

December 5, 1986

STRENGTHENING THE U.S. — ZAIRE RELATIONSHIP

INTRODUCTION

President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire calls on Ronald Reagan next week. This first meeting between the two leaders in three years usefully highlights U.S. interests in central Africa at a time when Washington has been focusing mainly on southern Africa and Ethiopia.

Of all the nations of Africa, few are as important to the U.S. as Zaire. Its location in the center of Africa, bordering on nine other nations, and its vast resources of copper, cobalt, and other minerals make it a critical strategic ally. It is essential that a stable pro-Western government be in control in Kinshasa.

Under Mobutu's 21-year rule, Zaire has been one of America's most consistent allies in Africa. Mobutu also has become a major force throughout the entire African continent. Zaire was the only African country to send troops to Chad and Togo to support those governments against Libyan-backed insurgents. Many nations in Africa look to Zaire for an understanding of Western concerns. Yet Mobutu also presents U.S. policy makers with an increasingly common dilemma: what to do about a friendly but corrupt Third World strongman.

Mobutu's agenda in Washington will focus on two themes: restoring the balance in the relationship between the U.S. and Zaire and the emerging geopolitical and geostrategic situation in Africa. Mobutu believes--with good reason--that Zaire has been doing much more to address U.S. concerns and protect U.S. interests than has been recognized. Mobutu will ask U.S. officials to pressure International Monetary Fund (IMF) officials to release \$56 million in promised credits to Zaire, and may ask for increased U.S. economic and military assistance. Mobutu will consult with Reagan on how best to protect Western interests in the fluid African political situation.

Reagan in turn will encourage Mobutu to continue his government's adherence to the IMF stabilization programs, and will express gratitude for Mobutu's efforts to better his government's human rights record. Reagan will thank Mobutu for Zaire's responsiveness to U.S. geostrategic concerns in Angola, and may discuss the possible U.S. use of an air base in Zaire.

Zaire has long been a friend of the U.S. in Africa. Recently, Mobutu has begun to feel that Zaire is being short-changed in the bilateral relationship. Reagan should take this opportunity to reiterate U.S. gratitude for Zaire's friendship, and should demonstrate it by offering to assist Mobutu in working with the Zairian government and the international financial community to create new economic policies that better address Zaire's needs.

MOBUTU'S RISE TO POWER

When the Belgian Congo was granted independence on June 30, 1960, it had all the makings of a success story. Blessed with huge mineral wealth and 13 percent of the world's hydroelectric potential from the mighty Zaire river,¹ it appeared that this was one former colony able to make it on its own.

Political instability was to make this impossible. Within one week the army mutinied; within two weeks, Belgian troops were sent to protect Belgian nationals; a day later Moise Tshombe, the governor of Katanga (now Shaba) province, the site of most of the country's mineral wealth, seceded, declaring his province an independent country. United Nations forces were sent to restore order; but when the U.N. commander refused to place his units under central government command, Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba requested and received direct Soviet aid. Political infighting broke out between Lumumba and the titular chief of state, President Joseph Kasavubu, with each dismissing the other from office in early September 1960. Neither recognized the authority of the other to take such action. As the state structure disintegrated, Colonel Joseph Mobutu (now Mobutu Sese Seko) took control of the government, imprisoned Lumumba, and expelled all Soviet bloc diplomats and advisers.²

1. The river drops 100 yards within a 10-mile stretch at the site of the Inga dams. The average flow is 11,000,000 gallons per second, surpassed only by the Amazon. See Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 298. This work is generally acknowledged as the definitive study of the Mobutu era.

2. Lumumba attempted to escape and was recaptured. He died under mysterious circumstances in Katanga early in 1961.

Later that month, Mobutu returned power to Kasavubu, while Lumumba's former Vice Prime Minister, Antoine Gizenga, proclaimed himself leader of the new "legitimate" government. Over the next four years several groups competed for power in the capital. In the countryside, repeated rebellions were calmed by Belgian paratroops, transported in U.S. Air Force planes. Political instability mounted for nearly five years until Mobutu, now a Lieutenant General and commander in chief of the national army, seized power on November 24, 1965. His coup apparently was welcomed by most Zairians.³

ZAIRE AND THE U.S.

