

How Mobutu looted billions from the Zairean people

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Nineteen-thirty was a poor year for vintage port. Buyers all but ignored it. Although cheap, it has little more than its rarity value to commend it. It was a bad year for Zaire, too. It marked the birth of Joseph-Desire Mobutu, alias Mobutu Sese Seko — for 32 years the country's rapacious president.

Port and Mobutu go glass in hand. One of the Zairean president's more mundane vices is a taste for drinks of the same vintage as himself. In his Portuguese holiday home he has insured himself against a drought by amassing 14,000 bottles, no mean achievement for the president of a country where there is just one hospital bed for every 700 people. And at \$150 a bottle the 1930 vintage is well over a year's salary for many Zaireans.

The Portuguese connection is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the fortune Mobutu has amassed during the three decades of his presidency. The Financial Times of London has reported US sources calculating that at its peak his assets totalled \$4 billion, not quite in the Ferdinand Marcos league but still extraordinary.

Over the past decade the mounting costs of staying in power have put something of a dent in the Mobutu cash mountain but their is still plenty left, some \$2.5 billion, according to more recent estimates.

If Mobutu is forced into involuntary retirement by the rebel forces, under Laurent Kabila, which are currently closing in on the capital of Kinshasa, it will not be into penury.

The president and his family own a property portfolio which includes some of the best addresses in Brussels; a Paris flat handily placed for the milliner who makes Mobutu's trademark leopardskin hats; a villa in the South of France; another in Switzerland, hotels in Spain and South Africa.

another wrangle to rank with those of the Marcos deposits and the dormant accounts of Jews murdered during the Holocaust.

Mobutu's fortune appears to have been amassed by three main routes. Zaire is richly endowed with natural resources, particularly copper, cobalt and diamonds. Substantial sums are alleged to have been diverted into Mobutu's private coffers. In 1984 a Belgian report claimed that the Zairean president had siphoned off some Belgian franc 60 billion (roughly \$1.5 billion) over 10 years from one of the state-owned natural resources concerns.

In a paper for an Africa Studies Association conference, cited in the London-based Africa Analysis, Mobutu and his associates are said to have diverted up to 20 per cent of the state operating budget and up to half of the capital budget for their personal use. Little wonder critics claim Mobutu treated Zaire "like his private property".

A second route to fortune was provided by Western businessmen looking for chances to exploit Zaire's resources. Stories of corruption abound. Anecdote has it that, for example, one Western company seeking a banking licence in the country was simply informed by the president that a relative needed a "soft" loan of some \$12 million. The company paid the money into a Swiss account but never got its banking licence.

Zairean political folklore tells of a transport minister who protested that the \$75 million he pocketed in one year was merely a modest 10 per cent of the contracts he had signed. Those contracts include a deal for electronic equipment for more airports than Zaire possesses.

A source of funds for the Mobutu regime came from foreign aid, of which Zaire has received some \$8.5 billion over the past 25 years. There is little doubt that much of the money never reached the projects for which it was intended. Britain gave up providing even non-governmental aid some years ago for this reason. "Whatever you did, the money disappeared."

That might seem a lot to some, but not to Mobutu. In 1991 he told the magazine *Jeune Afrique*: "I have a flat in Paris and small properties in France which people pompously call chateaux. I have a villa in Geneva and out of my wife's estate we have allowed ourselves to buy four or five houses in Brussels. Because we are thinking of our children's future. It is not a fortune."

Fortune or not, the property is only part of the Mobutu riches. He is said to have shares in a string of European companies. There is a coffee plantation in Brazil. Beside his foreign villas, Mobutu maintained a range of residence around Zaire. Some, such as the lakeside home in Goma, he rarely visited. The palatial house on Lake Kivu was graced with the Zairean leader's presence only once, in 1990, when he met South Africa's president, F.W. de Klerk, there.

But like his other mansions it was kept spotless, and hidden from prying eyes. That was until the rebels seized Goma at the beginning of their war six months ago.

The villa was an early target for vengeful looters who might have imagined the Father of the Nation had more taste. At first glance his Goma mansion appeared an ornate French chateau decorated in marble and glass. But the Romanesque plinths were plastic, and the giant Ming vases imitation. The marble tables proved fake. Even the vast chandeliers were plastic, as they clattered rather than tinkled in the wind.

Mobutu kept a stock of his famed cravats to hand, and a vast selection of crocodile and Italian shoes to rival Imelda Marcos. In the corner of his office sat a massage couch with speeds varying from "full rolling" to "back vibration".

But perhaps most revealing were the his and hers bathrooms, wired with stereo speakers and buttons to call the servants. Each was clearly signalled by the colour scheme. His was in sky blue, hers in pink and burgundy. Both had a giant whirlpool as a centrepiece, hers with a gold thread pillow resting on the edge. Each was surrounded by foot-high bottles of perfume, cologne and bath salts. One brand of perfume — *Je Reviens* or "I return" — seemed touchingly optimistic. The car park was home to the five gleaming black Mercedes and the only two ambulances in the province.

The great unknown, however, is Mr Mobutu's cash stash. The *Financial Times* has quoted a Swiss member of parliament who alleged that Mobutu had "several billion dollars" invested in Switzerland. If that is the case and if Mr Mobutu is forced into exile, the Swiss banking industry is likely to find itself caught up in

did, the money disappeared," according to a UK official.

Not all the foreign aid was overt. According to the *Financial Times*, America's Central Intelligence Agency pumped money into Zairean channels to fund Unita guerrillas in Angola — though the Unita fighters complained little of the funding ever reached them.

Despite such institutionalised avarice Mobutu's fortune is not what it was. His funding was hit by a collapse in copper prices. The diamond money had pretty much dried up to a few million a month even before the rebels seized the mines.

With the government's coffers empty, Mobutu has for years coughed up from his own resources to pay his 15,000-strong presidential guard. Mostly they received about \$48 a month, a magnificent sum compared to the paltry \$3.20 given the average soldier if he were paid at all. The presidential guard had the added bonus of real weapons and real uniforms.

His money may not have bought efficiency or fighting ability but it did buy loyalty. The Special Presidential Division is the only unit to put up anything like resistance.

Perhaps the biggest drain on Mobutu's fortune has been keeping democracy at bay. After he was pressured by foreign governments into reviving a multi-party system seven years ago, Zaire's autocrat promptly set about undermining it at every turn. That ate up untold amounts of cash. Opponents had to be bought off and the loyalty of old cronies had to be ensured in the endless debates which went on in the 2,000-strong transitional parliament year after year.

The greatest cost was the creation of dozens of fake political parties to sow chaos among the opposition. No one is quite sure just how many Mobutu's money backed, but it is a good slice of the 450 parties which have sprung up since 1990. A year ago, before anyone could have imagined rebels at the gates of Kinshasa, Mobutu looked to have every chance of creating enough chaos and division to win a presidential election.

Now one of Africa's long-reigning dictators looks about to depart. He will leave behind a looted country. According to the most recent figures Zaire's foreign debt amounted to \$9.6 billion. In recent years there has been little effort at repayment.

That raises the question why the Western powers tolerated Mobutu for so long. According to one old Zairean hand, the explanation is straightforward. "He simply happened to be a politically important, or considered important, person in Africa and so he was allowed to get away with it."