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President Ali Ondimba Bongo (2010-present) appoints Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda as Gabon's first female prime minister. Ossouka Raponda names a 33-member cabinet upon Bongo's recommendation. Gabon has eased several Covid-19 related restrictions including the lockdown of Greater Libreville as the country attempts to restart socio-economic activities. United States-based credit rating agencies Fitch Ratings and Moody's provide bleak outlooks on Gabon's economy, citing poor governance and the on-going oil price crisis. The Direction Générale de l'Economie et Politique Fiscale (director general of economic and tax policy) reports manganese production reached 2.2 million tonnes during the first quarter (Q1) of activities, a 57.2% increase compared to the same period in 2019, despite a drop in global demand, enabling Gabon to be on track to reach its 2020 output target of 5m tonnes.

Bongo appoints Gabon's first female prime minister

President **Ali Ondimba Bongo** (2010-present) appointed **Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda** as prime minister on 16 July.¹ Ossouka Raponda is **Gabon's** first female prime minister since Gabon obtained independence in August 1960 and is the sixth prime minister during President Bongo's tenure as head of state.²

Ossouka Raponda was defence minister before her appointment, serving in the position from January 2019 in the wake of an army mutiny (see *ARC Briefing Gabon February 2019*).³ From 2012 to 2014, she was budget and public accounts minister, and mayor of the capital, **Libreville**, from 2014 to 2019, the first woman to hold the position since 1956. Following her departure as mayor, she reportedly left a 27 billion FCFA (\$47.4m) surplus in the municipal coffers.⁴

Ossouka Raponda has training and professional experience in economics and finance. Presidential spokesperson **Jessye Ella Ekogha** said this made her a better fit to coordinate Gabon's current economic recession than outgoing prime minister **Julien Nkoghe Bekale**, who has a legal background.⁵ Ossouka Raponda said her main objective will be to improve the livelihoods of Gabonese during the multi-faceted health, economic and social crisis that the **Covid-19** pandemic has created.⁶

On President Bongo's recommendation, Ossouka Raponda named a 33-member cabinet on 17 July.⁷ Bongo maintained all four of his ministers of state including interior minister **Lambert Noel Matha**, but moved **Alain-Claude Bilie-By-Nzie** from foreign affairs to the water and energy department. Bilie-By-Nzie was replaced by **Pacome Moubélet-Boubeya**, who served as a cabinet minister from 2014 to 2018.⁸ **Michael Moussa Adama** replaces Ossouka Raponda as defence minister. Adama was

¹ Gabon Review, 16 Jul 2020

² Gabon Review, 16 Jul 2020

³ Direct Infos Gabon, 16 Jul 2020

⁴ Direct Infos Gabon, 16 Jul 2020

⁵ Gabon Media Time, 18 Jul 2020

⁶ Gabon Media Time, 18 Jul 2020

⁷ Gabon Review, 17 Jul 2020

⁸ Gabon Media Time, 17 Jul 2020

Gabon's ambassador to the **United States** from 2009 until his appointment to cabinet.⁹ **Guy Patrick Obiang Ndong** replaces **Max Liboukou** as health minister. Obiang Ndong had served as vice president and spokesperson of the **Comité de Pilotage du Plan de Veille et de la Riposte Contre l'Épidémie à Coronavirus au Gabon (Copil)** (Covid-19 steering and monitoring committee) since the start of the pandemic.¹⁰ Petroleum, gas and mines minister **Vincent de Paul Massassa** maintained his position, as did economy and budget ministers **Jean-Marie Ogandaga** and **Sosthène Ossoungou**.¹¹ However, the reconfiguration of the portfolios of these departments, sees Ogandaga heading the new economy and recovery ministry while Ossoungou is in charge of the budget and public accounts ministry, with responsibilities of the former economy and finance ministry.¹²

Ossouka Raponda has close relationships with President Bongo's mother, **Patience Dabany**, and his stepmother, **Marie Madeliene Mborantsuo**, the current president of the **Cour Constitutionnelle** (constitutional court).¹³

Government lifts lockdown of Greater Libreville

The government has lifted several Covid-19 related restrictions, including the confinement of **Greater Libreville** (consisting of Libreville and the communes of **Akanda, Ntoum, Owendo** and **Pointe Denis**), the reauthorisation of international flights, the reopening of restaurants and hotels, as well as the resumption of classes at schools and higher education institutions.¹⁴ The now former prime minister Nkoghe Bekale announced on 30 June the resumption of a host of socio-economic activities.

