zaire. When armed Hutus from among these refugees began killing ethnic Tutsis in Zaire in 1996, the Rwandan government organized a Tutsi militia that quickly defeated Zairian troops helping the Hutus. The Tutsi militia soon allied with the forces of longtime Congo rebel, Laurent Kabila. Most Hutu refugees were later sent back to Rwanda. Kabila's forces marched rapidly on major cities, often being joined by Zairian troops as they surrendered. In May 1997, Kabila entered Kinshasa to the relief of its war-weary citizens. Kabila declared himself president and changed Zaire's name back to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Mobutu died in exile in September 1997.

Promises of democracy were tainted by Kabila's refusal to include Tshisekedi in his government. Kabila also banned political parties and suppressed political demonstrations. He justified his actions as necessary for stability, but people wondered whether they had exchanged one dictator for another. In August 1998, many of Kabila's allies accused him of corruption, nepotism, and an anti-Tutsi bias. They joined with ethnic Tutsi rebels in the east to spark a new round of civil war. Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia fought on Kabila's behalf, citing their own national interests in Congo. Rwanda and Uganda allied with the rebel movement, called the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD). The rebels soon controlled most of eastern Congo. The RCD split into two factions in 1999; Uganda backed one and Rwanda the other. All six nations involved in the war signed the 1999 Lusaka Accord, but its cease-fire was promptly violated.

In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated by one of his bodyguards, and Kabila's son Joseph took over as president. Though politically inexperienced, Joseph Kabila initiated peace measures that led to a treaty in December 2002. The war, which had cost a staggering three million lives, was declared over. Foreign troops left the country, and the leaders of the two main rebel groups were granted positions in a transitional government. However, fighting between other rival militias continues, with civilians often the targets of violence.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Congo's population of 56.6 million is growing at 2.9 percent annually. More than 48 percent of the population is younger than age 15. Urban populations are growing rapidly. Kinshasa, the nation's capital and largest city, is home to at least seven million people.

There are more than two hundred distinct African ethnic groups in Congo; Bantu peoples account for the majority (80 percent). The three largest Bantu groups are the Mongo, Luba, and Kongo. The Mangbetu-Azande ethnic group is the fourth largest. These four comprise about 45 percent of the total population. Smaller groups include the Hutu, Tutsi, Pygmy, Nilo-Saharan, and various Afro-Asiatic peoples. The few foreigners that remain in Congo live mostly in Kinshasa's Gombe neigh-

borhood. West Africans (known as Ndingari), Lebanese, and Indians form an important merchant class. Congo is also home to large populations of refugees who have fled conflicts in neighboring countries.

Most Congolese ethnic groups coexist in peace on a daily basis. They intermarry, live in mixed communities, and handle their differences without violence. Tensions rise when one group believes another has an advantage or level of control in something, but this rarely leads to fighting. Political foes have exploited such tensions in civil conflicts, especially in the east where opposing groups from other countries reside, and this has been the prime contributor to the nation's ethnic violence.

**Language.** Broadcasting, local business, daily communication, and primary school instruction occur in one of the four national Bantu languages: Lingala (in Kinshasa and the west), Kikongo (in the west and southwest), Tshiluba (in central and southern Congo), and Swahili (in the east). Most people speak their own ethnic language as well as one or more of the four national languages.

Urban residents might speak a mixture of local languages and French. Under Mobutu, French was the country's official language. Used for international commerce, education, and government administration, it was spoken by only about 10 percent of the population. Lingala was used in the military and bureaucracy.

**Religion.** Eighty percent of the population is Christian: 50 percent is Roman Catholic and 20 percent belongs to various Protestant organizations. Another 10 percent participates in the indigenous Christian sect known as Kimbanguism, a Protestant offshoot established in the early 20th century by Simon Kimbangu. Many Christians also mix traditional animist beliefs with Christianity. About 10 percent of the people are Muslim, residing mainly in the east but also in Kinshasa. The remaining 10 percent follow traditional beliefs exclusively. Regardless of one's faith, religion plays an important role in daily life. People regularly attend worship services and participate in public prayers.

