

2008 ADVANCING FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY REPORT

Republic of the Congo

Part 1

The Republic of the Congo is ruled by a government in which most of the decision-making authority is vested in the executive branch. Denis Sassou-Nguesso, who assumed power following armed conflict in 1997, was elected president in 2002; presidential elections are next planned for 2009. Parliamentary elections in June and August 2007 were marred by irregularities and widely viewed as poorly run and highly disorganized. The government's human rights record remained poor, although there were fewer documented abuses in 2007. Serious problems remain, including: limited right by citizens to peacefully change their government; a judiciary overburdened, underfunded and subject to political influence, bribery and corruption; security forces reportedly responsible for extrajudicial killings, rapes, beatings, physical abuse of detainees and citizens, arbitrary arrest and detention, looting, solicitation of bribes and theft; poor prison conditions; official corruption and lack of transparency; infringement of personal privacy rights, including limits on freedom of movement and of the press; child labor; trafficking in persons; ethnic discrimination; and discrimination against indigenous people.

Part 2

The United States remains committed to promoting democratic principles, practices, values and human rights, with strategic goals of encouraging democracy and economic growth, investing in people, and providing humanitarian assistance. The embassy takes an active public diplomacy role while relying upon a network of NGO partnerships to provide humanitarian assistance. Greater military discipline, professionalism and respect for human rights are also encouraged by the United States through civil-military dialogue and military training exchanges. The embassy, using demarches, discussions with the government, and cooperation with the international community, continues to stress the need for the government to increase transparency in accounting for oil revenues and other public funds. As in previous years, the United States

supports and provides funding for projects dealing with human rights, free and fair elections, ethics and respect for human values, persons with disabilities and gender equality.

Part 3

As part of its on-going commitment to the development of democracy in the country, the embassy used mission personnel as informal observers during the 2007 parliamentary elections and continues to urge assistance from U.S. and international groups working on free and fair elections. The United States also funded NGO efforts to promote free and fair elections, which will continue as the 2009 presidential elections approach.

Because peace is a precondition for democracy, the embassy worked with local and international groups on negotiations and dialogue with a former rebel leader and his representatives in the war-torn Pool region.

Part 4

The United States supports projects to promote better understanding of good governance and the African Charter on Democracy. Programs to raise awareness of human rights, the rights of individuals detained or arrested and the rights of women are also supported. A campaign to teach ethics, the respect for differing values and acceptance of different cultures to 300 individuals across the country was awarded a grant in 2007. The United States also maintained an active and vocal role in the case of two local human rights activists who were harassed and detained multiple times by the government in 2007; by year's end, the two reported fewer problems and were able to travel freely.

The embassy opened its second American Corner in 2007, located in Pointe Noire, adding to the Brazzaville-based corner opened in 2006. The two American Corners hosted 18,000 Congolese visitors during the year and drew such speakers as Jane Goodall, London Club lawyers, Muslim religious leaders, ambassadors, political leaders and authors. The number of potential student, Fulbright and International Visitor Program applicants increased tenfold during 2007.

An internationally acclaimed documentary on Brazzaville street children, selected for the Cannes Film Festival, had its debut at the American Corner in Brazzaville; a legal and human rights activist who viewed the film at the American Corner later added protections for street children into legislation being pursued in the government. The embassy will continue to track this legislation, which may be one tool to fight against trafficking in persons. The embassy also organized and hosted a one-day International Women's Day seminar aimed at promoting gender equality. The United States supports freedom of the press and an independent media through grants and training.