*"Government is aware that measures taken to reduce the pandemic and which have lasted for more than four months, have disastrous consequences on all sectors of the economy."*¹⁵

The easing of restrictions includes:

- End of confinement of Greater Libreville and reduction of curfew hours from 8pm to 5am;
- Re-establishment of normal working hours from 7:30am to 3:30pm;
- Reopening of air borders, while land and maritime borders remain closed;
- Reopening of restaurants and hotels; and
- Schools to resume from 20 July to 14 August for exam writing classes, and higher education on 13 July.¹⁶

Nkoghe Bekale said the government had implemented several measures to support the population during the pandemic, notably the Covid-19 economic and social response plan and the drafting of the supplementary finance law. However, he acknowledged that these need to be complemented by the revival of economic activities.¹⁷ Nkoghe Bekale said the government was evaluating whether further economic activities should be authorised, and that it would reintroduce restrictions in the event of a significant rise in cases.¹⁸

Transport minister **Aime Balondzi** said airline companies would be permitted to undertake two flights per week.¹⁹ The tourism and trade ministry has established a nine-point health protocol for operators in the hotel and restaurant sectors to follow.²⁰ Now former foreign affairs minister Alain-Claude Bilie-By-Nzie announced on 1 July that citizens from the 27 **European Union (EU)** countries

⁹ Jeune Afrique, 17 Jul 2020

¹⁰ Gabon Review, 17 Jul 2020

¹¹ Gabon Review, 17 Jul 2020

¹² Gabon Review, 17 Jul 2020

¹³ ARC Gabon Source

¹⁴ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

¹⁵ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

¹⁶ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

¹⁷ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

¹⁸ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

¹⁹ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

²⁰ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

would not be granted visas upon the resumption of international flights to Gabon as the EU did not include Gabon in the list of countries whose citizens are authorised to travel to the **Schengen Zone**.²¹

Gabon has adopted a gradual approach since April towards phasing out Covid-19 restrictions. Greater Libreville was downgraded to partial confinement in April, while the national state of emergency ended on 11 May.²² Interior minister Lambert Matha on 1 June authorised the recommencement of a wide range of socio-economic activities.

Since Gabon registered its first Covid-19 case on 12 March, the government has taken several health and socio-economic measures to deal with the pandemic. These include the establishment of Covid-19 treatments centres at the **Centre Hospitalier Universitaire de Libreville (CHUL)** (university teaching hospital Libreville), **Hopital d'Instruction des Armées d'Akanda** (Libreville)(**Akanda** military hospital) and the **Centre International des Recherches Medicales de Franceville (CIRMF)** (Franceville international medical research centre). The **Laboratoire Professeur Daniel Gahouma**, a medical analysis lab with a daily testing capacity of 10,000 individuals, was set up at the **Libreville Palais des Sports**. A national mass screening programme, incorporating 60 health centres nationally, including 15 private facilities and eight mobile screening units, was also created (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April-June 2020*).²³ President Bongo contributed 2.1 billion (\$3.5m) towards the **Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Maladie et de Garantie (CNAMG)**(national health insurance and social security fund) to cover access to free healthcare from 27 April to 27 September for economically vulnerable groups (see *ARC Briefing Gabon May 2020*).²⁴

On the economic front, Bongo has created a 250 billion FCFA (\$414.3m) Covid-19 support plan, which forms part of a 407 billion FCFA (\$681m) economic and social response plan outlined by the economy and finance ministry. The plan includes 225 billion FCFA (\$376m) in direct cash transfers and 83 billion FCFA (\$138.9m) in tax rebates for businesses affected by the ongoing crisis (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April 2020*).²⁵ The government also committed to pay rents and utility bills for economically vulnerable groups during this period.