**General Attitudes.** Most Bantu peoples share a common cultural heritage, distinguished by their genuine concern for the welfare of others. They will nearly always share their food with others in need, no matter how little they may have themselves. Congolese are courteous and friendly. They laugh easily and enjoy living. Congolese are careful not to offend.

In many groups, speech is often abrupt. Congolese may make requests without a "Please" and accept help without a "Thank you." Indeed, Lingala was specifically promoted by Belgian colonialists for use in official institutions (such as the police force) because of its directness. Even if a person does not say "Please" (*Bolimbisi* in Lingala or *Tafadhali* in Swahili) or "Thank you" (*Botondi* in Lingala or *Aksanti* in Swahili), he or she will show gratitude or politeness through actions.

The desires of family, friends, and colleagues are expected to override personal concerns. Individualism at the expense of the family is frowned upon. Time is elastic; Lingala uses the same word, *lobi*, for both "yesterday" and "tomorrow." People are considered more important than schedules, and appointments or events may begin as much as an hour late.

Because there are so few wealthy people in Congolese society, they are accorded great respect. Education is highly valued and people work hard to find a way to pay for their children's schooling. The poor express education as a priority goal if their circumstances improve. Even children who live and beg in the streets of Kinshasa express a desire to go to school.

**Personal Appearance.** A neat and clean appearance is important to Congolese, even for those who live in poverty. They keep clothing clean and ironed. Western-style clothing is common in most urban areas. Congolese women wear a long, tailored dress, called a *pagne* or (in Lingala) *liputa*, made of a 5-yard length of fabric. Adults rarely wear shorts or immodest attire. However, children wear shorts. Some rural Congolese continue to wear traditional clothing or traditional items mixed with Western clothing.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** In urban areas, men and women generally shake hands, smile, and greet each other verbally. Upon entering a room for the first time, a person shakes hands with each individual. Close friends greet first with a handshake, followed by a hug and three alternating kisses to the cheek (men might simply touch alternating temples). The urban elite greet with the French term *Bonjour* (Good day). But *Mbote* (Hello) is more common. It is followed by *Sango nini?* (What's new?) among Lingala speakers. Outside urban areas, men usually do not shake hands with women but will shake hands with men. Some rural women greet men by clapping their hands a few times and bowing slightly. In the eastern and southeastern parts of the country, the Swahili greeting *Jambo* (Hello) is common.

**Gestures.** Pointing directly at a person with the index finger is impolite. One beckons by waving all fingers. Objects are passed with the right hand or both hands, never the left alone, as the left is traditionally reserved for personal hygiene. When shaking hands, if one's right hand is soiled, one offers the wrist instead. Hand gestures often accompany or replace verbal communication. For example, to indicate a bus or place is completely full, one taps the fist two or three times with an open palm.

**Visiting.** Visiting is important to the Congolese and hospitality is customary. Most visiting occurs in the home. Family and close friends often drop by unannounced, but strangers are expected to make arrangements in advance. When a person first visits a Congolese home, a gift is not appropriate. Visitors may give small gifts, such as food or an item for the house, after a relationship has been established. A visitor must be invited in before entering a home and he or she must be invited to sit before being seated. Good friends and extended family members have greater liberty to make themselves at home. Children are expected to greet each adult with a handshake and perhaps a kiss on the cheek. They usually are then dismissed while the adults socialize.

If a Congolese offers to share a meal, the guest is expected first to show reluctance to join the host's table. But the guest should ultimately accept the offer. Not doing so is impolite. Even if guests are unable to eat the meal, they should try some of the food as a gesture of goodwill. The Congolese often judge guests' sincerity by the way they eat. If hosts do not offer a meal, they usually serve refreshments. At the end of the visit, it is common for the host family to offer money to guests to pay for the taxi or bus ride home.

