



Central Africa

ECONOMICS

The Lifeline of a Nation

The following two readings are about riverboat traffic on the Congo River in the Democratic Republic of Congo, once known as Zaire. The first describes the writer's trip up the river around 1990. The second reading reports the shutdown of the riverboats in 1993.

Captain Kilundu has sailed the Zaire [Congo] River and its tributaries for 23 years. . . . He sits in his oversize chair at the helm of the *Colonel Ebeya*. . . . “This is not just a boat,” he said. “It is a social service. There are no roads here and very few other boats. This boat is the only market, the only pharmacy, the only clinic . . . for hundreds of miles. We bring the town to the people.”

The view from the bridge [boat's upper platform] showed a town in itself: The boat was augmented [increased] by the six double-deck barges it pushes, jammed with more than 5,000 people, making [it] one of the largest towns on the 1,077-mile stretch of river between Kinshasa, the capital, and Kisangani. . . .

“This boat is our life,” a fisherman named Basese told me as he dumped two small trussed [tied up] crocodiles onto the deck. “Without the boat we have no way to sell what we catch and grow, and no chance to buy the things we need.” . . .

I asked Malu [a merchant] how it was possible for the hundreds of merchants to make a living when they all seemed to sell the same things.

“There are very few jobs, so people have to become traders to feed their families. . . . I buy used shirts from the market women in Kinshasa and sell them along the river. . . . When we reach Kisangani, I hope to have none of these shirts [left]. . . . Then, as fast as I can, I buy potatoes and beans, and that is my stock to sell in Kinshasa and again buy shirts.” . . .

When we neared Mbandaka, once known as Equator Station, the entire town was waiting for us. “This is a very important place for me,” Malu called out as he bundled up his shirts. “If I'm lucky, I can sell as much here as on the whole rest of the trip.” . . .

In the midafternoon the boat horn blew, and Malu and the other merchants scrambled back aboard. Fishermen who had paddled downstream to await the boat in town tied on to be towed back up to their homes. Captain Kilundu maneuvered past empty warehouses and rusting, once-grand paddle wheelers lining the shore, and we pulled out into the stream. The next town was 300 miles away.

From “Zaire River: Lifeline for a Nation” (retitled “The Lifeline of a Nation”) by Robert Caputo from *National Geographic*, November 1991. Copyright ©1991 by **National Geographic Society**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Kisangani, Zaire—For nearly a century . . . riverboats have made the thousand-mile voyage upstream between Kinshasa and this port city deep in the immense tropical bush of Central Africa.

But five months ago, the two ancient and dilapidated [worn out] government-owned steamers still working the route, twice a month each way, ceased operating altogether. Port officials said they could no longer afford to buy fuel or spare parts for the journey, which took eight days to two weeks.

There are few roads: the river is the only highway. And the only reliable means of reaching here now is by plane, whose fare is far beyond the reach of most people in one of the world's poorest countries. . . .

If the riverboat shutdown continues, and many people believe it could last indefinitely given Zaire's devastated [ruined] economy, the region is likely to become increasingly remote and inaccessible [hard to reach]. . . .

"The riverboat was the only link for us to the outside world," said Prof. Boven L. Kumbukama, the chairman of research at the University of Kisangani. "And the future will be much bleaker and desperate without it."

From "A Stillness Falls on the Heart of Africa, As its Main Artery, the River is Cut," (retitled "The Lifeline of a Nation") by Kenneth B. Noble from the *New York Times*, March 18, 1993. Copyright ©1993 by **The New York Times Company**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why does the captain compare his boat to a "town"?

2. How might the lives of the people along the Congo River be affected by the end of riverboat traffic? Explain why.

Activity

Imagine that you are living along the Congo River. Write a letter to government officials in Kinshasa to persuade them that riverboat traffic should be restored.