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Gabon

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

13 May 1980

President Bongo, accompanied by the Gabonese Foreign Minister and Gabonese Ambassador in London, called on the Prime Minister this afternoon. Mr. Johnson was also present.

After congratulating the Prime Minister on the success of the transitional arrangements in Rhodesia, President Bongo stressed that Gabon was looking for close and effective co-operation with Britain. He was ready to sign agreements to this end if the British were ready to do so. He had always said that it was the British, not the Gabonese who had held back from closer co-operation in the past. The British should understand that Gabon, despite its colonial history, was no longer a French preserve. Their aim was free co-operation with all countries. He was ready to congratulate the Prime Minister on her firm stand within the European Community: she had clearly understood the French style in these matters. British investors should know that Gabon did not go in for nationalisation and expropriation and that foreign investors would be entirely free to expatriate profits.

The Prime Minister enquired about priority areas for development in Gabon. The President explained that there was virtually no small and medium scale industry; that further work was needed on the Trans-Gabon Railway, both in terms of credits and civil engineering expertise; and that further finance was required for the first Libreville Airport, where Plessey had already obtained a radar contract despite efforts to prevent this. A new international class airport would also be required, and feasibility work was now needed. Low cost housing was also a priority need. If Britain could offer, for instance, long term low interest credit for railway equipment coupled with financial support for studies for the new airport, this would be welcomed. The Prime Minister undertook to pass these points to the Minister for Trade who would be seeing the President tomorrow. She was aware of Plessey's efforts to obtain more work in Africa. The company did a great deal of export business.

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The President mentioned other areas in which British assistance would be welcomed. Gabon had already bought excellent but expensive TV equipment from Britain (manufactured by RCA of Jersey), two more sets of this equipment would be needed, and Gabon would like to have about four scholarships to enable Gabonese operators to train in Jersey. English was the first foreign language of Gabon. Assistance already given for training interpreters and translators had been greatly welcomed, and more training places for teachers and translators would be of great value. The Prime Minister asked Mr. Johnson to pursue this with the Gabonese Ambassador.

In a brief discussion of the African political scene, the Prime Minister touched upon current uncertainty in Uganda and President Bongo spoke of the situation in Chad. This had been under discussion in the conference he had attended in Nice where a Vice-President had explained the problem. The northern side encompassed ten political groups. There were Libyans working with the northern forces, apparently with support from the Soviet Union and Cuba, although one of the political groups was attempting to resist the Libyan influence. Gabon and other African countries were helping the southern political group, in pursuit of their belief that Soviet policies offered nothing to Africa. Chad, in effect, did not exist at present. No solution was in sight: the matter might have to come to the United Nations; alternatively, it might be possible to assemble an African peace-keeping force if the United Nations could finance it.

During the closing courtesies, President Bongo reiterated his request to the Prime Minister to let British businessmen know that Gabon was no French preserve.

I am sending copies of this letter to John Mortimer (Cecil Parkinson's office, Department of Trade) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

M. A. PATTISON

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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