INTRODUCTION

ZAIRE is possibly the saddest among Africa’s many examples of post-colonial rule. The country with enough arable land and hydro-electric potential to feed and power the entire continent has been reduced, by a caricature of a venal African dictator, to one of the five poorest countries in the world.

Developments in Zaire during the last three years have obscured any accurate economic view of the country. The World Bank has removed Zaire from the countries’ list in its World Development Indicators. The European Parliament has asked the European Union to suspend all Lomé-based aid to Zaire, effectively neutralising the benefits from the only meaningful international grouping to which the country belonged.

Africa’s third-largest nation - covering 2,34 million square kilometres - relies on copper for two thirds of its export earnings and about one third of its GDP. It has large offshore petroleum resources, currently earning about 20% of government income. Zaire also has 65% of the world’s reserves of cobalt and was, in 1990, the world’s largest producer of industrial gem diamonds. While almost 80% of Zaire’s surface is covered by dense tropical rainforest, the country’s timber industry is undeveloped.

Given its mineral wealth, the geographic vastness of the territory and its strategic location at the crosspoint of Central-Southern Africa, Zaire’s prospects are of great importance to South Africa. In particular, the future of President Mobutu Sese Seko’s rule and that of the Zairean democratic movement and Zairean-South African relations remain inextricably interlinked.

GRASPING

In his recently published book Blood on the Tracks, London journalist Miles Bredin could easily be describing Zaire when he says post-colonialism’s effects have been even worse than the devastation of colonialism. ‘All the beneficial effects of colonialism have been lost. Road systems have decayed, farms and factories have been destroyed and looted. African leaders have merely assumed the mantles of their former colonial masters, and continued the tyranny of their countrymen. In most cases they have been worse than the colonisers.’

President Mobutu easily outclasses the most grasping of his counterparts. He rules over a state that has all but vanished while amassing a personal fortune estimated to be somewhere between $5-billion and $12-billion. Mobutu boasted on United States television in 1984 that he was second richest man in the world. A French official contemptuously described him as ‘a walking bank account in a leopard skin hat’. Yet his country was suspended from the International Monetary Fund in June for payment arrears of $315-million.

Zaire is in a state of catastrophic equilibrium, says Dr. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, professor of African studies at Howard University in
Washington D.C. and also a leading member of the democracy movement in Zaire. The Zairean expatriate, currently spending a year at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, says while the old order of President Mobutu Sese Seko is dying, no new one has been born yet to replace it. Dr. Nzongola-Ntalaja holds that Mobutu remains only as a repressive force and an international actor, which he is able to do by retaining control of the military. His own praetorian guard is paid in foreign currency. He also hold the reins on customs and the central bank.

In February this year, Zaire exported diamonds valued at $14.24 million. Journalists report, however, that only a third of Zaire's diamonds leave the country through official channels to be counted in this way. The rest are smuggled by Unita contacts in Angola to be sold in Antwerp, Bombay and other centres with the connivance of government and customs.

Dr. Nzongola-Ntalaja says he does not exclude the possibility of total collapse in Zaire - as in Liberia, Somalia or Rwanda. Even as Dr. Nzongola-Ntalaja was making this assertion at an Africa Institute seminar in Pretoria in July, President Mobutu was considering what political capital he could reap from the slaughter in neighbouring Rwanda.

ARCH-SURVIVOR

The signal Mobutu was putting out to the world reached a new low of cynicism, even for Africa's arch-survivor. It said, in effect, that what was happening in Rwanda would pale into insignificance next to the horrors that would accompany a complete collapse in Zaire.

President Mobutu once again presented himself as the only person who could prevent this. His refrain of 'it's me or chaos' has become a familiar one. It has been greatly weakened by the decline of Zaire into a mere shell of a state. As The Economist reported in July, government has 'disintegrated into regional fiefs underpinned by smuggling and bribery. It is run - to use the word loosely - by President Mobutu Sese Seko, who treats the public treasury as his personal reserve and has spirited billions of dollars into Swiss bank accounts'.

