

Newsletter

ISSN 2045-4236

March 2021

Issue no. 111

Anglo-Malagasy
Society 
founded 1961

society • Politics • Economics • Tourism • Minerals • Wildlife • Events • Society • Politics • Economics • Tourism • Minerals • Wildlife • Events

Society news

The Society held its first event for 2020 online on 20th February. Kerry Taylor, the auctioneer who oversaw the recent sale of artefacts relating to Queen Ranaivalona III, gave an insight into the event while Helihanta Rajaonarison, a researcher and teacher in History at the University of Antananarivo and co-founder of the Museum of Photography of Madagascar, spoke about the queen and the importance of historical photographs.

If the circumstances allow physical meetings later in the year, the plans are to hold further events on the evening of Wednesday 23rd June and during the day on Saturday 30th October.

There are details of events and other topics on Facebook and on our website at www.anglo-malagasysociety.co.uk.

We shall publish the next newsletter as of June 2021. Please send any material for inclusion as well as any changes in your contact details to the editor Julian Cooke, whose e-mail address is juliancooke@yahoo.co.uk.

There still remain an elusive four previous editions of the newsletter, which would complete our archive: numbers 7 (1980), 13 & 14 (1984-5) and 16 (1986).

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Politics in Madagascar

The first quarter of 2021 saw a considerable amount of political tension in Madagascar and the impact of a second wave of the coronavirus Covid-19, together with the death in March of the former president Didier Ratsiraka.

At the start of January President Andry Rajoelina in his new year address promised that there would be a new tramway in the capital Antananarivo, a previous plan under the Transition regime, and a cable car. His predecessor Hery Rajaonarimampianina voiced his criticism while another former president, Marc Ravalomanana, argued that the country had slipped back to a position that was untenable. The civil rights organisation SeFaFi said that the pandemic in 2020 had led to a concentration of presidential powers to the exclusion of other institutions and a shortfall in good governance.

The number of cases of the virus increased, although on 5th January Hanitrana Rakotovoao, the Minister of Health, maintained that the situation was under control with no need for renewed restrictions. The ministry remained committed to the use of Covid-Organics as a traditional remedy rather than subscribing to the WHO-led Covax programme for poorer countries, although it did look to limit larger gatherings of more than fifty people. A poll also indicated that 82% of citizens approved of the initiative to develop domestic treatments. On 15th January the country banned all private international flights and the number of countries excluded from travel rose to forty-four. The increase in cases was mostly in the capital and the surrounding Anamalanga district, with a resurgence also in Toamasina. At the University of Antananarivo three-quarters of one set of forty-four tests reported positive.

There were indications of unrest in the army. Madagascar's Council of Churches (FFKM) noted the difficulties the populace had faced and Eric Rakotoarisoa, the president of the Haute Cour Constitutionnelle (HCC), called on the new members of the now-smaller Senate to be cognisant of their responsibility and the misfortunes of the country.

Later in January there were rumours of a ministry shuffle, apparently complicated by some resistance to replace the *côtier* prime minister Christian Ntsay, with potential candidates said to include Paul Rafanoharana, a former diplomatic adviser under the Transition, and Raymond Ranjeva.

The launch of the President's Plan pour l'Emergence de Madagascar (PEM) was postponed indefinitely mid-month. On 19th January Rajoelina appointed a further six members of the Senate in addition to the twelve elected; Herimanana Razafimahefa, a loyal supporter of Rajoelina, was elected unopposed as the new president of the chamber. There was some concern over the proposed number of assistants for the new senators (each could have ten permanent ones) and the cost, which seemed to contradict one rationale for the change. On 21st January the HCC decided that the numbers were excessive and then in February confirmed a reduced quota of 36 not 41 assistants for the Senate president, with six permanent and three temporary for each senator, numbers which still allowed for considerable patronage. The Senate had only just completed before the change its enquiry into the jail-break at Farafangana, the illegal import of weapons, duplications in the electoral list and the handling of the pandemic. The commissions noted that aid during the pandemic had been unequal, arms imported outside the norms and the handling of the prison outbreak poorly co-ordinated, if to little effect - Jean Rafidiarison, head of the enquiry into the handling of the crisis, noted the lack of participation by the authorities.

On 24th January Andry Rajoelina laid the foundation stone at a ceremony that served to emphasise his cordial relations with the Catholic church. On 25th January there was unrest at the university in Antsiranana after a protest over the lack of running water and electricity; the police suffered some injuries, used tear gas and detained six students as well as making further arrests later on the campus.

On 28th January Madagascar deported back to the Comoros Inssa Mohamed, an opponent of President Azali Assoumani and alleged leader of an attempted coup in April 2020.

Christine Razanamahasoa, the president of the National Assembly, warned at the start of February that there might be proceedings against members of the opposition whom she accused of spreading false news, which came to include reports that the prime minister and minister of defence had resigned, or at least that the former had left the country. A former minister of communication, Vonison Andrianjato, was questioned and later detained. The opposition planned a demonstration for 6th February, which in the end was held outside of the capital at Imerikasinina and passed peacefully although with heavy attendance by the police, who then banned further political demonstrations. Supporters of Rajoelina held their own commemoration of the events in February 2009.

The FFKM was called on to intervene in what seemed to be a growing crisis and in turn called on the political classes to act responsibly. The military denied rumours of tension in their ranks as well as the reported arrival at Nosy Be of mercenaries. The prime minister called on the opposition to be patient and to adhere to the electoral calendar if they wanted to secure power.

