

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

Gabon Monthly Briefing May 2020

Gabon Summary 20 May 2020

Gabon has lifted its national state of emergency and reduced partial confinement of greater Libreville as the country passes the 1,000 mark of recorded Covid-19 cases. Gabonese authorities have increased testing and hospital capacity as the World Health Organisation (WHO) predicts peak infection will occur from late May to mid-June. Prime minister Julien Nkoghe Bekale confirms Gabon will enter economic recession in 2020, as projected economic growth will drop from 3.8% to 0.2%. The economy and finance ministry outlines an economic resilience plan to offset the negative impact of the economic downturn. Leading local oil sector producers France-based Total and United Kingdom-based Assala Energy have instructed their Gabonese branches to scale down planned investments and operations for 2020 in the wake of the on-going global oil price shocks.

Gabon reduces Covid-19 restrictions

Gabon has lifted the national state of emergency and moved greater **Libreville** from a general lockdown to a partial confinement, but is increasing its **Covid-19** testing and hospitalisation capacity as it nears its estimated peak infection rate. At time of writing, the country had registered 1,104 cases, 182 recoveries and 10 deaths since recording its first Covid-19 case on 12 March. Following a cabinet meeting on 8 May, interior minister **Lambert Noel Mbatha** announced the government would lift the state of emergency on 11 May.¹ Mbatha said the decision to end the state of emergency was motivated by concerns about its impact on the economic well-being of Gabonese citizens.² Mbatha noted that the curfew would remain in place, as well as the ban on religious, sporting and cultural events and the closure of bars, restaurants and nightclubs.³ Gatherings of more than 10 persons would not be permitted, and air, land and sea borders would remain closed.⁴

The **Assemblée Nationale** (national assembly) had voted on 24 April to extend the national state of emergency, in effect since 9 April, by 15 days from 26 April.⁵ The Gabonese executive confirmed the extension during a 25 April cabinet meeting.⁶ Nkoghe Bekale announced on 27 April the scaling-down of the general lockdown to a partial confinement for **Grand Libreville** (greater Libreville), which would allow residents of Libreville and the communes of **Akanda, Ntoum, Owendo and Pointe Denis** to travel between these localities but not to other parts of the country, while non-residents of these cities would not be permitted to enter them.⁷ Mbatha underscored that individuals not wearing protective face masks in public would be arrested and held criminally liable.⁸

President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** (2009-present) announced on 17 April the creation of a 2.1 billion FCFA (\$3.5m) fund to assist the most economically vulnerable in Gabon, providing the funds from his personal finances.⁹ Bongo said his donation was a matter of “*fulfilling his duty of solidarity*” to

¹ Gabon Review, 8 May 2020

² Gabon Review, 8 May 2020

³ Direct Infos Gabon, 10 May 2020

⁴ Direct Infos Gabon, 10 May 2020

⁵ Gabon Review, 24 Apr 2020

⁶ Gabon Review, 25 Apr 2020

⁷ Gabon Review, 27 Apr 2020

⁸ Gabon Review, 3 May 2020

⁹ Gabon Review, 17 Apr 2020

citizens.¹⁰ The fund, which the **Caisse Nationale d'Assurance Maladie et de Garantie (CNAMG)** (national health insurance and social security fund) will administer, will ensure that the economically vulnerable have access to free healthcare from 27 April to 27 September.¹¹

Health minister **Max Limoukou** said on 17 April that mass testing for coronavirus would commence immediately.¹² 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) were already functioning as Covid-19 surveillance centres.¹³ Bongo said the Libreville **Palais des Sports** would be transformed into a giant laboratory that could perform up to 10,000 tests per day.¹⁴ However, the concentration of health facilities in urban centres highlights the shortcomings of the Gabonese healthcare system, which the **World Bank** had identified in a 2016 report.¹⁵

Despite the wide variety of measures that Gabon has implemented in order to curb the spread and monitor the evolution of the Covid-19 outbreak, civil society and opposition have criticised prime minister **Julien Nkoghe Bekale** for his coordination of the government's efforts to address the on-going pandemic.¹⁶ In a meeting with Nkoghe Bekale on 22 April, the **Conseil National de l'Ordre des Médecins (CNOM)** (national order of doctors) requested the establishment of additional testing facilities and provisional of more personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers.¹⁷ Dr **Adrian Mougougou**, president of the **Syndicat des Médecins Fonctionnaires du Gabon (Symefoga)** (public sector doctors union of Gabon), said health practitioners lacked medical equipment with only 30 functional artificial respirators in the country.¹⁸ The government had previously claimed that there were 100 such units available.¹⁹