In two respects, Zaire is important to the U.S. in the same way South Africa is important: geography and minerals. Its central African location places Zaire on the borders of nine nations--including Angola and the Sudan, both of critical importance to U.S. policy goals in the region. At 905,000 square miles, it is as large as the U.S. east of the Mississippi River, and is the second largest country in sub-Saharan Africa, thus giving it tremendous power in the regional geopolitical context. Its location and size would make Zaire an excellent base for subversive operations against neighboring states if it were to fall under the grip of a pro-Soviet regime.⁴

Zaire's mineral resources are extremely valuable to the West. Copper, cobalt, coal, petroleum, manganese, gold, silver, industrial and gem diamonds, uranium, tin, and cadmium are all present in Zaire in large quantities. Mineral exports accounted for roughly 80 percent of Zaire's foreign currency receipts in 1984. Copper is Zaire's principal export, accounting for half of its total export earnings. Industrial diamonds mined in Zaire account for 40 percent of the Free World's total production. More important to the West is Zaire's possession of over 60 percent of the world's reserves of cobalt, a mineral essential for the production of jet aircraft engines and mining and drilling equipment.

3. For a fuller discussion of the political instability of 1960-1965, see Young and Turner, op. cit. pp. 47-54.

4. In this sense, Zaire is reminiscent of Bolivia. In fact, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, hero of the Cuban revolution who later was killed trying to destabilize Bolivia in 1967, recognized Zaire's geostrategic importance and fought with a few hundred Cuban colleagues to overthrow the Zairian government in 1965. He eventually gave up the fight as hopeless. See John Seiler, ed., Southern Africa Since the Portuguese Coup (Westview Press, 1980), p. 31.

Zaire long has been a close U.S. friend. From the time of Mobutu's first coup in September 1960, his relations with U.S. intelligence officers have been legendary. Pro-Western in his geopolitical outlook, Mobutu in 1960 expelled all Soviet bloc diplomats and advisers from Zaire following his mini-coup. During the 1975-1976 Angolan civil war he assisted the pro-Western Front for the National Liberation of Angola (FNLA) against the Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). In 1982 Mobutu reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel, losing much of the Arab economic assistance that Zaire had been receiving. To this day Moscow remains the only major world capital he has not visited.

The U.S. has longstanding though not sizeable interests in the stability and economic prosperity of Zaire. Its imports from the U.S. totaled \$82 million in 1984.⁵ U.S. private investment in Zaire totals roughly \$200 million, mainly in petroleum and manufacturing.⁶

Beyond economics, Zaire has something else of potential interest to the U.S.: the Kamina air base in north central Shaba province. Construction on the base began in 1952 under the Belgian colonial government, but was never completed. Still it has two 9,000-foot-long airstrips, each of which can handle any plane in the U.S. inventory. The runways are staggered. This means that a plane can land on one strip, taxi to a cargo unloading area, then taxi straight through to start its take-off on the second strip without having to turn around. No other airstrip in Africa has these capabilities far from a major population center. There are only 25,000 Zairians near Kamina, thus presenting few security problems. Further, the base is located atop a high plateau, giving it excellent air defense capabilities; one radar could defend it.

At the time of an African crisis, Kamina could prove very valuable to Washington. U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers could take off from Kamina, bomb Libya from the undefended south, and return without having to refuel. U.S. planes taking off from Kamina could travel anywhere on the African continent, land to drop off or pick up people, and return to Kamina without having to refuel.

In an era of instability in Africa, Kamina's location makes it a highly attractive site for the deployment of prepositioned military hardware and forward-based U.S. forces. Its use by NATO and/or U.S. tactical air force units would greatly enhance the ability to project power on the African continent and into the Persian Gulf.

