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Tensions between President Ali Bongo Ondimba (2009 – present) and the opposition increase following the 20 December anti-government protest in Libreville. The opposition demands Bongo's resignation. International actors call for political dialogue to avoid further unrest in the lead up to the 2016 elections. The mines ministry is focused on preparations for the 2015 African Mining Indaba in Cape Town (South Africa) on 9-12 February. The six-week oil sector strike comes to an end. Road and fibre-optic cable projects improve economic integration with Republic of Congo (ROC).

Tensions escalate between government and opposition

Tensions between President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** (2009 – present) and the opposition have sharpened and international partners have called for mediation. On 20 December, opposition groups went ahead with a large anti-government protest in the **Rio** neighbourhood in **Libreville** despite the government having banned the protest at the last minute. A heavy-handed security response led to clashes with opposition activists resulting in at least one death, according to the government. The opposition claims the police killed six protesters.¹ The protest was the most significant since the post-election violence in 2009. Protesters called for Bongo's resignation.

"This was a historical protest but it wasn't organised well enough to achieve its aim and bring down the Bongo regime."²

Tensions continued into the new year. On 13 January a group of around 300 youths ransacked the residence of **Jean Ping**, the main opposition figure and former **African Union** commission president.³ Ping labeled the attack an "assassination attempt".⁴ According to an *AFP* report, police refused to stop the attack on Ping's residence and Ping claims the youths told him they "were paid CFA5,000 (\$9) each" to participate in the attack.⁵ However, the following day authorities charged Ping with illegal imprisonment and torture of some of the youths who had led the attack.⁶ State prosecutors told the press that the youths launched the attack after Ping refused to pay them to participate in the 20 December protest as he had promised.⁷ They said 15 youths suffered "violent and inhumane treatment" by Ping. The charge carries up to 10 years imprisonment. A conviction would prohibit Ping's expected involvement in the 2016 presidential election.

Various international actors have demanded that the government and opposition agree to political dialogue to avoid further unrest in the lead up to the 2016 elections. On 22 December **Abdoulaye Bathily**, the special representative of the **United Nations (UN)** secretary general in **Central Africa** and head of the **United Nations Office for Central Africa (UNOCA)**, met with government officials and opposition representatives to encourage the government and opposition to establish political dialogue.⁸ Following the attack on Ping's residence, on 13 January the **United States (US)** ambassador

¹ AFP, 13 Jan 2015.

² Source, journalist, Gabon

³ Infos Plus Gabon, 13 Jan 2015.

⁴ RFI, 16 Jan 2015.

⁵ AFP, 13 Jan 2015.

⁶ Gabon Actu, 15 Jan 2015.

⁷ RFI, 16 Jan 2015.

⁸ L'Union, 23 Dec 2014.

to Gabon **Cynthia Akuetteh**, appointed in 2014, urged “*all sides [to] commit themselves to open and inclusive dialogue*”.⁹ However, civil society and opposition groups accused her of favouring the government after she warned that the US government would “*strongly condemn any attempts to change government through extra-constitutional means*”. She added, “*Gabon has long been a model of stability in a fragile region.*”

*“Her statements brought more trouble because they are viewed as supporting the government. The opposition accuses the ambassador of offering a chance to Bongo to run for the presidency again in 2016. The opposition demands his departure.”*¹⁰

The situation has improved marginally since 17 January when a court acquitted 101 opposition supporters arrested during the 20 December protests and accused of “*disturbing public order*”.¹¹ However, the political situation remains fragile. The opposition received a boost in October following **French** investigative journalist **Pierre Péan**’s claims that Bongo is an adopted child and is therefore ineligible for the presidency under the constitution.¹² The government has dismissed the claims but the opposition continues to demand that Bongo take a DNA test or resign. Increasing social and economic hardships have also increased support for the opposition, which focuses on the Bongo family’s extensive wealth. In December and January the local press published several stories about Bongo’s fleet of luxurious cars.¹³

The mines ministry prepares for the Indaba conference

The mines ministry is focused on preparations for the 2015 **African Mining Indaba in Cape Town (South Africa)** on 9-12 February. **Christophe Akagha Mba** – appointed mines minister in the October 2014 government reshuffle – will lead the government delegation at the annual conference. The mines ministry plans to present the draft mining code, which will replace the 2000 code. The law was sent to parliament in May 2014¹⁴ but has not yet been passed into law. In July 2014, state-owned **Société Equatoriale des Mines (SEM)** said the code would be passed into law by the end of 2014.¹⁵ The law will position SEM, formed in 2011, as the sector champion through management of the state’s interest in projects. SEM CEO **Fabrice Nze-Bekale** says the new mining code would include an “*investor-friendly*” tax regime, simplified procedures for the granting of exploration licences, the establishment of a mining cadastre, and new provisions for environmental protection and corporate responsibility.¹⁶

Nze-Bekale also claimed in July that the SEM would present the results of testing to certify the **Belinga** iron ore deposit at the 2015 Indaba.¹⁷ In February 2014 SEM contracted engineering consultancy **SRK Consulting** to carry out the testing. Under the draft mining code SEM will assume a free and automatic minimum 10% stake in the Belinga project. However, Nze-Bekale has claimed that SEM will increase its stake in the project to 35%.¹⁸ In June Nze-Bekale said the government would launch a formal tender process in 2016 after announcing the results of the study. The government aims to start production in 2024 or 2025.¹⁹

The mines ministry is also focused on promoting its gold reserves at the Indaba.²⁰ **Morocco’s Managem** and **United Kingdom-listed GoldStone Resources** are developing gold exploration projects in Gabon.