Gabon has secured financial support for its Covid-19 response efforts from bilateral and multilateral partners including the **European Union (EU)**, **France**, the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** and the **World Bank** (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April-June 2020*). On 30 June, the **African Development Bank (AfDB)** added to this pool, providing a 66 billion FCFA (\$100.5m) loan to the Gabonese government to bolster its efforts to fight the pandemic.²⁶ At the time of writing Gabon had registered 6,433 positive cases with 4,034 recoveries, indicating a recovery rate of 62% and 46 deaths.²⁷

Moody's, Fitch provide bleak analysis of current economic state

The now former economy and finance minister, Jean-Marie Ogandaga, said on 6 July that Gabon needs to increase tax collection revenue by raising the E-tax and value added tax in relation to the forestry tax.²⁸ The economic downturn has resulted in a 597.3 billion FCFA (\$1.07 billion) loss in government revenue for Gabon. Ogandaga said the economic recession requires the optimal use of available resources and greater cost control.²⁹

Ogandaga highlighted that the amended finance law, which saw a 283.6 billion FCFA (\$484.4m) reduction in the national budget, would enable the government to honour its financial obligations with regard to social expenditure.³⁰ However, international stakeholders have expressed concern

²¹ Gabon Review, 30 Jun 2020

²² Direct Infos Gabon, 11 May 2020

²³ Gabon Media Time, 19 May 2020

²⁴ Gabon, 17 Apr 2020

²⁵ Direct Infos Gabon, 11 Apr 2020

²⁶ Direct Infos Gabon, 3 Jul 2020

²⁷ Gabon Review, 21 Jul 2020

²⁸ Direct Infos Gabon, 6 Jul 2020

²⁹ Direct Infos Gabon, 6 Jul 2020

³⁰ Direct Infos Gabon, 6 Jul 2020

about Gabon's current economic and financial situation. **United States**-based credit ratings agency **Moody's** completed its periodic review of Gabon's credit profile, institutions and fiscal solidity on 6 July.³¹ Moody's rated Gabon's economic strength as Ba3, citing high wealth creation, but overdependence on oil and low competitiveness. Gabon received a Caa3 rating for its institutional strength, which Moody's said is characterised by bad governance, poor budgeting and liquidity management, particularly with respect to payment of credit arrears. Moody's gave Gabon a B2 rating for its fiscal solidity, as the country is set to experience a weaker balance sheet, due to the ongoing oil price crisis. Moody's stated that it will not downgrade Gabon's credit from its current Caa1 rating and encouraged the government to continue efforts to restore the public finance balance and debt servicing.³²

In response to the Moody's evaluation, Ogandaga noted Gabon had not accumulated debt payment arrears since April 2019.³³ The **Direction Générale de la Dette (DGD)** (general directorate for debt) reported Gabon spent 648 billion FCFA (\$1.13 billion) on debt servicing during the first quarter (Q1) of 2020, a significant increase from the figure of 143.6 billion (\$250.4m) at the same point in 2019.³⁴

US-based credit agency **Fitch Ratings** was less optimistic. In its 30 June report on Gabon, Fitch said Gabon risks a medium-term downgrade to a CCC credit rating, due to its status as an oil producer. The continuing oil price crisis may lead to higher budget deficits and public debt.³⁵ In April, Fitch downgraded Gabon from B to CCC as a result of debt accumulation (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April 2020*).³⁶

In May, the government predicted Gabon's economic growth for 2020 would drop from the initially projected figure of 3.8% to -0.2%, a fall of nearly 4%.³⁷ In its **World Economic Outlook** published on 8 June, the World Bank revised Gabon's growth projections downwards, establishing the new rate at -3.2% (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April 2020*).³⁸ The World Bank report suggests the outlook will remain gloomy in the short term, with 2021 growth estimated at -2.6%.³⁹

While Gabon has adopted a revised budget and is formulating an economic resilience plan to address its second economic recession in less than a decade, recent developments indicate it faces an uphill task to address the current crisis.⁴⁰ On 23 June, the DGD reported Gabon's debt had increased by 9% to 5,607 billion FCFA (\$9.7 billion) during Q1.⁴¹

