

Kazocongo's Weblog

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Kisingani, March 15, 2003



(<http://kazocongo.files.wordpress.com/2007/11/people-close-1.jpg>) Kisingani must have been a beautiful city at one time: large buildings, beautiful mansions and wide streets with covered sidewalks and high arcades. The beauty is all gone. The mansions are windowless; the shutters in tatters, the paint weathered beyond recollection. The roads the Belgians built are also a memory. Who, besides the Nazis, could have built roads to last 40 years?

The streets are full of colorful Chinese made bicycles: thousands of them. These are the local taxis. The passenger's seat is tied on with florescent netting and the poor guys peddle their fare with an empty face; a face which does not even show the pain of peddling in 40 degree heat. Sometimes, one of the members of the 7th Brigade will stop a taxi and make him ride all day and not give him a franc at the end. If he protests, he will have more to worry about than a lost day. Except for the bicycles and the numerous white UN vehicles, there is not any traffic to speak about during the day. Nevertheless, the traffic cops, in their blue trousers, bright yellow shirts and yellow and blue helmets direct traffic although they have not been paid in five years. They manage to ticket enough bicycles in the day to eat. It is amazing to see the bicycles obey the cop at the crossing. They wait more obediently than any Parisian driver, until the cop signals them the light is green.

The central post office is a huge square structure without windows. Even though there is no postal service, the employees show up every day. They too have not been paid in five years. No idea what they do for a living. There are several big, two and three story University buildings, all scared by the war and neglect. The professors have not been paid, you guessed it, in five years, yet they still teach over 1000 enrolled students. It is interesting to see the students come down to the riverbank after dark to review their notes in the floodlights of the UN HQ. Because the UN has a generator, they are the only ones in town who have lighting. There is usually no electricity anywhere, and if there is, it will go first to the local RCD honchos.

The electricity went out at the UN hotel. I suggested they were just trying to make it romantic. A heavy set (fat) white said: "Romantic? You're in the Congo for Christ's sake!"



(<http://kazocongo.files.wordpress.com/2007/12/mairie-side.jpg>) *City Hall painted in UN blue and white (paint misappropriated)*

The dollar has fallen 25% against the Congolese franc here. We are in a zone with no central bank, no hard currency reserves, no industrial production, no right to print money, yet the dollar is devaluing to 290 Congolese francs when it is 450 in Kinshasa. The reason? There just is no more paper money to go around. The reserves are drying up and leaving the zone with trade and no new bills are coming in. This is insane. I thought only collectors items went up when they become rare. Who the fuck wants to collect dirty old 20-franc notes? In reality, this money has absolutely no value whatsoever, just the belief that if there is no more, people will pay more for it. To prove the power of self-delusion, the prices in the market have not budged in comparison to the Congolese franc. It is all a little bit like God. By Kisingani standards, given the fall against the dollar, the Congolese franc is the strongest currency in the world. Even the communists could not accomplish this feat.

I am staying in a room at the UN run 'Welfare Club'. It is an old African hotel. The only thing the UN did was paint the outside with a cream color (they ran out of white) and did the trimming in UN blue. The generator gives us electricity so the (white) South African soldiers can watch cricket and rugby on the color TV. There is no running water. I wash in a bucket. The room is a big ugly, square concrete monster with a ceiling fan to add to the atmosphere without moving it. The mosquito net is a Godsend.

There are two trees outside my room with hundreds of little birds in them who never sleep. Sometimes I can't even tell if it is raining because they make such a racket. It would prevent me from sleeping if the stifling heat had not done so first.

Every morning I am told about explosions and shooting in the town the previous night. Apparently it is nothing to worry about. I never hear any it for all the damn noise the birds make. There are thugs with kolashnikovs everywhere. Last night I saw one of their younger soldiers again. His AK-47 was three quarters his size.

The Congo River is about 250 meters wide and very brown. It is truly a miracle how the pirogues manage. One man stands at the front and the other at the back rowing up to 20 people across the river against the very strong current. They row in unison, as synchronized as any Daimler motor's pistons. This is what Stanley saw 130 years ago.



(<http://kazocongo.files.wordpress.com/2007/12/pirogue-in-rapids-2.jpg>) *Fishing at Stanley Falls*

The other day a UN tug pushed two barges full of UN containers into the docks which have been idle for, you guessed it, five years. It took the tug three weeks to make the trip up-river from Kinshasa. The UN hopes these tugs will help convince the different factions to lift their blockades. Minutes after the tug pulled in, women were selling smoked fish from Equatorial province and salt from Kinshasa on the road 100 meters from UN HQ. The locals told me the

tugboat crews pick up lots of goods on the way and smuggle it in on the UN boats and the UN has no idea this is going on right under their noses. Of course, when the RCD wants to, they will make the UN very uncomfortable because of this and could even ban further UN barges from coming up river.

Some of you may have noticed my Internet is not working so well. It all depends on the UN satellite dish. I find it quite a miracle to be 2000 kilometers inside the jungle, in a nasty war zone, and have Internet at all.

When night falls, it is as dark as I have ever seen it. You can't see people on the road until they come into your low beams. There is little chance of hitting them because the state of the roads does not allow you to go faster than 10 kilometers per hour. The pitch dark gives a very special yellow-orange color to the fires, which burn in the streets at night. Other than a way of disposing of garbage, the fires allow you to see your way from one street corner to another.

I worked hard with the local reporters. They need help. The UN woman running the show is a hard assed, good-looking, Canadian metisse. Yes, she is tough. We got off to a rough start but then she saw I was not a threat to her power hold on the locals. It has been fun for the most part even though we managed to miss every possible scoop this week. They did good local stories just the same: mostly stuff the NGO's are doing because the RCD has done nothing but serve itself for, that's right, the past five years. There is some hunger, there are a lot of nasty diseases and there are very many little, punk ass holes, with guns. For the moment, they are not challenging the UN but a Human Rights delegate did get a gun put to her mouth the other day and told for the umpteenth time to get out or die. Some of these UN people are tough.

I am now off to Kindu for three weeks. That place does not even have a hotel, UN or otherwise, nor a restaurant, nor anyplace to buy anything. The RCD and the Mai Mai fight non-stop. Just going up river. It kind of reminds me of a film I once saw.

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