

By Kazadi Mpoyi

Corruption has become a phenomenon in the Democratic Republic of Congo, leaving no part of national life untouched. It pervades society from the highest public offices to the most underprivileged citizens.

The Congolese economy was devastated by 30 years of dictatorship marked by corruption and nepotism, resulting in an annual per-capita income of about 42,000 francs (US\$80). Following the assassination of President Laurent Kabila in 2001 and the succession of his son Joseph, an agency called the Commission of Repression of Economic Crimes was established. Unfortunately, the organization did not live up to its name: The French National Assembly adopted a law in March 2005 outlawing corruption.

Bribes have become necessary in order to obtain anything from the country's public servants, who resort to corruption because of their low pay-around 30,000 francs (US\$55). A member of the National Observatory of Human Rights (ONDH —Observatoire National des Droits de l'Homme), an institution charged with defending human rights in the country, testified that he was asked in July 2006 to pay bribes to government officials at the Directorate-General of Migration to obtain permission to fly from Kinshasa to Inongo, a city located in the Maï-Ndombe district in the province of Bandundu.

The public tolerates this corruption because the authorities responsible for fighting corruption are widely perceived as corrupt themselves. In 2005, officials from the ministries of transportation, communications, foreign trade and mines were suspended of corruption following an incriminating report by the government's auditing agency. The ministers never appeared before a judge because of a pardon by President Joseph Kabila. Citizens invoke the Congolese proverb "the fish starts rotting at the head" to describe how corruption starts at the top.

But the public is not immune. A citizen who works with a state institution established to regulate the media said one day two traffic officers stopped him in Kinshasa and demanded to see his registration documents. The officers then told him his car violated emission standards. Although the employee explained that he had just tuned his engine and that he was late for an appointment at another government agency, the officers asked him to pay 8,400 francs (US\$18). After paying 1,500 francs (US\$3), they let him go.

In another example, a pastor went to register his church with the government, a procedure that generally costs 15,500 francs (US\$30) for records and deposit, and 26,000 francs (US\$50) for a state audit. The official handling his case charged him an extra 16,000 francs (US\$31) for the registration documents, bypassing the audit altogether and promising to defend the pastor if he found himself the target of harassment by other officials. Similar stories of officials issuing licenses and registrations without the required tests or documentation abound. For example, driver's licenses are often issued for a price, despite the absence of ophthalmologic or other health tests.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is not exempt from these practices. An investigation found that the list of bribes necessary to obtain a passport is long and expensive.

First, one must pay 9,000 francs (US\$20) to the ministry of justice for documentation of one's criminal record, then 62,000 francs (US\$120) for other documents – all this above the “legal” price of 41,400 francs (US\$80). Top ministry officials, who see their agents trolling outside the ministry building for passport-seekers, tolerate this practice. The Directorate General of Taxes is infamous for cutting deals in which businessmen pay less to the government in exchange for a fee to government agents and a promise that the agents will protect them from tax auditors.

The Commission of Ethics and Anti-Corruption (CELC—Commission d’Ethique et de Lutte contre la Corruption) says it approaches its task by “sensitizing” rather than “repressing” corruption. A CELC official said a May 2006 investigation on the pervasiveness of corruption in the country found that the Katanga province, where much ore is mined, is particularly bad. Smuggling and corruption have prevented the residents of Katanga province from benefiting from its rich natural resources. The United Nations released a statement in 2003 saying that in light of the plundering of the Democratic Republic of Congo’s resources, the government must finally break with corruption.