In March 1992 The Washington Post reported Kinshasa state-run hospitals were closed and the patients sent home. 'The public sector, by and large, has ceased to function. There is a government, there are ministries and there is even an official budget, but there is an air of fantasy about it all, since the tax collection system has broken down and virtually no customs revenues are coming in. For the most part, the government has taken to paying its bills by printing fresh batches of currency...'.

The people of his own country, rendered broke and ungovernable by looting of the treasury have heard the 'chaos' refrain virtually throughout his 29-year kleptocracy. They tolerate it, Dr. Nzongola-Ntalaja says, because the horrible memory of the civil war in the early sixties is still deterrent enough to drive people away from mass violence.

POLITICAL FATALISM

The unwieldy National Conference called in 1992 nevertheless provided an escape valve, giving the Zairean people an idea they would at last achieve some political expression. This hope was subsequently been dashed by Mobutu's resumption of executive power. Zaireans, says Dr. Nzongola- Ntalaja, are shielded by their political fatalism - the belief that politicians are simply about the business of holding onto office. Accordingly, their expectations of politicians are low.

Mobutu had no reason to doubt that the Western powers, who had come to his rescue before, would buy his stability line. Indeed, at that time, Africa's greatest survivor was already well on the road to restoring Zaire's international relations, tattered by his human rights violations and flagrant plundering of his country's resources. Once again he was posing as the regional anchor. Even the democratically-elected government of South Africa has accepted President Mobutu has an integral role in the peace process in Angola.

Restoring relations between Zaire and Angola, damaged by President Mobutu's support for the rebel Unita movement, was presented as the triumph of the July 8 summit in Pretoria where President Mobutu appeared with Presidents Mandela, Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique and Eduardo dos Santos of Angola.
Eight days later, the joint security commission set up by Angola and Zaire met for the first time in several years to discuss border security and Mobutu’s support for the Angolan rebels. Also in prospect is a summit meeting between Mobutu and dos Santos.

Less than a fortnight after the summit in Pretoria, Mobutu once again insisted on sitting next to President Mandela at a regional summit in Maputo that included Botswana’s Quett Masire and Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe. Mobutu clearly has a growing affinity for South Africa. In between the Mozambique summit and a visit to Mauritius with Pasteur Bizimungu of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), he slotted in a trip to Sun City. There he and his wife occupied the Royal Suite at the Palace at the Lost City.

Democracy campaigners like Dr. ISizongola-Ntalaja are disappointed at South Africa appearing to prop up Mobutu along with the French, Belgians and the United States. Even when France bit on the bullet and denied Mobutu a visa, his wife remained a frequent visitor to his properties in France. Mobutu himself was let in last year for what was described as a pressing appointment with his dentist on the Riviera.

REFUGEES

Having let the French use Zaire as a base for operations in Rwanda and having allowed the Rwandan refugees to pour in - ultimately his tightly stretched forces were unable to keep them out - Mobutu has earned credits with the West he is bound to be calling in sooner rather than later.

In July African Confidential reported rumours that France would leave some military equipment behind in Zaire and noted concern among diplomats in Kinshasa that French troops have built permanent constructions at Kisangani airport. Mobutu has been regarded as a key regional player by the United States since Cold War days. He convinced Washington he was the last bastion against communism and thereby insured receipt of millions of dollars in CIA backing. This tactic also got him Western support against rebel attacks in the south.

Mobutu appeared to bow to President Carter’s human rights demands in 1977. But when the US looked away, he tortured and expelled human rights activists. Eventually a combination of Western disillusionment and decades of corruption and mismanagement led to the severance of international aid, and expatriates fled after two episodes of army rioting in 1991. After the World Bank pulled out, in June 1991, Zaire was suspended from the International Monetary Fund for non-payment of debts.