5. U.S. Department of State, "Background Notes: Zaire," November 1985, DOS Publication 7793, p. 7.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

ZAIRE AND THE IMF

Zaire's economic fortunes under Mobutu fall generally into three periods. The first followed his consolidation of power in 1967; for the next seven years, Zaire's economy grew at a healthy average of 7 percent per annum. The second period, starting in 1974, saw the price of copper fall precipitously from its high of \$1.40 per pound to \$.53 per pound by spring 1975. The decline in price of Zaire's principal foreign currency earner, combined with Mobutu's disastrous economic policies, mounting and spreading corruption, and such external problems as the closure of the Benguela railway⁷ and the OPEC oil price increases, caused an economic disaster lasting into the 1980s.⁸

During this second period, Zaire was on and off four separate International Monetary Fund stabilization programs. So ailing was Zaire's economy that when the Mobutu government approached IMF officials to talk about a new stabilization program in 1982, the IMF insisted that Mobutu adhere to IMF guidelines before receiving new funds. This began the third economic period under Mobutu.

To fulfill the IMF program, Zaire in September 1983 devalued its currency 80 percent and extensively reformed its exchange rate system. As a result, convertibility of the currency was restored in February 1984. Meanwhile, nearly all restrictions on imports were lifted and most domestic prices were liberalized.⁹

Mobutu has taken other significant steps to meet IMF demands. He has tightened, for example, the expansion of domestic credit. As a result, credit's 84 percent growth rate in 1982 dropped to 21 percent last year.¹⁰ As important, the type of debt has shifted from public

7. The railway, which runs from the Angolan port of Benguela to Zaire's mineral-rich Shaba province, was closed by the Angolan war. Before that, it had served as the principal transportation route to take Zaire's mineral exports to the sea.

8. For a fuller discussion of Zaire's economic problems, see Young and Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-362; Louis M. Goreux, "Economic Adjustment Efforts of Zaire Require Support of External Creditors," in *IMF Survey*, March 3, 1986, pp. 72-75; and Thomas M. Callaghy, "The International Community and Zaire's Debt Crisis," in Nzongola-Ntalaja, ed., *The Crisis in Zaire: Myths and Realities* (Africa World Press, 1986), pp. 221-243.

9. From a confidential IMF/World Bank report, "Policy Framework Paper for a Macroeconomic and Structural Adjustment Program, January 1987-December 1989," p. 2.

10. Goreux, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

to private indebtedness. In 1982, the proportion of net domestic credit going to the government was 83.9 percent; by 1985 the government's share had fallen to 36.8 percent.¹¹ This means that since 1983 the Mobutu government has reduced its dependence on credit to finance its expenditures and has devoted the limited expansion of credit resources to its private sector.

At the same time, the composition of budget expenditures has shifted. In 1982, the single largest segment of the national budget paid for personnel, with goods and services a close second; debt service was the smallest item on the budget.¹² By 1985, debt service took up 56 percent of the expenditures, while personnel had dropped to 16 percent, and goods and services to 21.4 percent.

All of this led the IMF's African Department chief, Louis Goreux, to declare this March that "considerable fiscal adjustments have been made since 1982 and Zaire's economic policies are broadly satisfactory." At the same time, Goreux recognized that "the efforts by Zaire to meet its external obligations on schedule for more than two years have not yet, however, been rewarded by an increase in disbursements from foreign loans and grants."¹³

In fact, twice this year, the IMF itself refused to allow Zaire to draw its \$56 million in promised credits, though the IMF officials responsible for the program admitted that Zaire had stuck with the program. This triggered a heated confrontation in late August in Kinshasa, Zaire's capital, between Zairian Prime Minister Kengo wa Dondo and the IMF's Louis Goreux, capped by an angry walkout by Kengo.¹⁴

On October 29, 1986, Mobutu responded by declaring that beginning with the 1987 budget, external debt service would be limited to a maximum of 20 percent of the state budget and to 10 percent of Zaire's export earnings. Last year, in addition to debt service claiming its 56 percent of the state budget, it totaled roughly 25 percent of Zaire's export earnings.

