

CONGO (LÉOPOLDVILLE)

CAPITAL: LÉOPOLDVILLE—POPULATION: 14.8 MILLION

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, located in the south-central part of the African Continent, covers an area of about 904,747 square miles, approximately equal in size to the portion of the United States east of the Mississippi River.

The Congo includes the greater part of the Congo River basin. It is landlocked, with the exception of a narrow strip of land on the north bank of the Congo estuary which extends westward to the South Atlantic. It is bounded on the west and north by the Congo Republic (Brazzaville), the Central African Republic, and Sudan; on the east by Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania; and on the south by Angola and Zambia.

The vast, low-lying central area is a basin-shaped plateau sloping toward the west, covered by tropical rain forest. This area is surrounded by mountainous terraces on the west, plateaus merging into savannas to the south and southeast, and dense grasslands toward the Congo River in the northwest. To the east are high mountains.

The Congo lies on the Equator, about one-third of the country to the north and two-thirds to the south. The area is, therefore, hot and humid. In the western region south of the Equator the rainy season lasts from October to May, while north of the Equator it lasts from April to November. In the central region, however, the rain falls more or less regularly throughout the year. During the October-May wet season the storms are often violent but seldom last more than a few hours. The average annual rainfall for the entire area is about 42 inches.

THE PEOPLE

The Congo has a population of about 14 million. Prior to independence, the non-African population totaled about 117,000. Approximately three-fourths of these were Belgians, and about 1,300 were Americans, mostly missionaries. The number of Americans presently in the Congo is under 1,000.

The number of Congolese ethnic groups has been estimated to be as high as 200. The criteria for distinguishing these groups, however, are not standardized.

In spite of this ethnic profusion, the Congolese population can be divided into three major groups:

1. The Pygmies, believed to have been the first inhabitants of the Congo basin. About 50,000 live in the western and northwestern part of the Congo and 30,000 in the Kibali-Ituri and Kivu districts.

2. The Negroes, represented by:

- (a) The Bantu, who form the bulk of the population and number approximately 8 to 9 million.

- (b) The Sudanese, who inhabit the north and northeast areas of the Congo. Their number is estimated at 2 to 3 million.

- (c) The Nilotics, who are not very numerous and who are settled in the northeast.

3. The Hamites. In this category are to be classed several groups of Bahema shepherds living on the eastern frontier of the Congo.

There are perhaps 200 languages and dialects spoken in the country. The four principal ones can be described as follows:

1. Lingala, developed in the 1880's in response to the need for a commercial language. In time the original fragmentary jargon was given written form, and it is now used extensively along the Congo River from Léopoldville to Stanleyville and in the north and northwest.

2. Kingwana, a dialect of Kiswahili, introduced into the Congo by Arabs and especially the Zanzibari Swahilis, in the course of 19th century slaving operations. It is spoken extensively in the northeastern, eastern, and southern regions of the country.

3. Kikongo, primarily the language of the narrow neck of territory between Léopoldville and the ocean. A simplified dialect is spoken in the region just east of Léopoldville. Most of the languages of the western Congo belong to the Kikongo language cluster.