Congo ruler runs up
Land left in squalor by champagne president

New York

In two short visits to New York last year the leader of one of Africa’s poorest countries spent $400,000 (£207,000) on hotel bills as members of his entourage drank Cristal champagne and charged tens of thousands of dollars of room service to accounts paid by the Republic of Congo’s mission to the United Nations.

Detailed hotel bills obtained by The Sunday Times showed that a Waldorf Astoria suite occupied by Congo President Denis Sassou-Nguesso, chairman of the African Union, recorded £12,000 of room service charges during a five-night stay last April that cost his country £73,000.

When he returned to the same hotel during the UN general assembly meeting last September, almost £14,000 of room service was added to his bill during another five-night stay. His entourage, including several members of his family, occupied 44 rooms which together ran up a bill of £150,000 — comfortably more than the £106,000 that Britain gave the country in humanitarian aid last year.

The latest revelations about Sassou-Nguesso’s lavish travel habits have appalled anti-corruption campaigners and embarrassed the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Last year they agreed to a large debt relief package on the grounds that the country — known as Congo-Brazzaville to distinguish it from its neighbour, the Democratic Republic of Congo — was too poor to meet its financial commitments.

In what sense are these hotel bills a good use of Congo-Brazzaville’s money when the majority of the population doesn’t have electricity or drinking water?” said Sarah Wykes of Global Witness, an anti-corruption group active in the region.

More than 70% of Congo-Brazzaville’s 5m people live off less than £1 a day, despite the wealth generated by its oil industry which earned an estimated £1.3 billion in 2006.

Concern that oil profits were being siphoned off for the benefit of the country’s ruling elite led to controversy last year when The Sunday Times first published details of Sassou-Nguesso’s New York hotel bills after a previous visit in 2005.

Paul Wolfowitz, head of the World Bank, reportedly delayed the debt relief deal after learning that aides to Sassou-Nguesso had paid £100,000 in cash towards a September 2005 hotel bill totalling £169,000.

Despite his luxurious tastes attracting worldwide publicity, Sassou-Nguesso’s only concession to economy when he returned to New York before a meeting with President George W Bush last April was to stay in a £3,500-a-night “grand suite” in the Waldorf Towers, a luxury annex of the main hotel. The previous September he spent £4,500 a night for a triplex suite at the prestigious Palace hotel.

Most of the bills do not provide a breakdown of room service charges, but one visitor familiar with the Waldorf said they were so large that they must have included substantial quantities of expensive wines and spirits. The bills on September 19 included two bottles of Cristal champagne charged at £400.

Despite Wolfowitz’s corruption concerns, pressure from France and other African nations obliged the World Bank to implement a debt relief package. Yet two weeks after Sassou-Nguesso had committed himself to greater transparency about the handling of Congo-Brazzaville’s oil income, two of the country’s lead-
The plight of his people

- Population: 3.7m
- National income per head: £490 a year
- More than 70% of population live on less than £1 a day
- Infant mortality: 79.41 per 1,000 live births
- Under-five mortality rate per 1,000 children: 108
- Number of orphans: 270,000
- Inflation: 7.2%