KINSHASA

Mobutu, apart from foreign jaunts, has been ensconced at his remote marbled palace in his tribal village Gbadolite, 1,250 kms from Kinshasa. The airstrip at this village has been lengthened to allow the Concorde to land. In July Mobutu surprisingly ventured into Kinshasa to sign a power-sharing agreement and demonstrate his backing for the government of Prime Minister Kengo wa Dondo in that province.

Mobutu announced, on July 6 this year, a 47-member transitional government comprising his supporters and opponents in equal numbers. Kengo had been appointed on June 14 by the transitional parliament. This was a substantial slap in the face for Etienne Tshisekedi, who has not relinquished his claim to the premiership. He claims his sacking by Mobutu in February last year was illegal.

PRIVATISATION

Although Tshisekedi’s opposition government continues to issue statements, it appears to have lost credibility with the diplomatic corps and a number of its former ministers have joined the Kengo cabinet. Belgium, France and the United States appear tacitly to have recognised the Kengo government. Kengo attracted their support with his plans to gain autonomy for the central bank and halt public sector corruption. He has also undertaken to stop the reign of terror by the armed forces, audit state-funded enterprises and adopt a privatisation programme.

Tshisekedi has not strengthened his case by making hollow calls for a popular uprising that has not occurred and a miners’ strike that had no effect. His call for a consumer boycott of goods produced by French companies with Zairean interests was also largely ignored.
Kengo is by no means out of the woods. No matter how determined he sounds, he will not be able to move without support from Mobutu who treats the Bank of Zaire as his personal coffer and continues to command unswerving support from his generals.

Some observers believe, however, this support is easier than might have been imagined. Mobutu is so intent on regaining Western favour he will seek any means of avoiding a confrontation with Kengo, because losing Kengo would only increase Western disillusionment.

Another view, however, is that Kengo is simply making the right noises for the West and will eventually himself be sucked into the Zairean swamp of corruption. Mobutu says he wants elections within a year, despite a warning from Belgium that the country of about 40-million people is in no financial or logistical state to mount such an exercise. For example, less than a tenth of 50,000 kms of main road Zaire inherited at independence in 1960 is now usable.

These difficulties could not suit Mobutu better. He would gamble on winning traditional support before the opposition has had a chance properly to organise and Kengo personally has made his mark. For the time being, however, domestic politics have gone onto the back burner as Zaire strains every sinew to address problems caused by the tide of human misery flooding in from Rwanda. The flood of more than million Rwandan refugees that poured into Zaire, mostly into the North and South Kivu provinces, has re-opened a few long-closed international aid channels. But it would be impossible fully to compensate Zaire for the hardship caused by the refugees. In any event, efforts now remain concentrated on easing the plight of those who have fled Rwanda - and protecting them from their compatriots - who urge them not to return. Zairean schools in the eastern provinces are closed to pupils because they are being used to shelter refugees. Medical services, such as they are, are stretched beyond breaking point. The environment is taking a battering because of the sudden, huge influx of people. Zaire's struggling tourism industry has been crippled by the refugees. Accordingly there was no great surprise at xenophobic charges from Zairean politicians that foreigners were to blame for the country's woes and should quit henceforth.

EXPATRIATES

While these calls were aimed at the expatriate community and included suggested severance pay for Zairean staff in the employ of foreigners, the Zairean government has been at pains to repudiate these calls. Limiting itself to expressing an 'ardent wish' that the refugees will quit by the end of September, the government is determined not to lose any credit for its forced humanitarianism thus far.

The government has promised (in the words of Kengo himself among others) that no refugees will be expelled. Recognising the state of things, Belgium, which has had no cooperation with Zaire since 1990, has made an offer, via Deputy Minister Leo Delcroix, of soldiers to help police the refugees.

Mobutu has long term fears about the Rwandan refugees. He even fears they could revive their claims to parts of Eastern Zaire where Hutus and Tutsis settled in large numbers 30 years ago. However unlikely, he is reportedly afraid that by banding together politically, the residents and the refugees could tip the scale in favour of forming the legendary Republic of the Great Lakes or the Republic of the Volcanoes.

