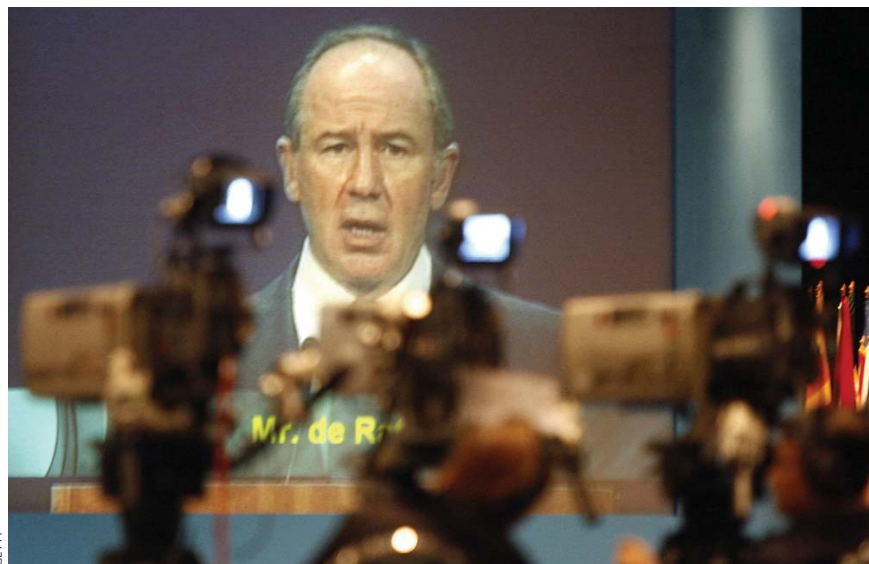


IN SHORT



A positive outlook

■ SUB-SAHARAN Africa is on line to maintain a good rate of economic growth this year, predicted Rodrigo de Rato, managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But he gave a warning that countries should "avoid repeating past errors" by taking on more debt from a new generation of creditors.

The IMF chief said that the region's economy should grow more than 5 per cent this year, thanks to high commodity prices, debt relief and a favourable world trade environment. "Economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa will probably exceed 5 per cent this year for the third year in a row and the outlook is also favourable for next year," he said. Late last year, the IMF was forecasting growth of 5.9 per cent for Sub-Saharan Africa in 2007, following a projected 5.4 per cent in 2006.

Mr de Rato was speaking at the opening of the new IMF Africa Regional Technical Assistance Centre in Gabon's capital, which will offer technical advice and financial training to Central African countries.

He warned African nations against the temptation to take on more debt from a new generation of creditors and risk repeating the cycle of the 1970s and 1980s. "The hard-won gains from debt relief risk being lost if the countries concerned borrow to finance expenses which do not improve their economic situation," he is reported as saying. "Nobody wants to repeat the experience of the 1970s and 1980s... but a new generation of creditors, who did not go through that process, risks repeating the experience," he added. China, keen to feed its booming economy, has been offering low interest loans, debt relief and other incentives to governments around Africa in return for access to minerals and oil.

Mr de Rato said, however, that economic growth in the world's poorest continent was not yet strong enough to keep it on track to meet all the Millennium Development Goals, which aim to halve Africa's poverty by 2015 and combat diseases such as malaria and HIV/Aids. He said inflation in Sub-Saharan Africa, excluding Zimbabwe, was less than 10 per cent, the lowest in a quarter of a century, and that debt relief was freeing up additional funds which should be put towards development.

African nations, he added, should improve their regulatory environments and make doing business easier for foreign investors to reap the full advantages of trade. "Studies show easy access to the market for new companies, a supple labour market, and transparent and respected property rights are particularly important for trade benefits to be achieved."

Set for take-off

■ GABON AIRLINES, a new private company, is expected to succeed the defunct national carrier, Air Gabon, according to company officials. The Gabonese Ministry of Transport has granted Gabon Airlines an official permit to operate flights from the country. The new company is fronted by Christian Bongo Ondimba, son of President Bongo and CEO of the Banque Gabonaise de Développement.

The airline is expected to begin flying between Africa and Europe from March 2007, commencing with the route Libreville-Paris, followed by flights to other destinations yet to be confirmed but likely to include Johannesburg and other African capitals. Dubai looks set to be on its international route map.

The airline has acquired two Boeing 767-200s from the American company United Airlines and is expected to acquire a third for staff training and maintenance.

It has signed an agreement with Travel Technology Interactive, supplier of Aeropack, one of the most fully integrated electronic booking, distribution and management systems for airlines on the international market. The company is backed by a portfolio of about \$9.3 (€7) million held by banks, insurance agents and private investors.



Rough diamonds

■ THE FILM *Blood Diamonds* starring Leonardo DiCaprio has brought the world's diamond industry into sharp focus of late. Gabon is one of 11 new countries to have entered into membership talks with the founders of the internationally reputed Kimberly Process Certification Scheme, designed to certify the origin of diamonds from sources free of conflict.