Nkoghe Bekale held a question and answer session at the national assembly on 7 May to provide an account of the government's response to the outbreak.²⁰ Nkoghe Bekale said the government had ordered 15 million masks and prepared 1,000 additional hospital beds to reinforce hospital capacity, with the **World Health Organisation (WHO)** predicting that Gabon would reach its peak infection rate between the end of May and mid-June.²¹

Somewhat prematurely, **Air France** outlined on 10 May a provisional schedule for the recommencement of commercial flights from **Paris (France)** to Libreville from 21 June.²² Flights on this route, with the exception of repatriations, have been suspended since 21 March.²³ However, the transport ministry issued a communiqué stating that no flight would be allowed to land in Gabon without prior government authorisation.²⁴

Gabon officially set to experience an economic recession

Gabonese authorities have confirmed that the country is set to experience an economic recession due to the effects of the on-going Covid-19 pandemic.²⁵ The government intends to put in place an economic resilience plan to address the immediate impact of the economic downturn as well as an

¹⁰ Gabon Review, 17 Apr 2020

¹¹ Gabon Review, 22 April 2020

¹² Direct Infos Gabon, 17 Apr 2020

¹³ Gabon Review, 4 Mar 2020

¹⁴ Gabon Review, 19 May 2020

¹⁵ Gabon Review, 22 Apr 2020

¹⁶ Gabon Review, 6 May 2020

¹⁷ Gabon Review, 22 April 2020

¹⁸ Gabon Review, 22 April 2020

¹⁹ Gabon Review, 22 Apr 2020

²⁰ Gabon Review, 6 May 2020

²¹ Gabon Review, 7 May 2020

²² Direct Infos Gabon, 11 May 2020

²³ Direct Infos Gabon, 11 May 2020

²⁴ Direct Infos Gabon, 14 May 2020

²⁵ Gabon Review, 28 Apr 2020

economic recovery programme in order to pursue the long-term stabilisation of Gabon's economy.²⁶ Prime minister Julien Nkoghe Bekale declared on 28 April that Gabon's economic growth for 2020 would drop from the initially projected figure of 3.8% to -0.2%, a fall of nearly 4%.²⁷ Nkoghe Bekale said the government's economic resilience plan, in tandem with technical and financial partners, aims to mitigate the effects of a full-scale recession.

Gabon is set to experience a significant shortfall in expected budget revenue in 2020, which will require the government to review its initial socio-economic priorities and reorient its budget spending towards financing health interventions and providing economic and social support for businesses and the general population.²⁸ The initial estimate for revenue losses in 2020 was from 230 billion FCFA (\$380.5m) to 645 billion FCFA (\$1.06 billion).²⁹ However, the **Direction Générale de l'Économie et Politique Fiscale (DGEPPF)** (general directorate of the economy and tax policy) indicated on 6 May that there would be a 700 billion FCFA (\$1.17 billion) shortfall.³⁰ DGEPPF director general **Jean-Baptiste Ngolo Allini** attributed this to a drop in petroleum production and the provision of petroleum-related services.³¹ Ngolo Allini noted that the slowdown in non-petroleum sector activities such as catering, hotels, tourism, timber, construction and public works as well as transport also contributed to the fall in revenue.³² Ngolo Allini said this would result in a fall in public and private sector investment as well as drop in consumption and the demand for exported goods.³³

The economy and finance ministry released a report on 8 May on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the national economy.³⁴ The assessment blamed the economic downturn on falling commodity prices as well as the contraction in global economic activity and the subsequent application of domestic Covid-19 related restrictions.³⁵ On 11 May, the economy and finance ministry indicated that 407 billion FCFA (\$681.4m) would be allocated towards the government's economic and social response plan, with financial support to the following sectors:

- 2.1 billion FCFA (\$3.5m) for the poor and most vulnerable in society;
- 7.3 billion FCFA (\$12.2m) for the payment of electricity and water bills over the next three months;
- 33 billion FCFA (\$55.2m) towards food provision and payment of rents for the next three months;
- 66 billion FCFA (\$110.5m) for the health sector;
- 225 billion FCFA (\$376.9m) in direct cash transfers and 83 billion FCFA (\$138.9m) in tax rebates for negatively impacted businesses.³⁶