11. Ibid.

12. Personnel took up 30.8 percent of government expenditures, while goods and services accounted for 29.2 percent. Ibid.

13. Ibid., p. 75.

14. See Sennen Andriamirado, "Is the Prime Minister an IMF Victim?" in Jeune Afrique, October 30, 1986, pp. 36-37.

In early November Mobutu called for discussions between Zaire, its Western allies,¹⁵ and its creditors. He made clear to the creditors that he was not simply calling for a new debt rescheduling; instead, he was asking for creative thinking. If Zaire's friends and creditors were unable or unwilling to come up with an improvement in Zaire's debt service situation by January 1987, then his new policies would take effect.

ZAIRE IN REGIONAL AFFAIRS

Long accustomed to playing a large role in regional affairs, Mobutu recently has begun paying considerable attention to Angola. Some Western press reports have suggested that U.S. assistance to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA democratic resistance forces in Angola has been sent via Zaire to avoid a South African connection. Mobutu denies these reports and maintains correct relations with Angola's Marxist-Leninist MPLA regime. Perhaps because of his links to the MPLA and Savimbi, Mobutu could act as an independent mediator between the two.

Mobutu also has played an increasing role in the affairs of the so-called Frontline States of Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe as they seek to reduce their economic dependence on South Africa. For the first time, Zaire has taken part in the discussions of these southern African nations. It is believed that the Frontline States hope that Mobutu can use his connections with the U.S. government to have it bail the Frontline States out of their economic troubles. It was after an October meeting between Mobutu and the heads of Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique that Mozambican strongman Samora Machel was killed in a plane crash.¹⁶

Zaire is active not only in southern Africa. In July 1983 Mobutu sent troops to Chad to support the government of President Hissein Habre against insurgents backed by Libya. In addition, he restored diplomatic relations with Israel in 1982. These actions incurred the wrath of Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi, leading to a Libyan-sponsored plot against Mobutu in September 1985.¹⁷

15. The U.S., Belgium, France, West Germany, and Italy.

16. One high Zairian government official reported that Machel had asked Mobutu to "tell [his] friend in Washington" that Machel "wanted to get rid of the communists," but needed help to do it.

17. From the State Department "White Paper on Libya," reprinted in The New York Times, January 9, 1986, p. A6.

Earlier this fall, when Libya tried to destabilize Togo through operatives in Burkina Faso and Ghana, Mobutu sent troops to support Togo's government. In both Chad and Togo, Mobutu was the only African leader to send forces to uphold the governments. The government of the Sudan recently asked Mobutu to try to mediate the dispute there, indicating that Zaire under Mobutu is viewed by other nations in the region as able to play a diplomatic role.

CRITICISMS OF AID TO ZAIRE

Critics of U.S. assistance to Zaire focus on two broad themes: human rights and corruption. The Zairian government, it is argued, has not lived up to Western human rights standards, and hence should not receive U.S. assistance. It also is maintained that money sent to Zaire would be wasted, given the corruption that runs rampant through the government and economic structure.

These arguments have some merit. Zaire under Mobutu does not have a spotless political and human rights record. He permits only one legal political party, the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR). Virtually all state power is vested in the office of the president. The security forces--the Zairian Armed Forces (FAZ) and the National Documentation Agency (CND)--arbitrarily have harassed and detained civilians and suspected opponents of the government.¹⁸

But Zaire's human rights situation is improving. Though increased rebel activity in eastern Zaire led to a deteriorating situation there, the Zairian government has taken steps in the past two years to improve the conditions of political dissidents. Former Prime Minister Nguza Karl-I-Bond, once sentenced to death by the government, returned from exile in 1985 and earlier this year was appointed Zaire's Ambassador to the United States. Further, to improve the judicial and penal systems, Mobutu took control of the Minister of Justice portfolio in early 1985 and named a commission to investigate prison and judicial performance. This October, Mobutu created a cabinet-level department, the Ministry of Citizens' Rights and Freedoms, to hear complaints of human rights violations. The ministry is headed by Nimy Mayadika Ngimbi, a close associate of Mobutu.