The **Direction Générale des Hydrocarbures** (general directorate of hydrocarbons) noted that oil production increased by 5.3% to 2.78m metric tonnes during Q1 compared to 2.35m metric tonnes in 2019⁴² while the **Direction Générale de la Comptabilité Publique et du Trésor** (general directorate of public accounting and treasury) reported that revenue rose by 27.4% to 127.8 billion FCFA (\$222.9m) during the same period.⁴³ However, petroleum minister **Vincent de Paul Massassa** has confirmed that Gabon will reduce its daily oil output from 226,000 to 144,000 barrels per day in terms of an agreement to reduce output in a bid to stabilise global oil prices. These fell below \$20 p/b in March following a dispute between **Russia** and **Saudi Arabia** (see *ARC Briefing Gabon June 2020*).⁴⁴

³¹ Gabon Review, 6 Jul 2020

³² Gabon Review, 6 Jul 2020

³³ Gabon Review, 14 Jul 2020

³⁴ Direct Infos Gabon, 23 Jun 2020

³⁵ Gabon Review, 3 Jul 2020

³⁶ Gabon Review, 5 Apr 2020

³⁷ Gabon Review, 28 Apr 2020

³⁸ World Bank, 8 Jun 2020

³⁹ World Bank, 8 Jun 2020

⁴⁰ ARC Gabon analyst

⁴¹ Direct Infos Gabon, 23 Jun 2020

⁴² Gabon Review, 23 Jun 2020

⁴³ Direct Infos Gabon, 27 Jun 2020

⁴⁴ Gabon Media Time, 30 May 2020

Gabon maintains manganese production targets despite drop in global demand

The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et Politique Fiscale** (directorate general of economic and tax policy) reported on 24 June that manganese production reached 2.2 million tonnes during the first quarter (Q1) of activities, a 57.2% increase compared to the same period in 2019.⁴⁵ Exports and sales of manganese increased respectively by 51.1% and 64% to 1.7m tonnes.⁴⁶ The positive results indicate the success of Gabon's efforts to make the manganese sector a pillar of its economic growth. Global manganese production dropped by 0.8% in Q1.⁴⁷ However, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a slowdown in automobile industry activity, resulting in lower demand for manganese and a 33.4% decrease in prices. This has led to a 12.5% decrease in revenue, to 146.5 billion FCFA (\$255.5m), despite the increases in production, export and sales.⁴⁸

The DGEFP attributed the increased output to the exploitation of the **Binioniet Lebaye** manganese deposit by **Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooue (Comilog)**, a branch of France-based metallurgical firm **Eramet**.⁴⁹ Comilog set a production target of 5m tonnes for 2020 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon March 2020*)⁵⁰ and is on track to attain this figure, despite the fall in global demand for manganese from key markets in **Europe, India** and **North America**.⁵¹ Comilog's core activities are at the **Moanda** manganese concession.

Gabon produced 15% of the world's high-grade manganese ore in 2019. In March, President Bongo stated his ambition for Gabon to become the world's largest producer of the mineral (see *ARC Briefing Gabon March 2020*).⁵² Eramet's five-year investment plan, announced in June 2019, to invest 419 billion FCFA (\$725m) in this sector from 2019-2023 supports Bongo's aim.⁵³ Eramet plans to raise annual output to 7m tonnes by 2023 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon July 2020*). In addition, the **Code Minière** (mining code), adopted in June 2019, has reduced several taxes with the aim of attracting further local and foreign investors to the nascent Gabonese mining industry.⁵⁴ **China**-based **Commerciale des Mines de Huazhou (CICMHZ)** and **Nouvelle Gabon Mining (NGM)**, a branch of **India**-based miner **Coalsale Group**, are other important players in Gabon's manganese sector.⁵⁵ CICMHZ operates concession at **Ndjole**, in central Gabon, while NGM has mining operations at **Franceville** and **Okondja** in eastern Gabon.

⁴⁵ Direct Infos Gabon, 24 Jun 2020

⁴⁶ Direct Infos Gabon, 24 Jun 2020

⁴⁷ Gabon Review, 25 Jun 2020

⁴⁸ Gabon Review, 25 Jun 2020

⁴⁹ Direct Infos Gabon, 24 Jun 2020

⁵⁰ Gabon Review, 4 Mar 2020

⁵¹ Gabon Media Time, 27 Jun 2020

⁵² Gabon Review, 4 Mar 2020

⁵³ Gabon Review, 24 Jun 2020

⁵⁴ La Tribune Afrique, 7 Jan 2020

⁵⁵ Gabon Review, 25 Jun 2020

Planner

- 2020 **(Gabon)** Legislative by-elections, scheduled for April, new date TBA
- 2020 **(Gabon)** Deadline for tender submissions for 12th round of petroleum licences, scheduled for April, new date TBA
- Late 2020/early 2021 **(Gabon)** Senate elections
- 2023 **(Gabon)** Local and national assembly elections