Some of these measures were part of the 250 billion FCFA (\$414.3m) financial assistance package that President Bongo announced on 3 April to mitigate the socio-economic challenges resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak (see *ARC Briefing Gabon April 2020*).³⁷ The government has already mobilised 88 billion FCFA (\$147.3m) from the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** and 25 billion FCFA (\$41.8m) in contributions from the Gabonese private sector to fund this initiative.³⁸ The **European Union** representation in Gabon and France respectively donated €1.5m (\$1.6m)³⁹ and 3.25 billion FCFA

²⁶ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2020

²⁷ Gabon Review, 28 Apr 2020

²⁸ Direct Infos Gabon, 28 Apr 2020

²⁹ Direct Infos Gabon, 10 Apr 2020

³⁰ Gabon Review, 7 May 2020

³¹ Gabon Review, 7 May 2020

³² Gabon Review, 7 May 2020

³³ Gabon Review, 7 May 2020

³⁴ Gabon Review, 9 May 2020

³⁵ Gabon Review, 9 May 2020

³⁶ Gabon Media Time, 11 May 2020

³⁷ Gabon Review, 4 Apr 2020

³⁸ Gabon Media Time, 18 May 2020

³⁹ Gabon Review, 30 Apr 2020

(\$5.3m) to the Gabonese government to support the fight against Covid-19.⁴⁰ The **World Bank**, through the **International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)**, provided a 5.4 billion FCFA (\$9m) loan on 19 May with the same objective.⁴¹ IMF representative for Gabon **Loko Boileau** said the IMF wanted to assist Gabon to develop a new budget support plan to counter the devastating economic impact of Covid-19:

“As in the past, the IMF remains ready to support the Gabonese authorities if they wish, in their efforts to reform the economy.”⁴²

Despite the government’s measures to offset the economic impact, Gabon faces a daunting task. **United States (US)**-based credit ratings agency **Fitch Ratings** downgraded Gabon’s sovereign credit rating from “B” to “CCC” on 3 April.⁴³ Fitch based its decision on a number of factors including Gabon’s poor management of its public finances. Fitch said the accumulation of external debt arrears in the past and frequent delays in securing planned multilateral financing have limited Gabon’s ability to honour debt repayments.⁴⁴ The on-going global oil price shocks have compounded the problem and will compromise Gabon’s ability to obtain money from international financial markets.

Nkoghe Bekale has called on bilateral and multilateral partners to cancel Gabon’s debt, despite Gabon’s status as an upper middle-income country.⁴⁵ Nkoghe Bekale praised the decision by **G20** countries to grant a debt payment moratorium to low-income nations on the payment of bilateral and government loans but believes this measure is insufficient.⁴⁶ Budget and investment promotion minister **Jean-Fidele Otandault** echoed the desire to see Gabon’s debt cancelled.⁴⁷ According to the **Direction Générale de Dette (DGD)**, Gabon’s public debt increased by 1.6% from 5,346 billion FCFA (\$8.8 billion) in 2019, of which 3,875 billion FCFA (\$6.4 billion) constituted external debt. Fitch predicts that the debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio will increase from 60% currently to 73%.⁴⁸ With Gabon about to experience its second recession in less than a decade, Otandault has recommended that Gabon pursue economic diversification with a special focus on investing in agriculture in order to reduce dependence on petroleum sector activities.⁴⁹

Foreign oil firms reduce investments and operations

In the wake of the on-going global oil price crisis, which currently sees **Brent** crude oil trading at \$22.23 per barrel,⁵⁰ some of Gabon’s most prominent hydrocarbons companies have announced plans to scale down planned investments and operations. **Jean Yves Grall**, director general of **Assala Gabon**, a branch of **United Kingdom**-based **Assala Energy**, noted on 3 May that the company will suspend certain projects.⁵¹ Grall said cancelled contracts, sick employees and the oil price crisis have all impacted Assala negatively.⁵²

“Assala Gabon is trying to maintain its activities and investments as much as possible, but we had to suspend some of them in order to ease the pressure on our suppliers who cannot honour their contracts without potentially exposing the health of our staff.”⁵³

Assala, Gabon’s second-largest oil producer, had earmarked 177.3 billion FCFA (\$300m) in investment, an increase from the 2018 figure of 147.7 billion FCFA (\$250m).⁵⁴ In March, Assala

⁴⁰ Direct Infos Gabon, 7 May 2020

⁴¹ Direct Infos Gabon, 20 May 2020

⁴² Direct Infos Gabon, 30 Apr 2020

⁴³ Gabon Review, 5 Apr 2020

⁴⁴ Gabon Review, 5 Apr 2020

⁴⁵ Direct Infos Gabon, 30 Apr 2020

⁴⁶ Direct Infos Gabon, 30 Apr 2020

⁴⁷ Direct Infos Gabon, 5 May 2020

⁴⁸ Gabon Review, 5 Apr 2020

⁴⁹ Direct Infos Gabon, 5 May 2020

⁵⁰ Oilprice.com, 20 May 2020

⁵¹ Direct Infos Gabon, 3 May 2020

⁵² Direct Infos Gabon, 3 May 2020

⁵³ Direct Infos Gabon, 3 May 2020

Energy CEO **David Roux** reported the company invested 41.8 billion FCFA (\$69.2m) during the first quarter of activities in Gabon from January to March 2020.⁵⁵

Another key player in Gabon's hydrocarbons sector, **Total Gabon**, a branch of France-based **Total Group**, also announced that it intended to reduce its initial scale of investment. Total Gabon's decision was in line with its parent company's plan to save \$14 billion through the reduction of investment and production targets.⁵⁶ Total Gabon CEO **Stephane Bassene** said the company was taking "*an even more selective approach*" in view of the current selling prices of oil,

"... taking into account the health and economic situation, while having at heart the desire to preserve society and future projects".⁵⁷

Total Gabon was already experiencing a downturn in its activities. Its net profit fell to \$50m in 2019 compared to \$258m in 2018, and it experienced an 11% drop to \$808m in revenue, compared to 2018.⁵⁸ Total Group experienced a 99% drop in net profit during the first quarter of activity in 2020 from \$3.1 billion in 2019 to \$34m.⁵⁹ However, Bassene said that Total Gabon would not lay off any employees.⁶⁰

Gabon's Covid-19 restrictions have also influenced Gabon's oil operators in their decisions to reduce investment. Petroleum, gas and hydrocarbons minister **Vincent de Paul Massassa** had instructed that only 10 employees be allowed on oil exploration and production sites.⁶¹ Petroleum sector actors have lobbied for the number to be increased to 20 employees.⁶²

Gabon's hydrocarbons sector experienced a series of positive developments in 2019 that gave the impression the industry would enjoy significant growth in 2020. The **Direction Générale des Hydrocarbures (DGH)** (general directorate of hydrocarbons) indicated that petroleum production rose by 13.9% from 9.6m barrels in 2018 to 10.9m barrels in 2019.⁶³ Petroleum revenue increased by 24.6% in 2019 to 727.2 billion FCFA (\$1.21 billion).⁶⁴ The newly implemented **Code des Hydrocarbures** (hydrocarbons code) also attracted investors in the domain for the first time since 2014 (see *ARC Briefing Gabon August and November 2019*). As a result, the government was expecting to receive more investor interest, however, it has postponed the 12th call for tenders for the allocation 35 offshore blocks until further notice.⁶⁵ **Organisation Nationale des Employés du Pétrole (ONEP)** (national organisation of petroleum workers) secretary general **Sylvain Binet** has warned that an estimated 5,000 direct jobs could be lost as a result of the crisis in the oil sector.⁶⁶

⁵⁴ Direct Infos Gabon, 3 May 2020

⁵⁵ Gabon Review, 31 Mar 2020

⁵⁶ Direct Infos Gabon, 6 May 2020

⁵⁷ Gabon Media Time, 8 May 2020

⁵⁸ Gabon Review, 26 Mar 2020

⁵⁹ Direct Infos Gabon, 6 May 2020

⁶⁰ Direct Infos Gabon, 6 May 2020

⁶¹ Gabon Review, 4 May 2020

⁶² Gabon Media Time, 4 May 2020

⁶³ Direct Infos Gabon, 27 Apr 2020

⁶⁴ Direct Infos Gabon, 26 Apr 2020

⁶⁵ Gabon Media Time, 6 May 2020

⁶⁶ Gabon Media Time, 4 May 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

19 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **World Bank**, through the **International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)**, grants Gabon a 5.4 billion FCFA (\$9m) loan to support the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic;

19 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique Fiscale** (directorate general for economy and tax policy) reports commercial trade between **China** and Gabon reached 2.137.5 billion FCFA (\$3.57 billion) in 2019, a 4.9% increase compared to 2018;

18 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Three sailors who were kidnapped off the coast of Gabon in March, have been released in **Nigeria**;

