JEAN-LOUIS BILLON
Minister of Commerce, Crafts and SME Promotion, Côte d'Ivoire

Profile by **Anver Versi**

Reviving the battered giant

Jean-Louis Billon is a young man carrying a heavy burden on his shoulders. In 2012, while on business in Geneva, he was summoned by the President of Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, to return home and take over the Ministry of Commerce, Crafts and SME Promotion.

Effectively, this was nothing short of asking him to restart the country's economic and commercial life – frozen by 20 years of political instability, including two damaging military conflicts.

Although Alassane Ouattara had won the 2010 elections against the incumbent Laurent Gbagbo, it was not until April 2011, when Gbagbo was arrested and shipped off to The Hague to face trial for crimes against humanity that the new government could concentrate on the business of governing.

In the 1970s and part of the 1980s, Côte d'Ivoire was widely lauded as Africa's 'miracle economy'. It was (and continues to be) the world's largest producer of cocoa at a time when global prices for this essential ingredient in the manufacture of genuine chocolate, were at a dizzying pace. Rubber, pineapples, palm, tea and oil all contributed to make this West African country the envy of the rest of Africa and to provide a relatively high standard of living for its population.

Then a series of political conflicts, centred on the issues of ethnicity and citizenship, split the country and development ground to a halt. A bitter conflict between 2002 and 2010, which raged with varying degrees of intensity, and a final violent upsurge in 2011 brought economic activity virtually to an end.

Nevertheless, throughout the period of unrest, the country's immensely rich agricultural sector continued to function, even if in very low gear. Key to this was the outstanding management of the country's largest company, SIFCA, and its subsidiaries. The agro-processing firm, which employs 25,000 people, grows, processes and markets palm oil, natural rubber and sugar and is also involved in neighbouring Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria.

SIFCA was founded by Pierre Billon – who until his death in 2001, was one of the most charismatic and progressive business leaders in Africa. His son, Jean-Louis, joined the family business in 1995 after a stint with Grace Cocoa in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, US. He worked his way up to general manager of the firm and stepped into his father's shoes as chairman of the board. The fracturing political situation at home as well as a very rapidly changing global commercial and economic landscape, required managerial and tactical skills of the highest order. For SIFCA, and the tens of thousands who depended on the company for their livelihood, this was sink-or-swim time. Could the young Jean-Louis Billon, who had obtained his higher educational degrees from French and US academies and cut his commercial teeth in a US company, adapt to the very special demands that Côte d'Ivoire presented? Would he be able to navigate his way through the country's treacherous political currents and overcome the rapid decline of the national infrastructure to still keep his company afloat?

The French, who at one time numbered around 50,000, were leaving in droves and closing down their companies. The French accounted for a quarter of all foreign investment and French companies contributed roughly 50% of taxes. This exodus played havoc with the economic and commercial superstructure.

Thriving in adversity

But instead of withdrawing into his shell as many had expected, Jean-Louis seemed to thrive in adversity. He entered a partnership with global rubber giant Michelin in 2002 to stablise the rubber industry and also plunged himself into civil affairs.

In 2001, he was elected mayor of Dabakala, the town of his and his father's birth. A year later, he was elected president of the national Chamber of Commerce and Industry and became involved in several other commercial and professional organisations. He was appointed board chairman of the United Bank of Africa, Côte d'Ivoire. He also became very involved in the activities of the Convention of Ivorian Civil Society (CSCI), which was created in 2003 following the outbreak of civil war in the country in 2002. CSCI was made up of a cross section of Ivorian society and dedicated to trying to bring peace to the warring factions in the country and restore confidence in the economy.

As president of the Chamber of Commerce, Billon was part of an international campaign to try and persuade international investors, business and tourists to return to Côte d'Ivoire. In 2008, he made an impassioned speech in France, urging companies to return and help rebuild his country. He also established partnerships with Singapore-

Above: Minister Jean-Louis Billon believes the SME sector is key.

based global food giants Olam and Wilmar to help him raise productivity.

When the Prime Minister of France, François Fillon, visited Côte d'Ivoire in 2011, Jean-Louis, as president of the national chamber or commerce, assured him that France remained the country's most important partner; he also however, pointed out that the world, and Africa had changed. "While Europe shows maturity, Africa is rich in youth; European growth is less dynamic, while the potential for growth in Africa in not even quantifiable," he said. He said that a resurgent Côte d'Ivoire would be a cornerstone of the new Africa which would become the main stage on which future global economic dramas would be played out. In short, the relationship was one of equals, "the logic of cooperation instead of confrontation".

Given Jean-Louis Billon's list of social and business achievements and his diplomatic skills, it is hardly surprising that President Alassane Ouattara would handpick him to begin the restoration of the country's economic life.

Perfectly at ease

I met him at a private dinner during the Africa-Singapore Business Forum (see page 80). He struck me as a cheerful young man refreshingly without any hang-ups. He seemed perfectly at ease in the international setting and you got the sense that he harboured no doubt whatsoever that Côte d'Ivoire would once again regain its reputation as 'The Jewel of West Africa'. He agreed with me that although the country was registering 9% growth figures, most of this related to infrastructure recovery rather than productivity, although this has shown a healthy 2% growth.

While France has never ceased to be the preferred trading partner of Côte d'Ivoire, a new day is dawning because Côte d'Ivoire is one of the cornerstones of a new Africa that will be the theatre of future global economic issues.

"We have been in crisis for the last 20 years," he said. "It is only now that we are resuming our development process. We're catching up on infrastructure and reforms. We're building roads, bridges, water dams, new refineries and working to more competitive – and become the best economy of the sub-region."

Although he has been a minister for a very short time, he has gained a reputation for speaking frankly and to believing in meritocracy rather than the bane of many West African countries – a dependence on connections.

He has already instituted policies that are likely to have far-reaching results. "The first item of the agenda was to restore the business framework – rules, regulations, anti-trust laws, competition stipulations and so on. The business environment is now secure and more and more companies are setting up shop. But, of course, we have to set up the infrastructure so businesses can flourish. We are doing that."

He is convinced that the key to rapid growth and job creation is the SME sector. He initiated the $170m Phoenix programme which will provide credit guarantees, market access and better protection to SMEs, which form about 98% of commercial enterprises in the country. The new code is based on the US Small Business Act. He wants larger companies to sub-contract tenders to SMEs and he wants to make sure that invoices are settled in 60 to 90 days. "We would like to double the number of SMEs over the next seven or so years," he told me.

He also wants to upgrade the status, skills and income levels of artisans and other craft people. Growth will come from increased exports. "We export a lot into the sub-Saharan region. What we need now is to increase are the exports to Europe, the US and Asia – we are weak in those regions of the world. At the same time, we are improving our mining and we would like to improve our exports of handicrafts and some agricultural products. We are now back in AGOA," he said, "and this will help us improve our exports."

Jean-Louis Billon is at the bottom of a steep hill; carrying a heavy load all the way to the summit will need determination, strength, stamina and confidence. From what I saw, this young leader has all that in plenty. ■