

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.

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. President Omar Bongo, who took office in 1967 and is Africa's second longest serving leader, has effected an 'open government' after the December 2001 legislative elections were once again won by the Gabon Democratic Party. This has included members of opposition parties in cabinet posts and more power-sharing.

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, but income inequality persists across the general population. Export earnings were largely based on timber, manganese and uranium until oil production took off in the early 1970s. The oil sector now accounts for some 80% of all exports and almost 70% of GDP. Since its hey-day in the eighties, however, production has gradually fallen, perhaps without Gabon fully realising the potential. 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.

Gabon's main export commodities include crude oil, timber, manganese, 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. Despite declining production from the Moanda mine, Gabon is still the world's third 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 artisanal gold and diamonds.

All useful mineral substances occurring under the surface are the property of the State. A new Mining Code was enacted in July 2000, under which exclusive rights are granted by the Ministry of Mines, Energy and Petroleum. There are four types of mining permit:

- Prospecting, for regional reconnaissance, valid for two years.
- 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.

- Mining (with concession) for mineral extraction, renewable as many times as required.
- Mining (without a concession) for extraction of construction materials and related minerals.

Manganese is open cast from bedded oxide deposits in the early Proterozoic Francevillian Basin of the Moanda region in the southeastern part of the country. Eramet Manganese operates several operations in the Moanda region, through its subsidiary, Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooué SA (Comilog). Production capacity is 2.5 Mt/y with reserves for more than a century, but only realised 1.8 Mt in 2000. Recent expansion on a plant will be able to process 0.6 Mt/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.

Ore-body exhaustion and tumbling prices led to the end of uranium production in 1999 after nearly 40 years continuous operation at the famous Francevillian Basin deposits in Haut Ogooué Province.

Gold production by artisanal miners averages around 1 t/y. Total production from Gabon has been estimated at 55 - 60 t, of which 99% are of alluvial and eluvial origin. Production of gold from vein deposits has not exceeded 400 kg. Most production is centred around the Etéké region. In the private sector, Australian junior Lafayette Mining maintains 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 are re-evaluating the Magnima - Bakoudou project located in southeast Gabon. The project has outlined a resource containing an estimated 802,500 oz gold, 3.94 Mt at 6.4 g/t Au, in an area of 350 m x 700 m from surface to 110 m deep. The project is 90% owned through Searchgold's subsidiary, Golden Gram Gabon SARL, with the remaining 10% represented by a Gabonese consortium, Sogecor. Located within Archean 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. SearchGold will order a complete review and re-evaluation of all existing data and this exercise could well bring the project to the stage of the pre-feasibility on the open pit portion of the deposit.

Iron ore deposits are found on the North Congo Craton at Belinga (northeast Gabon) have a reserve estimate of 850 Mt. However, exploitation depends on construction of a railway link from Booué to Belinga.

The Mabounie niobium deposit, 200 km southeast of Libreville, has been the focus of much interest in the past few 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. The Mabounie resource has been estimated from bulk sampling at 21.6 Mt grading 1.6% Nb₂O₅ or 0.35 Mt of Nb, but awaits full feasibility studies. Cluff Mining became the largest shareholder and operator of the project in 2000, with a total of 35% indirect ownership, but is now looking to divest of its share and operator status to concentrate on platinum projects.

The diamond exploration scene right across the North Congo Craton has seen a recent

upturn in activity, including in Gabon. Diamonds have been produced in Gabon, with production peaking at 50,000 ct/y in the 1940's. Most of this production came from Makongonio, in the south near the border with Congo. There are also well known metamorphosed kimberlites in the north of the country in the Mitzi region (trending into Equatorial Guinea), where a small amount of diamond is produced by local artisans. De Beers have recently begun actively exploring in a large permit area centred on the Mitzi

region, and are currently undertaking regional review and target generation. Southern Era has also been actively exploring for diamond deposits in Gabon over the last five years. Work has continued on the company's three concessions in the north and north-east of Gabon to identify and sample the source area for the alluvial diamond mining area. Southern Era have announced the discovery of two diamondiferous kimberlite pipes, confirmed in the last year.