



Farm equipment headed for Congo

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Farming and optimism are two things with which most Saskatchewan people are familiar.

The challenge facing a University of Regina professor is how to package that experience and send it to an African country.

Jean-Marie Nkongolo-Bakenda is a professor of international business and strategy at the U of R. On Friday, he displayed some of the farm equipment that will soon begin the long journey to his home country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The equipment, which will be packed in a 40-foot shipping container, will go towards helping local villages improve their agricultural practices by making them more efficient. In turn, this is expected to help children's education by keeping them in schools and out of the fields.

Nkongolo-Bakenda began preparing the shipment of the equipment two years ago after he returned from a trip to the small Congolese city of Gandajika.

"When I visited Gandajika and its neighbouring villages, I was shocked at how badly living conditions had deteriorated," said Nkongolo-Bakenda. "There were no seats for children in many of the schools. In many cases the schools could not operate full-time because both the teachers and the children had to work in the fields several days a week."

Nkongolo-Bakenda is sending a tractor, a grain truck, three cultivators, and other assorted farm equipment. Because of the limited transport space, much of the equipment had to be modified to fit into the shipping container.

"The truck was eight feet wide and the container is only seven feet," he said. "We had to narrow the truck to make it fit, which meant we needed to weld it and take some parts off."

Nkongolo-Bakenda did most of the welding himself, but also had some help from members of an association he started. The Association for the Development of the Rural Communities in Congo (ADERC) is a group dedicated to exactly what its name says.

The equipment purchased for Congo is unquestionably second-hand but is still in working condition. The money used to obtain the machines as well as to transport them across the world came from the expenses of Nkongolo-Bakenda and other members of his association.

"We paid for the equipment with the money that we had," he said. "It came out of my own pocket and out of the pocket of my friends that are helping me. It will cost approximately \$7,000 to send to Congo."

The container is scheduled to begin its journey on March 15. By train it will go to Saskatoon, then to Montreal. From Montreal it will be shipped to Antwerp, Belgium, to the Middle East, and on to Africa.

The container is expected to arrive in Ba Mpiana, Congo, sometime in May or June. With a few quick tune-ups, the equipment should be ready to use immediately upon arrival.

If Nkongolo-Bakenda's plan is successful, the number of children kept in school year-round should increase. He is optimistic that even older machines can make a big difference."

"Using the equipment, the villagers will be able to improve their efficiency and way of life through a sort of agricultural co-op," said Nkongolo-Bakenda. "They will eventually earn enough money to rebuild schools and purchase additional equipment that can be used in neighbouring villages."

"The long-term goal is to break the cycle of dependency in the area through business development."

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