A country of rich geological wealth, Gabon's main mineral export is manganese, while other commodities include oil, gold, iron, niobium, platinum-group metals and diamonds. A comprehensive Mining Investment Code enacted in 2000 includes strict environmental controls.

Diamonds are believed to be widespread across Gabon and large areas have yet to be explored, notably the Chaillu Massif mountain range. Artisanal miners are currently producing small quantities in the Mitzi region. Over the past five years, South African mining giant De Beers has conducted aeromagnetic, alluvial and geochemical surveys.

The Canadian diamond exploration company SouthernEra Diamonds Inc. recently announced it had discovered 41 kimberlitic bodies in Gabon (kimberlite is a type of rock containing diamonds). To date it has four diamond exploration permits in the country: the 100 per cent owned Kango and Sud projects, the 95 per cent owned M'bigou Project and the 60 per cent owned Makongonio Project, run in a joint venture with Gabonese mining company Cogemat.

SouthernEra Diamonds Inc. runs the world's fourth-largest global diamond-exploration programme. The company has explored in Gabon since 1999, initially targeting areas traditionally producing the highest value and largest stone size diamonds. Over 36,000 carats of alluvial diamonds were commercially mined in the mid-1950s, but large-scale production has yet to begin. One diamond field, within the Makongonio project area, has produced two gem quality diamonds of over 50 carats.

Investing in the future

■ Total Gabon, the leading oil company in Gabon, is showing its commitment to the country with a massive recruitment drive.

The company, a subsidiary of the Total group, has taken on 60 young Gabonese engineers and qualified technicians since 2002. A further 100 positions, of which 30 per cent are in the engineering sector, will be filled between 2007 and 2010.

"Total Gabon is able to draw on the advantages and synergies of the international group it belongs to. It prioritises the development of local skills," said human resources director Hervé Nidelet.

The company is currently looking to boost its skilled workforce in anticipation of upcoming retirement of staff. Spending on staff training was \$2 (€1.4) million in 2006, a 30 per cent increase on 2005.

As part of its contribution to Gabon's Diversified Investment Programme, a government scheme set up to channel funds from the country's oil profits into practical projects to

benefit the population, Total Gabon is renovating the main high school in Port Gentil at a cost of \$4 (€2.8) million. The project, which began in 2005, will be completed during 2007.

The company is responsible for over half of the 237,000 barrels of oil produced per day in Gabon. It is owned by Total (58 per cent), the Gabonese government (25 per cent) and private operators (17 per cent).



■ THE REGIONAL drive towards financial transparency was reinforced at the recent meeting of the Central African Action Group Against Money Laundering (GABAC) in Libreville. The group called on the six countries in the CEMAC region to establish an investigation office to help GABAC in its efforts.

■ BANANA production in Gabon looks set to be boosted, thanks to the Gabonese Development Support Institute (IGAD) and an expanded network of banana producers. New plantations under cultivation are expected to produce three tonnes of bananas per hectare.

■ BRAZILIAN mining giant Companhia Vale do Rio Doce (CVRD) has frozen its mining projects in Gabon for "strategic reasons". A world leader in the production and exportation of iron ore, CVRD holds exploitation permits for manganese deposits at Franceville and Okondja, as well as prospecting permits for gold and copper. Its two manganese operations are to be closed. "We remain interested in Gabon's potential, but we have opted to freeze our industrial projects," a spokesman said. Last year sole rights to exploit one of the world's largest remaining iron ore deposits in Gabon were awarded to a Chinese consortium, the China National Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Corporation, which won the bid against CVRD.



Ecotourism focus

■ THE FUTURE development of Gabon's ecotouristic wealth came under the spotlight recently during a three-day international conference organised by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) and the Gabonese High Commission for Tourism.

More than 300 experts from 27 member countries of the UNWTO met in Libreville for the event, *Ecotourism in National Parks and Protected Areas in Africa*, which was declared open by Gabonese Prime Minister Jean Eyéghé Ndong and UNWTO Secretary-General Francesco Frangialli.

With 13 national parks created in 2002 occupying 11 per cent of its surface area, Gabon expects to become a major ecotourism destination in the next decade, attracting some 100,000 tourists a year.

"Nature in this country offers an unimaginably stunning spectacle. Tourism holds great promise, both for visitors and for the Gabonese economy," said Gabon's High Commissioner for Tourism Mehdi Teale at the event. He expected Gabon to quickly become an important destination for wildlife enthusiasts around the world.

Mr Frangialli said the event was an opportunity for participants to reflect on ecotourism and the role it could play in nature conservation in the 21st century: "Future ecotourism has to be designed to respect the environment," he added.

■ GABON'S capital was also the venue of a sub-regional workshop on the implementation of forest laws in Central Africa. The Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), in conjunction with the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Tropical Woods Organisation, hosted the workshop.

