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## In War-Torn Congo, Going Wireless to Reach Home

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For Poor, Cellphones Bridge Digital Divide

By [Kevin Sullivan](#)  
Washington Post Foreign Service  
Sunday, July 9, 2006; Page A01



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KINSHASA, Congo -- Until not long ago, if Zadhe Iyombe wanted to talk to his mother, he had to make the eight-day boat trip up the Congo River to the jungle town where he was raised. In a country with almost no roads, mail or telephone system and a grisly guerrilla war raging, making that exhausting and dangerous trip was about the only way he could find out if his 59-year-old mother was still alive.

Then he got a cellphone.

Now he talks to his mother every day. And once a week, with a simple new feature in African cellphones, he uses a text message to transfer five minutes of airtime to her phone to make sure she can always call him.

"Now I know immediately how she is doing," said Iyombe, who lives here in the capital, 400 miles southwest of his mother's home. "These phones make everything easier. It has totally changed life in Congo."

As surely as the light bulb and the automobile before them, the cellphone and text messaging

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Fiston Disundi, an ex-soldier, receives cash in a transaction recorded on the teller's cellphone. The payment aims to get fighters to turn in their guns. (Kevin Sullivan - Twp)

**CRISIS IN DARFUR**



More than 2 million civilians have fled their homes and hundreds of thousands have died in the Sudan conflict.

are radically changing the way people live in the developing world. In widespread use for about five years in much of Africa, technology long taken for granted by the world's rich has made life easier, safer and more prosperous for the world's poor.

For the first time, millions of Africans are able to communicate easily with people who are beyond shouting distance. Farmers and fishermen, for example, use text messaging to check market prices, eliminating middlemen and increasing profits -- and preventing long trips to the market on days it is canceled.

In cities, cellphones are becoming a basic tool of electronic commerce, allowing consumers to transfer money to merchants with a few presses on the keypad.

Restaurant owners now can advertise by sending bulk texts to their customers, promising something delicious for lunch. People call a doctor, mechanic or police officer instead of walking miles to find one. News of births, deaths and illnesses instantly reaches the farthest corners of the jungle, where mothers like Iyombe's struggle with the concept of their children's voices emerging from a little plastic box with buttons.

"Before, if you had a sick baby in the middle of the night, he could easily die," Iyombe said, holding the Nokia phone that has raised his ambitions and expectations of life. "Now you can call somebody to help."

Worldwide, there are more than 2.4 billion cellphone users, with more than 1,000 new customers added every minute, according to industry analysts. About 59 percent of users are in developing countries, making cellphones the first telecommunications technology in history to have more users there than in the developed world.

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Cellphone usage in Africa is growing faster than in any other region and jumped from 63 million users two years ago to about 152 million today, according to David Pringle, a spokesman for the GSM Association, a trade group that represents cellular companies whose customers account for 80 percent of the global total.

Few places are seeing faster growth than Congo, which has 3.2 million cellphone customers and just 20,000 conventional land lines. At least 8,000 new cellphone customers sign up each day here; the number of users has increased more than tenfold in the past five years.

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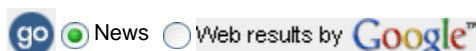
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