18. "Zaire: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices," report submitted to Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, and the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, by the Department of State, February 1986, pp. 370-380.

Corruption remains a serious problem. Mobutu is reputed to be one of the world's wealthiest men.¹⁹ As such, there is no doubt that significant amounts of the money that flowed into Zaire in the early 1970s (and perhaps later) went directly to Mobutu and to members of the ruling clique. In that sense Zaire may be no different than scores of other Third World nations, where corruption is a way of life.

Zaire should not be excused for its performance on either human rights or corruption. By violating human rights, Mobutu will be making it uncomfortable for U.S. officials to deal with him and seek favors for him, even though Zaire is clearly important for the U.S. And by tolerating (and perhaps participating in) corruption, Mobutu undermines those who argue that Zaire's economy can benefit from financial aid. Zaire's problems are in many respects similar to, and no worse than, problems found in other Third World nations, many of which receive even more U.S. assistance, without giving as much in return in the form of support for U.S. foreign policy goals.

U.S. POLICY TOWARD ZAIRE

U.S. policy aims in Zaire are simple: maintain in power a pro-Western government which responds to the economic, political, and social needs of its people. Toward those ends, U.S. policy has been to encourage economic programs that will develop Zaire's economic infrastructure, while keeping Zaire's standing in the Western financial community. On the political and social fronts, U.S. policy has been to encourage Mobutu to improve his government's respect for human rights and to create a climate of reconciliation with political dissidents. Militarily, the U.S. has supported Zaire against foreign incursions from Angola in 1977 and 1978, and has supported reform of Zaire's security forces.

Specifically, U.S. policy towards Zaire should:

o Maintain or Increase Levels of Military Assistance: Over the past three years, U.S. military assistance to Zaire has decreased steadily from \$10 million in 1983 to \$8 million in 1986, and is projected to drop further in the next two years. At the same time, the external threat to Zaire has increased, as Cuban forces in Angola--which sponsored two invasions of Zaire in the late 1970s--have grown from 27,000 to 35,000. Since Zaire spends only \$30 million per

19. See Glenn Frankel, "Zaire's Mobutu: Self-Made Ruler," The Washington Post, May 23, 1985, p. A29; also, David Fouquet, "Corruption Charges Swirl Around Zaire's President Mobutu," The Christian Science Monitor, October 8, 1982, p. 13.

year on national defense, U.S. aid comprises a sizeable chunk of the defense budget. A relatively small increase in the U.S. commitment would result in a proportionally large increase in Zaire's defense capability; conversely, a relative small decrease in the U.S. commitment would result in a proportionally large decrease in Zaire's defense capability.

o Assist Zaire in Dealings with the IMF: There is some question as to whether the policies encouraged by the IMF have actually benefited Zaire; for instance, Zaire's foreign debt has not been reduced substantially, and its economic growth rates have not matched population growth rates. Nevertheless, Zaire has adhered to the IMF program, and deserves its drawings. The IMF should keep its part of the bargain. The Reagan Administration should pressure the IMF officials responsible for the administration of Zaire's programs to be more responsive to Zaire's concerns. The U.S. director at the IMF should vote in favor of releasing Zaire's promised credits, and should use his influence with other directors to see that they do likewise. After more than three tough years without going off the program, Zaire deserves to be rewarded with the credits already promised it.