Fear of a further invasion of refugees from Rwanda cannot be entirely laughed off. In late August tens of thousands of frightened Hutus started moving out of the French 'safe zone' in Rwanda towards Bukavu in the south of Zaire where there are already between 600,000 and 800,000 refugees. The fear among the refugees is the triumphant RPF government would seek retribution for the slaughter of Tutsis and by no means are all the mainly Hutu refugees innocent. And the United Nations and aid agencies seemed unable to stem the tide.

HARDLINERS

Not surprisingly then, Ghanaian and Ethiopian contingents of the UN force failed to gain the refugees' confidence. Anti-government agents in the camp aggravated matters by whipping up anti-UN sentiment. They have even managed to persuade people that the UN was responsible for the event that sparked off the massacres - the killing of President Juvenal Habyarimana in an air crash on April 6. Ex-government hardliners among
the refugees have become increasingly vehement about urging refugees to flee. From inside Zaire, emissaries of the former Rwandan government are organising ferries to bring their compatriots over in increasing numbers. Their long term plan is to depopulate the country and undermine the legitimacy and authority of the RPF government. This has played into the hands of anti-RPF propagandists among the refugees in Goma ravaged by dysentery and cholera. In July these diseases claimed 20,000 lives among refugees within 10 days. By pointing to the fresh exodus they can dissuade Rwandans in their own camps from returning. Where this fails, acts of intimidation by thugs determined to stop refugees returning have grown more brutal. The Zaire government has pledged to disarm these former Hutu troops inside the camps.

The Zairean Justice Minister conceded in early September that as many as 20,000 Hutu refugees inside his country could still be carrying arms. Some of these had even refused to give up their uniforms - thereby disqualifying themselves for consideration as refugees. Former soldiers in Mugunga, outside Goma, threatened last month to blow up grenades if UN workers did not give them blankets and plastic sheeting to make shelters. Their activities led to food distribution being suspended. People have died in fights for the limited supplies of food.

Yet many refugees are refusing to return to Rwanda without these thugs whom they see as their only protection against the new government. The French withdrawal from Rwanda in late August was marked by frightened Hutu refugees desperately trying to flee into Zaire. When the Ruzizi-1 border post was closed, the refugees took a 12 km riverside trail to another crossing. Zairean soldiers were reduced to firing into the air to stop refugees storming across at Bukavu border post.

According to French estimates, 2.5 million people were crammed into their safe zone, as against 1.9 million in the rest of the country. It could be said Zaire's misery is currently overshadowed by that of its eastern neighbour.

But with prices doubling every month in a collapsed currency, this is of no comfort to the people of the country reduced to patronising herbalists, not because of traditional preferences, but because they simply cannot get and could not afford conventional medicine. Meanwhile Deputy Prime Minister Nguza Karl-Bond recovers in a Johannesburg clinic from a heart attack, and other senior Zairean officials recuperate at exclusive private clinics that charge daily rates of more than twice a deputy minister's annual salary.

CONCLUSION

Clandestine trade with Zaire existed throughout South Africa's isolation years. In August 1989 a South African diplomatic presence was secretly established in Kinshasa at President Mobutu's invitation. Relations were formalised two years later.

Larger South African commercial involvement in Zaire was substantially undermined by the unrest of 1990, but trade continues and South African products feature prominently on Zairean shelves. The advantage to South African businessmen dealing with Zaire is they are paid outside that country - mostly in Europe, where Zaireans hold their bank accounts.

Political developments in South Africa have ruled out President Mobutu's continued presence as a requisite for good relations with Zaire. But the absence of an obvious and strong successor to Mobutu is as worrying to South African businessmen there, as it is to anyone concerned for the future of that country which links Southern and Central Africa to the rest of the continent.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
The South African Institute of International Affairs is an independent organisation which aims to promote a wider and more informed understanding of international issues among South Africans.

It seeks also to educate, inform and facilitate contact between people concerned with South Africa's place in an interdependent world, and to contribute to the public debate on foreign policy.