⁹ Statement on 13 Jan 2015.

¹⁰ Source, journalist, Gabon

¹¹ RFI, 17 Jan 2015.

¹² See ARC Gabon November 2014 Briefing

¹³ France 24, 23 Dec 2014; and several local publications

¹⁴ Reuters, 28 May 2014.

¹⁵ Mining Weekly, 11 Jul 2014

¹⁶ Mining Weekly, 11 Jul 2014

¹⁷ Mining Weekly, 11 Jul 2014

¹⁸ Reuters, 28 May 2014.

¹⁹ See ARC Gabon June 2014 Briefing

²⁰ Source, mines ministry official, Gabon

The 2015 budget is focused on increasing mining production as part of Bongo's **Gabon Emergent** economic diversification programme. Mining accounted for 6% of GDP in 2013,²¹ but SEM hopes to increase this to 30% by 2030.²²

Six-week oil sector strike comes to an end

The new year began with the continuation of the strike in the oil sector. Umbrella oil workers union **Organisation Nationale des Employés du Pétrole (ONEP)** declared an industry-wide strike on 1 December.²³ However, work resumed across the sector on 12 January following negotiations between prime minister **Daniel Ona Ondo** and representatives of ONEP from early January.²⁴ Many issues including a mandatory healthcare contribution and the reappointment of managers of key industry players remain unresolved. **Pierre Reteno Ndiaye**, managing director of the **Société Gabonaise de Raffinage (Sogara)**, says Gabon's sole refinery will miss its production targets due to the strike.²⁵

The disruptions in the oil sector as a result of the strike will compound the impact of the fall in international oil prices. Despite reduced oil revenue the government has not announced plans to review the 2015 budget.

*"With the decline in oil prices, the government should review its budget downwards. This will undermine ongoing projects and the new programmes launched by Bongo last month, in particular the **GRAINE** agriculture project to improve food security through the development of large agricultural areas."*²⁶

Economic integration with Republic of Congo moves ahead

Good diplomatic relations between Gabon and **Republic of Congo (ROC)** have led to a number of developments to improve regional integration. On 15 December 2014 President **Denis Sassou Nguesso** (1979 – 1992, 1997 – present) inaugurated the 90km road linking the towns of **Okoyo** and **Lékéty** on the border of Gabon. Construction of the road started in 2011, and received CFA47 billion (\$83m) funding from the **Chinese** government.²⁷ Sassou Nguesso said the road was a "*great symbol of integration*".²⁸ The road forms part of an **African Development Bank (AfDB)**-funded project to link the **Ndéndé-Doussala** road in Gabon to **Dolisie** in ROC, covering 282km. The AfDB released CFA 53 billion (\$108m) financing in July 2014 for the Gabon side. The project partners held a consultative meeting in Libreville in December for the project.²⁹ The project forms part of the Libreville (Gabon) - **Brazzaville** (ROC) corridor to facilitate economic opportunities and free movement.

On 21 December Gabonese and Congolese officials inaugurated the construction of a project to deploy a fibre-optic cable between the two countries.³⁰ The \$26m project will last around 16 months. The ROC government awarded a contract to China's **Huawei Technologies**. Gabon has contracted **China Communications Services** to carry out the project which forms part of the **World Bank**-funded **Central African Backbone** fibre-optic interconnection project.

²¹ Jeune Afrique, 2 Oct 2014.

²² Reuters, 28 May 2014.

²³ See ARC Gabon December 2014 Briefing

²⁴ Source, journalist, Gabon

²⁵ Source, journalist, Gabon

²⁶ Source, journalist, Gabon

²⁷ sassou.net

²⁸ sassou.net

²⁹ RFI, 15 Dec 2015.

³⁰ BizTech Africa, 26 Dec 2014.

Implications

The opposition has gained momentum in its aim to build a street protest movement to force Bongo out of office. The 20 December project was a landmark event, with loose opposition and civil society groupings experiencing an improved level of cohesiveness, following a trend over recent months. However, recent protests are not yet at the level of organisation and size of recent protest movements in the region that have forced heads of state from power, such as in **Burkina Faso** in October 2014. The extensive security forces response to protests militates against this. In addition, the opposition – at least at this point – is not known to have fostered close links with the military. That said, the opposition will probably increase its support base in the coming months as falling oil revenues stall Bongo's economic programme and economic hardships increase. Falling oil prices and the disruption caused by the six-week oil strike may force Bongo to review the 2015 budget and further reduce government spending.

The mines ministry will promote an investor friendly regulatory framework at the 2015 Mining Indaba. The government is under growing pressure to lessen the economy's dependency on the oil sector, and mining is viewed as a key tenet of the diversification drive.

Leading institutional donors have targeted economic diversification projects in the Central Africa region. The government will receive further funding in the coming years for such projects, which will reduce business costs and improve the overall business climate in Gabon.