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In Congo's Capital, Informal Economy Is Often the Best Opportunity

By Stephanie McCrummen

KINSHASA, Congo — On this day, the first sunny day in a while, Omer Waka decided to stake it all on bamboo wall calendars, a calculated gamble in a city of hustles.

Lately, he had hawked soccer balls, brooms, watches and belts, sunglasses, clocks and rainbow feather dusters. But visiting the wholesale market one recent Friday, he had a feeling about the 2007 calendars, one airbrushed with Jesus, the other with the Taj Mahal.

He took his savings, all $8 of it, and bought 10, figuring that he would sell the bunch on the street for $16 and that today he would eat.

"We're pulling into December, and I thought people would like these," said Waka, 31, a trained mechanic who has tried and failed to find work as a mechanic, as a driver, as a guard, as anything in a city where regular paying jobs are almost nonexistent.

And so for 12 years, he has competed in the daily roulette known as the informal economy, an off-the-books netherworld of scrappy enterprise that somehow keeps this city functioning and which includes the vast majority of its 6 million people.

Across Africa, cities are growing rapidly, with 35 percent of the continent's population now living in urban areas, a figure the United Nations expects will surpass 50 percent by 2025.

In Congo, hundreds of thousands fleeing civil war have come to Kinshasa, with one result being a capital filling up with the formally unemployed, who are nonetheless working.

Here, scenes of lethargy are rare; instead, there is the alert energy of people whose daily survival depends on creating something out of nothing, from the jobless teacher selling ices on the corner, to so-called passers whom travelers pay to get through the chaotic airport, to a growing number of street hawkers such as Waka who roam the wide boulevards selling bananas, or knockoff Roberto Cavalli fashions imported from China.

"You can't just cross your hands," said a woman who got a loan from a friend to buy bee pollen pills that she sells from her home. "You'll die of hunger."

To a large extent, it has been this way for decades in Congo, a country with immense mineral wealth whose people are nonetheless ranked among the poorest in the world. The cultlike dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the country for 32 years, pillaged billions from the government to fund his lifestyle and patronage networks, leaving a state near total collapse and a nation of people who essentially had to fend for themselves.

Two civil wars that followed only worsened the situation, and thus in Kinshasa, urbanization has meant heaping more people on top of an already untenable situation.

For a few, there is still the marbled, if slightly decaying Grand Hotel left over from the Mobutu days, where Congolese and European businessmen do deals under the palms. Down a decrepit road behind wrought-iron gates is the gilded compound of the former minister of mines, who receives visitors on overstuffed couches and, for ambience, plays the same Sade song all day, on repeat.

For the vast majority, however, day-to-day life exists on the margins, without access to credit, without banks, without insurance, beyond any government regulation or benefit, beyond even any physical structure.

In Kinshasa, if you have a chair, some scissors and the sprawl of a mango tree, you have a barbershop.

One recent Friday, the street hawkers began their daily orbit around the city at dawn, selling bags of water, toothpicks and orange blossom air fresheners. Waka was among them, and by midmorning he had sold a couple of Taj Mahals, but others were not so lucky.

Bahati Gachabu was still dangling the blue Kenneth Cole button-down he had spent an hour selecting at the market that morning. Siku Chendesa was still waving two suits like signal flags to passersby, who were mostly other street hawkers.

"I've been with these suits for four days now," he said, walking on past a man selling sunglasses and another selling two packs of cigarettes and a bottle of Chanel.

While cheap goods from China have benefited a handful of Congolese importers, they have mostly filled the city with frying pans and fake Thierry Mugler underwear that vendors are rarely able to sell.

Chendesa passed near a Cobil gas station, where three men in white plastic chairs appeared to be doing nothing but were actually working the corner as money-changers.

They sat under an umbrella they had made from a flour sack, next to a sign they had made from a scrap of wood, amid hundreds of white plastic chairs and flour sack umbrellas belonging to people selling apples, popcorn, motor oil, fish.

In their own way, the three had a collective of sorts.

"Sometimes, there are people among us here who haven't eaten," said Kasiala, who started his business with a $25 loan from a relative. "So when we come together, we try to help the one who didn't have food that day and things like that."

Some days, Kasiala said, he could make $5, which paid for food for himself and his pregnant wife, and transportation, with perhaps $1 left for doctor visits. He lives with his parents, because paying rent is unfathomable.

"We're here 365 days a year," Kasiala said. "If you stay home, you'll starve."

The three sat there all day in the sun, in the rain and into the night, when they waited some more.

With plenty of time between customers, they spent hours discussing politics and news. Kasiala studied philosophy at college, preferring Socrates "because he made fun of himself," he said. His friend Jimmy Mandu studied international relations.

"I think maybe I'll finish school and become a diplomat, and tie our country with others," Mandu said, imagining a tentative future.

Kasiala also considered his work temporary, perhaps a trick of the mind, he granted, considering he had been on the corner four years now.

In a white plastic chair next to him, Roger Manga was selling motor oil out of soda bottles, as he has for 26 of his 45 years on Earth.

"Really, if I'm here, it's to avoid stealing people's stuff," he said.

None of the men had tried signing up with the newly created Office of National Employment a couple of miles away, housed in a stucco building called Le Royal that would be considered abandoned except that "O.N.E.M," the office's acronym, is freshly scrawled on a door.

In theory, the office is supposed to register all the unemployed in Congo and match them with companies that have jobs.

In reality, a couple dozen people came at their appointed time one recent morning, only to be turned away because none of the office's employees showed up for work.

It was raining, and people waited under a slender eave—an unemployed economist, an unemployed farmer, an unemployed teacher, an unemployed engineer and unemployed Roger Malumba, who finished college with an admiration for the theories of the political theorist Montesquieu.

"He speaks of the counterweight theory," Malumba said. "And in a country like ours, that's interesting."

He had hoped to work for a good-government group but could not find a job that paid. He tried Congolese Bank of Credit, Bravo Air, Celtel, Vodacom and starting his own political Web site. But all he got was 10 years older.

"Can you imagine, 32 years old and I'm still under my parents' roof?" Malumba said. "As an intellectual, it's very bothering. My parents sacrificed so much so I could help them. But can you imagine not having a job in all these years? It's revolting."

It was why Omer Waka took his chances with bamboo calendars, and the money-changers sat on their corner, watching junker cars and the occasional Mercedes pass by. Sometimes, sitting there, they plotted various means of escaping the country that seems to them a jungle prison.

"All of us here would like to change nationality," said Kasiala, who imagines crossing into Angola someday or making his way to Paris, if he can save enough money. "Mainly, that's my everyday thinking, because I can't make it here."