

Farewell 'Mère Edith'

The grief of the Gabonese nation was shared by world leaders on the news of the death of the First Lady of Gabon, Edith-Lucie Bongo Ondimba

THE WIFE OF GABONESE President El Haj Omar Bongo Ondimba and the eldest daughter of Congolese President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, Edith-Lucie Bongo Ondimba passed away aged 45 on March 14 in Rabat, Morocco, where she had been undergoing treatment for a long illness.

Thousands of people turned out in Gabon to mourn their First Lady. Soldiers formed a guard of honour for the coffin draped in the flag of her native Republic of Congo where she was buried following a state funeral in Libreville. Crowds wept on the streets of the capital as a white hearse carried the coffin from the airport to the Presidential Palace where she was laid in state.

Numerous heads of state sent messages of condolence to the Gabonese President including Mohammed VI, the King of Morocco; Laurent Gbagbo, President of the Ivory Coast; and Alpha Omar Konaré, former leader of Mali. French President Nicolas Sarkozy wrote: "I

know how much her long illness caused you to suffer far beyond what your discretion allowed you to show. I know too that the formality of condolences and relations between states can appear distant and unnatural during such a difficult personal time. It is therefore as a friend rather than as a head of state that I send you my very deepest sympathies."

National day of mourning

Ten African heads of state and two prime ministers attended the funeral including Central Africa's François Bozizé; Idriss Déby of Chad; Faure Gnassingbé of Togo; Amadou Toumani Touré of Mali; Laurent Gbagbo of the Ivory Coast; Thomas Yayi Boni of Benin; Fradique de Menezes of São Tomé and Príncipe; and the First Lady of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Olive Lembe Kabila. France was represented by the President's General Secretary Claude Guéant and Cooperation and Francophony Minister Alain Joyandet. An ecumenical church service was

held and all regular TV programmes were interrupted to show the funeral live.

The First Lady was laid to rest on March 22 in Congo in the northern town of Edou before thousands of people and seven presidents, including her husband and her father, and her two children Yacine and Omar Denis.

"You will rest here with your people. God will welcome you to his kingdom," said President Sassou-Nguesso. He and President Bongo laid a wreath of flowers before the coffin bedecked with the green, yellow and blue Gabonese flag. Hundreds of red roses were thrown by mourners onto her coffin along with a banner which read: "For us, you will always be a model".

Aimé Emmanuel Yoka, Justice Minister for Congo, spoke of the "exceptional destiny of this child, daughter and wife of a head of state". In spite of her suffering, he said, she had been born to be loved in Congo and Gabon, adding that she had been a figure of courage and strength. ■

President Bongo stands before his wife's coffin at the Presidential Palace in Libreville (left). Right: President Bongo, his son Omar Denis, daughter Yacine Queenie and Congolese President Denis Sassou-Nguesso leave Rabat. Below: A guard of honour carries the coffin of the First Lady in Libreville



Clockwise: The First Lady and President Bongo arrive at the Elysée Palace, Paris; opening the African First Ladies' Summit in 2001; with Congolese counterpart Antoinette Sassou-Nguesso in Lebanon, 2002, for the Francophony Summit; with Bernadette Chirac at Libreville's General Hospital for the opening of an Aids treatment centre

A champion of women

Gabon's First Lady was a doctor whose healing hands touched the lives of the nation

BORN IN 1964 in Brazzaville, Congo, Edith-Lucie Bongo Ondimba was the eldest daughter of President Denis Sassou-Nguesso. A medical doctor by profession, she began her career at the University Teaching Hospital of Brazzaville in 1989 where she worked as a paediatrician before her marriage in 1990 to the President of Gabon.

From the start, the new wife of the chief of state insisted on continuing her career, taking up a post at the paediatric hospital of Owendo, Libreville. "For me, not working would be unthinkable," she said. "Fortunately, my husband has always understood that..."

Her upbringing as the daughter of one of Africa's longest-serving statesmen helped equip her with the skills required for a string of ambitious projects that improved the lives of the Gabonese people.

Motherhood – she gave the President a son and a daughter – was a motivating factor: "Having children changes you," she said. "It teaches you to have a healthy fear for the

people you have put on this Earth." Her work at the heart of Gabonese society won her the affectionate sobriquet of 'Mère Edith'.

In 1996, she established Fondations Horizons Nouveaux (FHN) in Libreville. A centre of excellence praised by UNESCO and a pioneering institution in Africa, it has a team of specialised staff and provides dedicated and subsidised care for children with disabilities.

As a member of Médecins du Monde, she dedicated much time to the international humanitarian aid organisation and was the founder of Gabon's best-equipped hospital, the Polyclinique El-Rapha in Libreville.

HIV/Aids is a disease in which she had a strong interest. "I specialised in retroviral diseases for my doctoral thesis and had the chance to see this virus both under the microscope and in action in my own country," she said. That challenge inspired her to become the founding president of the organisation African First Ladies Against HIV/Aids in 2002, and to take a leading role in New York at the *Treat Every Child as Your Own* campaign that

called for an end to the stigma that exists about Aids in Africa. Accompanied by 40 African First Ladies and in the presence of former US First Lady Laura Bush, she unveiled a unified effort to fight HIV/Aids in Africa, challenging adults to take responsibility for infection among children and to break their silence on the disease.

"Our objective is to awaken a sense of humanity and responsibility in people," she said. In Gabon she led a series of nationwide awareness campaigns, encouraging fidelity, abstinence and the use of the condom.

From the start, she was a champion of the women of Gabon. "It is women who are the most vulnerable to HIV because of their economic weakness," she said. "We need to awaken in them a spirit of independence and improve their intellectual, cultural and economic skills, and then assist them further with training, home management and micro-finance skills. If we can do that, believe me, women will be the making of this country." ■

Sarah Monaghan