o Reevaluate U.S. Aid Policies to Zaire: Reagan should take this opportunity to order a full-scale review of U.S. aid policies toward Zaire. What is needed is a U.S. policy which encourages Zaire to adopt a strategy of economic growth. Only by liberalizing the economy and removing further obstacles to individual and foreign investment and entrepreneurship can Zaire create new jobs and wealth and raise living standards. In contrast to the IMF's typical austerity-centered policies, the IMF program in Zaire recognizes the importance of a growth strategy. In the short term, therefore, Washington should encourage Zaire's continued adherence to the IMF programs. The U.S. also should take part in the roundtable discussions requested by Mobutu on how to create new economic policies and programs that better address Zaire's development needs. Further, U.S. officials should seek to broaden those discussions as much as possible, so that representatives of the London Club, Paris Club, IMF, and World Bank all participate, along with Zaire's other Western allies.²⁰ U.S. participants in these discussions should impress upon their counterparts, both Western and Zairian, the need to adopt a coordinated strategy for economic growth in Zaire.

o Request Use of the Kamina Air Base: Reagan should raise the question of use of the Kamina air base with Mobutu. It is an excellent base for the forward deployment of U.S. military materiel and forces. Reagan should ask Mobutu for the right to use the base for U.S. Air Force needs and possibly for the deployment of units of the Rapid

20. The London Club refers to a forum for rescheduling commercial bank debt; the Paris Club refers to a forum for rescheduling public and publicly guaranteed debt.

Deployment Forces. The U.S. should be willing pay for completing construction on the base, estimated at \$10 million to \$40 million.

o Improve U.S.-Zaire Working Relationship: During the early days of the Mobutu government, U.S.-Zairian cooperation was such that CIA officials gave Mobutu a daily briefing on the latest world developments. This was ended long ago. Its resumption would cost the U.S. nothing, and would go a long way toward reestablishing the perception of equilibrium in the relationship.

o Recognize Zaire's Achievements: Reagan could do much to strengthen U.S.-Zairian relations with a public statement following his meeting with Mobutu recognizing Mobutu's achievements in Zaire and his responsiveness to U.S. regional concerns. As with most leaders, Mobutu is proud of his accomplishments, and wants to be recognized for them. This would cost the U.S. nothing, and would make Mobutu feel welcome in a country which he has long viewed as one of his best friends.

o Encourage Democratic Pluralism: In the short run, the U.S. should seek to strengthen Zaire as a friend of the West. At the same time, the U.S. relationship with Zaire and Mobutu will inevitably be strained, and domestic opposition could grow, if Zaire does not continue to address the issues of corruption and human rights violations. While the U.S. should avoid excessive immediate pressures that could destabilize Zaire, it should develop a long-term coordinated policy to prevent the misuse of U.S. funds, and assist Zaire in the consolidation of the rule of law and in improvement of its human rights record. Along with urging sound economic development policies utilizing the private sector, other steps can be taken, such as programs by the National Endowment for Democracy to encourage the development of a democratic infrastructure in Zaire.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, Zaire has suffered a painful economic stabilization program under International Monetary Fund direction. Zaire has tried to adhere to IMF guidelines, slashing government spending to cover its budget deficit, devoting a very large proportion of its budget to pay off its foreign debt, and taking other measures necessary to get its economy back on a sound basis.

At the same time, it has been one of the United States' best allies in Africa. It was the only African country to send troops to Chad and Togo to support those governments against Libyan-backed insurgents. Zaire reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel in 1982, and in doing so lost economic aid from the Arab world that has

yet to be made up. It has been a voice for moderation in the Organization of African Unity and the leftist Non-Aligned Movement. Zaire has been very responsive to U.S. geostrategic concerns in southern Africa, and could be the key to brokering a negotiated settlement in Angola.

U.S. policy needs to be more responsive to Zaire's concerns. Mobutu Sese Seko's visit to Washington next week offers Ronald Reagan an opportunity to let Mobutu know how much the U.S. appreciates Zaire's role in African affairs and its responsiveness to U.S. concerns.

William W. Pascoe, III
Policy Analyst