

GABON

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The Gabonese Republic borders the Atlantic Ocean, with a coastline 885 km in length, and has common borders with Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Congo (Brazzaville). It covers an area of approximately 268,000 km² and supports a population of 1.2 million. A narrow coastal strip rises to a series of plateaux, with three-quarters of the country being covered by tropical rain forest. Deep river-valleys effectively divide the country into a number of smaller isolated areas.

The country has an equatorial tropical climate with high temperatures and considerable amounts of rainfall. The dry seasons are from May to September and December to February. The largest cities are Libreville (the capital city), Port-Gentil and Franceville; major ports are Port-Gentil, Owendo, Manyamba and Nyanga. French is the official language and indigenous languages of the Bantu tribes are Fang, Myene, Bateke, Bapounou/Eschira and Bandjabi. Major religions are Animist (39%), Christian (60%) and Muslim (1%).

Gabon is a republic with a universal franchise, a multi-party presidential regime, and a bicameral legislature consisting of a Senate and National Assembly. Ruled by just two autocratic presidents since independence from France in 1960, Gabon introduced a multiparty system and a new constitution in the early 1990s that allowed for a more transparent electoral process and for reforms of governmental institutions. The ruling party has won all the elections comfortably, all with accusations of fraud. The sixty-four-year old President Omar Bongo, who took office in 1967, is Africa's second longest serving leader after Togo's Gnassingbe Eyadema. The next legislative elections are scheduled for December 2001.

A small population, abundant natural resources, and foreign private investment have helped make Gabon one of the more prosperous black African countries. Gabon enjoys a *per capita* income four times that of most nations of sub-Saharan Africa. This has supported a sharp decline in extreme poverty; yet because of high income inequality a large proportion of the population remains poor. Gabon depended on timber and manganese until oil was discovered offshore in the early 1970s. The oil sector now accounts for some 80% of all exports and almost 70% of GDP. Gabon continues to face fluctuating prices for its oil, timber, manganese, and uranium exports. The rebound of oil prices in 1999 helped growth, but drops in production hampered Gabon from fully realising potential gains. With support from higher oil prices, growth is predicted to move up. The government is striving to move away from oil dependence. Construction and services have picked up once again, and the timber industry looks to renew itself. Oil should provide the basis for a steady 2001.

Gabon's main export commodities include crude oil, timber, manganese, uranium, palm oil, coffee and cocoa. Downstream industry related to oil is also firmly established, with an oil refinery at Port Gentil and a number of international oil companies contributing to the distribution and marketing of petroleum products. Legislation relating to foreign investment is generally favourable.

Gabon is the world's second largest manganese dioxide producer, and also has the potential to produce up to 15% of global niobium from a developing mine near Mabounie. Gabon also produces minor amounts of gold, uranium and diamonds.

All useful mineral substances occurring under the surface are the property of the State. A

new Mining Code will be enforced, pending adoption by the competent authorities. Exclusive rights are granted by the Ministry of Mines, Energy and Petroleum. There are four types of mining permit:

- i) Prospecting, for regional reconnaissance, valid for two years.
- ii) Exploration, for mining exploration and evaluation. A licence with concession is valid for three years and is renewable for two further periods of three years. Without a concession, the licence is valid for two years, renewable for one period of two years.
- iii) Mining (with concession) for mineral extraction, renewable as many times as required.
- iv) Mining (without a concession) for extraction of construction and related minerals.

Manganese is mined by open-pit methods from bedded manganese oxide deposits in the early Proterozoic Francevillian Basin of the Moanda region in the southeastern part of the country. Eramet Manganese, the world's leading producer of manganese alloys, operates several operations in the Moanda region, through its subsidiary, Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooue SA (Comilog). Production capacity is 2.5 Mt/y with reserves for more than a century. Recent expansion on a plant will be able to process 600,000 t/y of manganese agglomerate. The high-grade ore is subsequently converted to ferroalloys and manganese-based chemicals at plants in Europe, the US and China.