Chronology

- 17 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Media Time*. Prime minister **Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda** announces a new 33-member cabinet;
- 16 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. President **Ali Ondimba Bongo** appoints **Rose Christiane Ossouka Raponda** as Gabon's first female prime minister;
- 15 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Construction work on the 780 km **Transgabonaise** highway set to begin in September;
- 8 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de Dette (DGD)** reports Gabon allocated 648 billion FCFA (\$1.12 billion) towards debt payments during the first semester of 2020, compared to 143.6 billion FCFA (\$248.8m) in 2019;
- 7 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **United States**-based credit rating agency **Moody's** completes its review of Gabon's credit profile, reporting that Gabon has a high risk rated Caa1 credit profile, but notes it has not changed its credit rating;
- 6 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The economy and finance ministry indicates the **Covid-19** pandemic has resulted in a 597.3 billion FCFA (\$1.07 billion) loss in government revenue for Gabon;
- 3 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **United States**-based credit ratings agency **Fitch Ratings** predicts Gabon's sovereign rating will deteriorate to CCC in the medium term as a result of its status as a petroleum producing country that is highly reliant on petroleum for government revenue;
- 3 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **African Development Bank (AfDB)** grants Gabon a 66 billion FCFA (\$100.5m) loan to address the **Covid-19** pandemic
- 1 Jul 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Prime minister **Julien Nkoghe Bekale** announces resumption of international flights and reopening of hotels and restaurants from 1 July;
- 29 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique Fiscale (DGEPF)** (general directorate for economic and fiscal policy) reports railway cargo transport generated 20.8 billion FCFA (\$47.8m) during the first quarter, with 2 million tonnes transported, a 33% increase compared to last year;
- 29 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The Senate adopts the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the Penal Code;
- 27 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Direction Générale de la Comptabilité Publique et du Trésor (DGPCT)** (director general of public accounting and the treasury) reports oil revenue of 127.8 billion FCFA (\$218.4m) during the first semester;
- 25 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique Fiscale (DGEPF)** (general directorate for economic and fiscal policy) reports that petroleum production increased by 5.3% during the first quarter (2.78 million tonnes), but exports decreased by 20.2% (2.35 million tonnes);

24 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Olam Gabon Special Economic Zone (GSEZ)** a subsidiary of **Singapore**-based **Olam**, announces a 50.3% increase in port traffic to 1.2 million tonnes at the **New Owendo International Port** during the first quarter;

24 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique Fiscale (DGEPF)** (general directorate for economic and fiscal policy) reports the logistics firm **Société d'Exploitation du Transgabonais (Setrag)** a branch of **France**-based **Eramet**, experienced a 22.7% increase in turnover during the first quarter of 2020 amounting 20.4 billion FCFA (\$34.9m);

24 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The 528-km component of the **Central African Backbone (CAB)** optic fibre cable line from **Boué-Bitam** has been completed;

24 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Manganese production during the first quarter of activity increased by 57.2% compared to 2019 to 2.2 million tonnes, while revenue decreased by 12.5% to 146.5 billion FCFA (\$250.6m) due to lower global prices;

24 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale des Hydrocarbures (DGH)** (general directorate for hydrocarbons) reports that petroleum exports reduced by 20% to 2.35m metric tonnes during the first quarter, while production increased by 5.3% to 2.78 million tonnes during the first quarter compared to 2019;

19 Jun 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **South Africa**-based petrochemicals firm **Sasol Ltd** has announced it will sell its interests in Gabon, which are represented through a 27.5% participation in **United States**-based **Vaalco Energy**;

19 June 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Compagnie Financière Africaine (Cofina)** through its branch **Cofina Gabon**, will provide a 4 billion FCFA (\$6.4m) loan to SMEs in Gabon after obtaining finance from the **Banque de développement des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale (BEAC)** (bank of **Central African** states);

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