

# Turning Gabon rivers into life lines

## Ottawa doctor devises floating clinic

BY JENNIFER PAGLIARO, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JANUARY 31, 2009



Dr. Don Kilby, right, heads a group launching a floating medical clinic in Gabon, while Dieudonné Aleka is training in Ottawa to work as a nurse's assistant on the boat.

**Photograph by:** Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

It's difficult for people in the Ngomo region of Gabon to obtain even the most basic health care. A Canadian aid organization will take advantage of the many lakes and rivers in the region and launch a floating medical clinic to travel where help is most needed.

The Canada-Africa Community Health Alliance is behind the specially designed pontoon boat that is being built in Canada and will later be shipped to Gabon in central-west Africa, piece by piece.

Dr. Don Kilby, CACHA's founder and the director of the University of Ottawa's health services, said the need for these floating dispensaries is high in a country where transportation is often by water. Some people have to travel 20 to 30 kilometres to seek medical attention.

"It became obvious that the only way to solve that problem was to use our Canadian know-how to help the people," said Dr. Kilby, who founded CACHA in 2001.

The clinic was designed by U-Fab Boats of Smiths Falls, Ont., which specializes in making unique boats. It's being built at a plant in Grand-Mère, Que., near Shawinigan. A floating clinic, Dr. Kilby explained, allows health services such as prenatal care and vaccinations for children to reach more villagers.

Jean-Charles Le Vallée, CACHA's executive director, said the organization is working with a local partner clinic in the Ngomo region. Gabonese staff will offer basic care, minor surgery and certain specialized practices, such as gynecology.

The clinic will also provide care to HIV/AIDS patients, continuing with the work of previous CACHA missions in Africa.

Mr. Le Vallée said the floating clinic will be built with the help of volunteers, then disassembled, shipped to Africa, and reassembled upon arrival.

One of these workers is Dieudonné Aleka, a Gabonese boat pilot who will be the clinic's captain. Mr. Aleka is in Ottawa receiving training in basic medical care. He will help assemble the boat, so he can help reassemble it in Gabon with the help of three others from Canada.

Dr. Kilby met Mr. Aleka during a previous medical mission to Gabon and chose him for this special project because of his keen interest.

"We want the pilot to be invested in the activities in the clinic," Dr. Kilby said.

Once the floating clinic is in operation, some time in March, the Gabonese government is committed to supporting the project financially.

"We need to raise \$125,000," Dr. Kilby said. "And in return the government of Gabon will spend \$700,000 up front." This \$700,000, Dr. Kilby said, will go towards building five more floating clinics as well as sponsoring five other medical missions in Gabon.

Elizabeth Lavoie, a board member, said the group has applied for funding from Industry Canada and CIDA. She said they're also counting on personal donations.

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen