

African Lightning

DEALING WITH JUJU CURSES

By G. Pascal Zachary



Jean-David Bile, in front of AES Corp.'s new 85 megawatt power plant in Limbé, Cameroon.

Photo by: AES Corp.

REFORMING AN AFRICAN electricity company requires tough love, persistence — and a little luck. Just ask Jean-David Bile, a civil engineer in the central African country of Cameroon. Bile runs AES Corp.'s electricity operation in Cameroon, a national grid that is chiefly powered by two large dams and was formerly fully owned by the infamously corrupt government of Cameroon.

Bile is rooting out corruption at the electricity company, cracking down on customer theft, improving the flow of electricity — and ending the practice of hiring people to satisfy the demands of politicians and traditional chiefs. His achievements don't always endear him to his fellow Cameroonians. Once, the chief of a village near his biggest dam implored him to hire some of his relatives. When Bile refused, the chief hurled a juju curse against him, but Bile still refused. "To implement dramatic reforms you have to be tough on your own people, or you'll never make it," he says.

When Bile first got his job two years ago, he was the first African to run an AES operating unit (the company runs electricity systems in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, the Ukraine, and many other farflung places). In Cameroon, AES faced perhaps its biggest challenge anywhere because no American company has ever run an entire African electricity grid before.

In Cameroon, Bile faces problems that might drive many utility executives into early retirement. Customers can only pay their bills in person. Even after a new billing system has sped up the process, long lines at the company's offices are common. While Bile has halted price increases, AES raised rates by about one-third prior to his tenure, prompting frequent customer complaints about high prices. Theft of electricity is so common that even Bile has donned a hard hat and joined his inspectors — and armed police — on midnight raids of electricity-stealing night clubs. "It takes some courage even for the common man to live in this country," he says. "Every day is a hard day."

At one recent staff meeting, Bile is told about the death of a customer killed while trimming an avocado tree. The customer accidentally severed a power line. Bile, who can be jocular and relaxed despite invariably wearing a suit and tie, sternly declares that the company had to better protect its customers. "Their safety," he says, "will be improved."

"Things are getting better," says Titi Manyaka, managing director of AES's largest customer in Cameroon, a subsidiary of Alcan, the Canadian aluminum maker, "and not only for AES's customers." Manyaka credits AES with realizing that an African chief executive brings crucial benefits to management. He praises Bile for solving problems that stumped earlier executives.

Born in 1947, Bile is the son of a civil servant and government minister. He attended college in Paris, earning a doctorate in engineering from the Sorbonne. Then, against the advice of his French professors, he returned to Cameroon. It was 1977 and this country's once-booming economy was starting a slow, steep decline. Bile worked for decades at the electricity company, rising to a senior position. But political interference and corruption were rife at the company, and Bile only went so far.

When AES bought the company five years ago, most senior Cameroonians were dismissed. Bile was kept and tapped as an adviser to an American chief executive and later a Scottish one. Both executives disappointed, partly because a serious drought curtailed electricity output in this hydro-heavy country.

Almost in desperation, AES turned to Bile in 2004. Not long afterwards, the rains returned, hydro generation soared, and the electricity outages declined. While some call the end of the drought a lucky break for Bile, most Africans view it as poetic justice. They see Bile as a local hero.

Bile feels his work is only beginning and that reforming electricity in Cameroon remains an urgent matter made all the more difficult because people tend to have low expectations of what's possible in Africa. "We know we need to do things quickly," Bile says. "The clock is ticking. We have to go fast, fast" to keep up with customer expectations.

"It's never too late to do the right thing in Africa," he adds. "It's never too late." ☺

CAMEROON

- Population: >> 17.3 million
- Population in poverty: >> 48 percent
- Electricity used: >> 2.8 billion kilowatt hours
- Area: >> Slightly larger than California

Source: CIA Factbook

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