**Eating.** Congolese eat a light breakfast (perhaps tea and bread or leftovers from the day before) and a larger meal in the late afternoon or early evening. Meals usually are eaten with the fingers of the right hand only. When Congolese use utensils, they observe the continental style of eating; the fork is in the left hand and the knife remains in the right. Men and women eat from separate communal bowls. When sharing a bowl, people eat only from the space directly in front of them. Only the

eldest is permitted to distribute meat with both hands to those eating the meal. Diners wash their hands before and after each meal.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Although family structure varies greatly between ethnic groups, they all place emphasis on group goals and family welfare. Large extended families usually live under the same roof or in a group of closely joined homes. In western Congo, families are mostly matriarchal; the mother's brother, rather than her husband, is the male with the greatest authority in the family. In other areas, patriarchal and polygamous families are common. Urban families, particularly among the more affluent, tend to be more patriarchal and include fewer relatives in the extended family. Women care for the children and household. Because many women sell produce and goods at the market, they are often the primary force in the informal economy. Children are expected to be polite and obedient to adults. They take on chores early in life, and older girls help their mothers with most daily tasks.

**Dating and Marriage.** Casual dating occurs only among the wealthy in large urban areas. Dating in rural areas usually leads to marriage. Traditionally, marriage is a family affair and is at least partly arranged by parents. A complete wedding usually includes three ceremonies: civil, church, and traditional. The process can take months and is very expensive. Prospective grooms must present the bride's family with gifts and money. This custom prevents many young people from marrying, at least in the traditional way.

**Diet.** Staple foods include cassava, rice, potatoes, bananas, yams, beans, corn, fish, peanuts, and various fruits and vegetables. Common fruits include mangoes, oranges, *pawpaws*, and coconuts. Sugarcane is also grown in Congo. People must purchase some perishable foods on a daily basis. Adequate supplies of food are hard to find in some areas, and malnutrition and starvation affect as much as 10 percent of the nation's children.

**Recreation.** Soccer is the most popular sport. Even urban girls are beginning to play. Rural Congolese enjoy gatherings that consist of dancing and drum music. Many urban people spend their leisure time socializing, dancing, or listening to music.

**The Arts.** Congo is known for its many types of music. Musical styles originating in Congo have also become popular in other parts of Africa. Played by bands of high-pitched guitars, *soukous* combines African and Caribbean influences. Other upbeat dance styles, such as Congolese jazz, *kwasa kwasa*, *ndombolo*, and *lingala* or *rumba*, are performed in urban discos. Congolese musicians who have achieved international success include singers Papa Wemba and Koffi Olomide and bands Wenge Musica and Zaiko Langa Langa. Traditional music is still important, so instruments such as the *likembe* (a board with thin metal strips plucked with the thumbs) are widespread. Folk art has a strong presence throughout the country; common forms include baskets, wood carvings, and jewelry. Painting and sculpture are concentrated in urban areas.

**Holidays.** Congo's holidays include New Year's Day, the Commemoration of the Martyrs of Independence (4 Jan.), Easter, Labor Day (1 May), Independence Day (30 June), Parents' Day (1 Aug.), Veterans' Day (17 Nov.), and Christmas.

**Commerce.** Most people live in small villages and farm small plots of land or catch fish. In the cities, business hours vary. Businesses may open anytime from 7 to 9 a.m. and close

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between 4 and 5 p.m. Government offices close by 4 p.m. People purchase daily goods from open-air markets and small shops. In Kinshasa, most residents live by trading or working in the informal street economy.

### SOCIETY

**Government.** President Joseph Kabila is Congo's chief of state and head of government. He has broad powers over all three branches of government. Under the terms of the peace agreement, leaders of the country's two main rebel groups were installed as vice presidents in 2003. Each group also received seven leadership positions in government ministries. An interim parliament will be in place until elections are held.