Uranium production at the Mounana deposit in Haut Ogooue Province ceased at the end of June 1999 after nearly 40 years of production. Only 294 t uranium was produced in 1999, representing a 60% slump in production. The Compagnie des Mines d'Uranium de Franceville (Comuf), which is a 68% subsidiary of Cogema, France, announced that mining at the deposit, hosted by fractured Francevillian metasediments 80 km northwest of the town of Franceville, has

ceased because reserves are all but depleted. Comilog, which exploits manganese nearby, will probably take over the Comuf uranium installations. However, the resources at Mikouloungou are estimated at 1.1 Mt, and should see mining extended for a further year. Thereafter, production is expected to cease altogether.

Gold production by artisanal miners averages around 1 t/y. Total production from Gabon has been estimated at 55 - 60 t, of which 99% is of alluvial and eluvial origin. Production of gold from vein deposits has not exceeded 400 kg. Most production is centred around the Etéké region. There is growing interest in the gold potential from the private sector. Australian junior Lafayette Mining has a 100% interest in two groups of gold exploration properties - consisting of a southern group of three permits (the Etéké group) covering an area of 1,656 km² and a northern permit (Ovan) of 2,736 km². The Etéké group contains three high-grade gold resources within Birimian-age greenstone rocks of central Gabon. Searchgold Resources is evaluating the Magnima - Bakoudou project located in southeast Gabon. The project has outlined a resource containing an estimated 805,000 oz gold, 3.9 Mt at an average grade of 6.4 g/t Au, in an area of 350 m x 700 m from surface to 110 m deep. The Bakoudou deposit remains open to the north, east, south and at depth. The project is 90%-owned through Searchgold's subsidiary, Golden Gram Gabon SARL. Gabonese interests, represented by Sogecor have the remaining 10% of the project. Located within Archaean volcanic rocks of the du Chaillu Massif, 55 km south-west of Franceville, the Bakoudou deposit comprises a zone of quartz veins and altered wallrock weathered down to an average depth of 50 m.

Iron-ore deposits are found in the Archaean North Gabon Massif in the northeast of Gabon at Belinga where reserves are estimated at 850 Mt. Although there are significant reserves, exploitation depends on

construction of a railway link from Booue to Belinga.

The Mabounie niobium deposit, 200 km southeast of Libreville, has been the focus of much interest in the past 2-3 years. The high-grade pyrochlore-bearing carbonatite complex was originally discovered in 1986 by the Gabonese directorate of mines by means of an aerial geophysical survey and explored by BRGM on behalf of the Government of Gabon. It was recognised as a major carbonatite complex with several similarities to the Araxa niobium deposit in Brazil, the world's largest niobium mine. Reunion Mining (now owned by Anglo American) carried out most of the initial work in 1998-99, resulting in identifying a resource of 14 Mt grading at an average 1.7% Nb₂O₅. Subsequent studies have revised this resource now at 21.6 Mt grading 1.6% Nb₂O₅ or 350 000 t of Nb. The full feasibility study into the development of the high-grade niobium zone and investigating the production of pyrochlore concentrate is scheduled to be completed during 2001. Pyrochlore concentrate will be converted to ferro-niobium, to produce 6,000

t/y of contained niobium, which would represent a 15% share of the world market. Cluff Mining has become the largest shareholder and operator of the project, owning 49% of Niobium Resources BV, which has the title to the Mabounie deposit.

Diamonds have been produced in Gabon, with production peaking at 50,000 ct in the 1940s. Very little modern exploration has taken place over the 100,000 km² where diamonds are known to occur. Most of this production came from Makongonio, in the south near the border with Congo. There are some isolated occurrences near the north of the country in the Mitzi region (northern Gabon) and in the Massif central of Chaillu, Region Abeilles. The Makongonio site is the object of extensive investigation by Cogemat, in particular using geochemical methods. A small artisanal production exists, but its extent is not known. Southern Era is actively exploring for diamond deposits in Gabon. Work has continued on the company's three concessions to identify and sample the source area for the active alluvial diamond mining area.