Central Africa's dense and humid forests include the natural resources of Burundi, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, São Tomé and



Príncipe and Chad. The forest ecosystems that these countries jointly host form the second largest tropical forest in the world after the Amazon, but its natural assets are seriously threatened by poaching, logging and mining.

COMIFAC, established in September 2004 in Libreville, and made up of forestry ministers of participating countries, coordinates sub-regional initiatives on the conservation and sustainable management of these precious ecosystems.

Food security

■ LIBREVILLE is to house the new headquarters of the Central Africa regional office of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and it will become operational in 2007, its director general Jacques Diouf (pictured) has announced.

"I'm happy with the progress made in Gabon as part of the FAO special food security programmes initiated in 105 countries globally, including 44 in Africa," said Mr Diouf.

Mr Diouf, who visited the Gabonese capital recently as part of a ministerial meeting on food security in Africa, lauded the efforts of the Gabonese government towards achieving food security.

The headquarters of this new regional office will be located in Libreville's administrative complex at the Cité de la Démocratie, near to the existing office of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

The setting up of the FAO regional office in Gabon was decided last May in Rome when the initial agreement was signed between Gabon's Agriculture Minister Faustin Boukoubi and the FAO director general Mr Diouf. FAO is a UN specialised institution that was created in 1945 in the city of Quebec. It leads international efforts to defeat hunger and serves both developed and developing countries.



Spreading wings

■ INTERNATIONAL airline options in and out of Gabon are set to grow following the announcement by South African Airways (SAA) that from April it is starting three flights a week between Johannesburg and Libreville.

SAA is expanding its route network in Europe, North America, South America and Africa by adding new destinations on each continent, boosting the airline's international



network by 8 per cent. The new Libreville connection is in addition to more than 20 other destinations on the African continent the airline services. New twice-weekly flights were also launched from Johannesburg to Point Noire in the Republic of Congo and Bamako in Mali in January.

SAA is also launching new services to South America in July with three flights a week to Buenos Aires, as the airline's second entry point into that region, along with São Paulo in Brazil. "These flights will allow SAA to capture emerging south-to-south traffic flows associated with growing trade and investment between emerging economies in the southern hemisphere, including Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, India and Malaysia", says Nomfanelo Magwentshu, SAA business development manager.

Gabon has established trade ties with Brazil and, as part of its flagship programme to 'Bring the World to Africa and Take Africa to the World', the Gabon flights would complement new flights to Brazil in 2007, the carrier said. In addition, SAA flights from New York to Johannesburg will operate non-stop from May, saving at least six hours of flying time for those passengers currently flying via Europe.

Ready, steady, go!

■ GABON was the venue for the first event of the 2007 international cycling season when teams of cyclists from around the world lined up for the starter's pistol in Libreville.

The 550-kilometre cycling race, La Tour Tropicale Amissa Bongo Ondimba, was organised by the International Cycling Union (UCI) in memory of the late daughter of President Bongo.

The race attracted some 90 amateur and professional cyclists who made up a mix of European and African teams. Beginning in Libreville, it saw riders complete 140 kilometres from Kango to Lambaréné, much of it through tropical forest. The second stage took them 130 kilometres further through spectacular scenery and across the equator from Lambaréné to Ndjolé, and the third stage covered 100 kilometres from Bitam to Oyem. The following day saw the riders leave Oyem and finish in Mitzic, with the final stage being a circuit race in downtown Libreville.

Many of the cycling teams were from African countries including Gabon, Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, Burkina

Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, Senegal and Mali, while a total of five teams came from Germany, Holland and France. Two professional French teams took part: Crédit Agricole and Française des Jeux.

A new event welcomed onto UCI's international calendar last year, the race offers cyclists a sporting opportunity during winter in the northern hemisphere. The race was won by Frédérique Guesdon of the French team Française des Jeux, and he received his trophy during a ceremony on Libreville's seafront from Gabonese Health Minister Paulette Missambo.



■ CELTEL Gabon, the mobile telephone operator with the largest market share of 42 per cent, has launched a mobile Internet service. Subscribers can now surf the net and read emails at the speed of up to 175 kilobytes per second from their laptops and data-enabled mobile phones wherever there is a Celtel network in Gabon.



■ TWENTY TWO Cuban doctors have taken up medical posts in rural Gabon. The staff, specialists in anaesthesia, radiology, emergency medicine and paediatrics, are part of a national Gabonese recruitment drive to solve health personnel shortages.

■ A MASSIVE national road improvement programme is set to take place in Gabon. Loans worth \$124 (€96) million from the French Development Agency and the German bank AKA will finance surfacing works on the Libreville-Owendo, Ntoum-Cocobeach and Ndjolé-Médoumane routes. A loan of \$44 (€34) million from the Islamic Development Bank will finance construction of a new route from Koumameyong to Ovan in Ogooué-Ivindo province.