**Economy.** Political chaos and neglect have left Congo's economy in ruin, and most of the population lives in dire poverty. Although only about 3 percent of the nation's total area is under cultivation, the bulk of the labor force is involved in agriculture. Subsistence farmers produce staples such as cassava and corn. Other agricultural products include coffee (the nation's most important cash crop), sugar, palm oil, rubber, tea, bananas, and timber. The national currency is the Congolese *franc* (CDF), although the U.S. dollar is used for most major transactions.

Vast mineral deposits and other natural resources make Congo potentially one of the richest nations in Africa, but this potential remains largely untapped and even lost. Congo is one of the world's largest producers of diamonds, a resource that rebel groups and foreign armies used to fund their campaigns during the civil war. Congo could be a principal cobalt and copper supplier, but many of these mines are not functioning. Other abundant natural resources include oil, gold, silver, zinc, tin, uranium, bauxite, iron ore, coal, and timber. Even if goods are produced, they are difficult to transport. If peace can be established in all parts of the country, it may be possible for the government to use mineral wealth to build roads, refurbish and expand the railway, and support other development projects.

Inland waterways give Congo great potential for hydroelectric energy. It has one of the largest dams in Africa, the Inga Dam near the mouth of the Congo River. Power is transmitted more than 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) from the Inga to the southern copper-mining region—one of the world's longest direct-current hydroelectric transmission lines.

**Transportation and Communications.** The Congo River is the nation's major route for both commercial and passenger transportation. Congo's few paved roads are in disrepair and difficult to travel. Many dirt roads are impassable in the rainy season. Public transportation in cities is all but nonexistent. Private trucks provide transportation, along with taxis in larger cities, but fuel is expensive and scarce. Hence, most people walk distances up to about 6 miles (10 kilometers).

Only wealthy Congolese have private phones, and there are no public phones. Telephone service shops offer access for a fee per minute. Radio messages are broadcast to areas where conventional telephone service does not exist. Mobile phone use is also beginning to be established in some of these areas. Shops offering internet access are becoming popular in Kinshasa. The press is free but faces some restrictions. As many

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	167 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	136 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$680
Adult literacy rate	74 percent (male); 52 (female)
Infant mortality rate	98 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	40 (male); 42 (female)

as 15 newspapers are regularly published in Kinshasa. A number of television and radio stations also operate.

**Education.** Like the economy, the education system has faltered. Facilities and staff are lacking, and enrollment levels are very low. Few viable institutions exist in interior rural areas. A severe "brain drain" of the skilled and educated is undermining the country's ability to provide adequate teaching. However, the country's three public universities (in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and Kisangani) still operate alongside several private institutions.

**Health.** Congo has few physicians. Medical help is available in Kinshasa, but adequate health care is a serious problem in rural areas. Medical supplies are lacking throughout the country. International relief organizations or traditional healers are often the only sources of care. Malaria, yellow fever, AIDS, and cholera are widespread. Preventive medicine and mosquito nets are available but too expensive for the average person. Disease epidemics are common. Outbreaks of the deadly Ebola virus have occurred in rural areas where people come into contact with infected animals. Other diseases afflicting people include measles, hepatitis, tuberculosis, and sleeping sickness.

### AT A GLANCE

#### Events and Trends.

- More than 10,000 UN peacekeepers are stationed in eastern Congo. Despite their efforts to bring stability to the region, lawlessness and factional fighting remain widespread.
- As part of the peace process, former rebel soldiers are being integrated into the Congolese military. In March 2004, the first unit of the unified military began training for deployment against rebel factions.
- The government of Belgium made an official apology in 2002 for its complicity in the killing of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. A parliamentary commission determined that the Belgian military had a role in the kidnapping and murder of Lumumba during the chaos that swept Congo shortly after independence. Belgium also established a fund in Lumumba's name to assist with Congo's development needs.

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