15 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Cote d'Ivoire**-based **Atlantic Financial Group Central & East Africa** has acquired 52% of shares of Gabonese bank **BICIG** for 30 billion FCFA (\$49.4m);

13 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The transport ministry announces that **Air France** commercial flights from **Paris** to Libreville will not resume on 21 June, contrary to reports the previous day by the airline;

12 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Air France** announces the resumption of commercial flights to Libreville from 21 June;

11 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The headquarters of the petroleum and hydrocarbons ministry closes following the death of an employee from **Covid-19**;

7 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique Fiscale** (directorate general for economy and tax policy) announces that Gabon will lose 700 billion FCFA (\$1.17 billion) in state budget revenue in 2020 due in large part to the fall in global oil prices;

7 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Africa Oil & Power**, in its special report in the *Africa Energy* series, highlights Gabon as one of the most attractive hydrocarbons investment destinations in **Africa**;

7 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **French** ambassador to Gabon **Philippe Autié** announces that France will grant 3.25 billion FCFA (\$5.3m) to the Gabonese government to support the fight against **Covid-19**;

6 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique Fiscale** (directorate general for economy and tax policy) announces that Gabon will enter an economic recession in 2020, as growth will drop from the initially projected figure of 3.8% to -0.2% due to the effects of the global oil price drop and the **Covid-19** pandemic;

6 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Logistics firm **Société d'exploitation du Transgabonais (Setrag)**, Gabonese subsidiary of **France**-based metallurgical firm **Eramet**, reports turnover of 78.1 billion FCFA (\$130m) in 2019, a 15% increase compared to 2018;

5 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Comilog**, a Gabonese subsidiary of France-based metallurgical firm **Eramet**, reports it produced 1.3 million tonnes of manganese during the first quarter of activity in 2020 compared to 1 million tonnes in 2019;

4 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Norway-based **BW Energy** says it will produce an average of 15,000 to 16,500 barrels of oil per day at the **Dussafu Marin** in 2020 despite the current production rate of 17,500;

3 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Jean-Yves Grall**, director general of **Assala Gabon**, subsidiary of United Kingdom-based oil firm **Assala Energy**, says the firm will have to suspend some of the \$300m in planned investments for 2020 as a result of the fall in global oil prices;

3 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **Organisation Nationale des Employés du Pétrole (Onep)** (national petroleum workers' organisation) assistant secretary general **Sylvain Mayabi Binet** suggests up to 5,000 direct and indirect jobs in the oil sector may be lost as a result of the on-going oil price shocks;

1 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique** (directorate general for the economy and tax policy) reports palm oil production increased by 47.8%, with 238,184 palm units cultivated in 2019;

1 May 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de l'Economie et de la Politique** (directorate general for the economy and tax policy) reports the production of logs increased by 5.7% to 2.1 million cubic meters in 2019;

30 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** resident in Gabon **Boileau Loko** says the IMF wants to help Gabon to develop a new budget support programme when the current framework expires in June;

28 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. Prime minister **Julien Nkoghe Bekale** says Gabon will experience near 0% real economic growth in 2020 as a result of the **Covid-19** outbreak;

28 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Prime minister **Julien Nkoghe Bekale** states the government will launch a **Plan de Stabilisation et de Relance de l'Economie** (economic recovery and stabilisation plan) to offset the effects of a looming economic recession;

28 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Prime minister **Julien Nkoghe Bekale** announces the lifting of the general confinement imposed for **Greater Libreville** and the removal of restrictions on the operation of certain economic activities;

26 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. Government extends state of emergency until May as measure to prevent the spread of **Covid-19**;

26 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. The **Direction Générale de Dette** (general directorate for debt) states Gabon registered a 1.6% rise in national public debt to 5,346 billion FCFA (\$8.8 billion);

23 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Direct Infos Gabon*. France-based **Agence Française de Développement** (French development agency) provides Gabon with 3.2 billion FCFA (\$5.2m) for projects in the health domain;

22 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. **Syndicat des Médecins Fonctionnaires du Gabon** (union of public servant doctors) president **Adrien Mougougou** says Gabon does not have sufficient medical equipment to fight the **Covid-19** outbreak, and the country has only 30 artificial respirators;

17 Apr 2020 **Libreville (Gabon)** *Gabon Review*. President **Ali Bongo Ondimba** creates 2.1 billion FCFA (\$3.5m) fund to enable the most vulnerable in society to access healthcare over the next six months;

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