On the weekend of 13/14th February a heavy presence of the forces of law and order deterred demonstrators and on 15th February the TIM opposition deputies announced plans for a further demonstration in the capital at Ambohitatovo, now a park if previously the Place de la Démocratie. The police and the capital's mayor, Naina Andriantsitohaina, said the event could not take place while the country's reconciliation council, the Conseil du Fampihavanana Malagasy (CFM), called for calm. The authorities blocked streets leading to the city centre to prevent entry and only allowed pedestrians if they were not wearing red, the colour of the opposition, although a dozen so dressed were arrested. The opposition deputy Hanitra Razafimanantsoa (whose daughter was arrested on the day of the demonstration) condemned the lack of freedom of expression but General Angelo Ravelonarivo, the prefect of police for Antananarivo, said he would oppose any opposition event.

On 22nd February various opposition parties formed a new alliance *Tolon'ny vahoaka malagasy* as a movement against abuse of power; it included TIM, RMDAM and the Panorama group. Marc Ravalomanana called for the release of the arrested demonstrators and protested at the increased police presence at his home.

The student unrest continued through February, with arrests in Antsiranana, clashes in Antananarivo and the death of a student at Toamasina, which the Gendarmerie said had been in self-defence. The government said it would deal with the late payment of student bursaries.

By late February there was a worrying increase in Covid-19 cases at Nosy Be.

The opposition agreed to hold a meeting planned for 6th March at Soamandrakizay, 10km from the centre of the capital, although the Catholic church objected to the use of its premises and the prefect of police refused authority. Rajaonarimampianina's HVM party encouraged its supporters to attend. The police did authorise a meeting instead at the Magro building in Behoririka under strict conditions, which several thousand attended. Andry Rajoelina and members of the government attended an event at the Mahamasina stadium with a prayer for peace.

The council of ministers convened an extraordinary session of parliament to elect new members of the HCC including a replacement for its president Jean Eric Rakotoarisoa, as their terms of office had expired. The National Assembly elected two magistrates close to the government in Rojoniaina Andriamaholy, wife of a secretary-general in the presidency, and Georges Nandrasana.

On 16th February the French ambassador, Christophe Bouchard, in a meeting with the Senate president Herimanana Razafimahefa, agreed to a prompt resumption of talks on the contested Iles Eparses. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) pledged support to Madagascar on the issue.

Incidences of the Covid-19 virus started to increase in the regions of Analamanga, Boeny and Diana. The Ministry of Health said it would re-commence distribution of Covid-Organics, or CVO, while the USA and UNICEF offered medical equipment. Roland Ratsiraka, the deputy for Toamasina, deplored the refusal to use vaccines and the Chinese ambassador noted that it was ready to provide 10m doses of its vaccine to developing countries. On 16th March the Minister of Health said the country was awaiting rather than refusing vaccines and that it should continue to make use of products made in Madagascar, while imposing new restrictions on funerals and sporting events. The former presidents Ravalomanana and Ratsiraka said they supported the use of vaccines, as did Amnesty International and the Academie Malgache; but on 20th March Andry Rajoelina said he had no intention of being vaccinated and still preferred CVO, arguing that Madagascar was still studying the effects of the vaccines. He acknowledged that the country faced a second wave of infection with 2,483 cases and 45 deaths in the previous month, with the South African variant a feature. The government announced that Nosy Be and Mahajanga would face restrictions for a fortnight and that international flights to the island would stop after 27th March. Finally on 25th March the government approved the use of vaccines, if by choice not by compulsion, and the country joined the Covax programme.

Didier Ratsiraka died on 28th March at the age of 84 following a brief period in hospital. Rajoelina declared a day of national mourning on 29th March, the anniversary of the uprising in 1947; Ratsiraka was interred at the mausoleum at Ambohitsaina. Rajoelina said the Malagasy people had lost an illustrious patriot and Ravalomanana spoke of his sadness. There is a review of the legacy of Ratsiraka in *The Conversation* at <https://theconversation.com/didier-ratsiraka-the-legacy-of-madagascars-red-admiral-143017>.

Economic and social matters

Famine in south

The south of Madagascar has continued to struggle with persistent challenges from drought and food insecurity. The UN estimated in January that 1.27m needed humanitarian assistance and called for \$75.9 million in aid. The area is also experiencing dust and sand storms, a natural phenomenon known as a *tiomena* that is exacerbating the crisis by smothering crops, forests, buildings and roads. Southern Madagascar has experienced five below-average rainy seasons in the last six from 2015/16 to 2020/21. For poor households 2019/20 food stocks ran out in September, two months earlier than usual, while crops from the 2020/21 season will not be available until May and will likely be below average. The Japanese ambassador announced aid of \$3m in February.

Finance and aid

In January the World Bank warned that Madagascar's economic recovery would be limited by a second wave of the virus, while warning also of the impact of natural disasters and social unrest, given the increase in poverty. It said that medium-term prospects depended on an increase in productivity in agriculture and formal employment in other sectors. Madagascar's economy is expected to have contracted by approximately 4% in 2020 and the International Monetary Fund forecasts growth of 3.2% in 2021.

In February the US Agency for International Development (USAID) outlined a new five-year strategic plan which would provide over \$490 million in development assistance over the next five years. At end March IMF approved a \$312.4 million extended credit facility arrangement for Madagascar to help it cushion the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate-related shocks, with an immediate disbursement of \$69m.

Health

An analysis in January noted that only 9% of the \$836m of the emergency expenditure from funds in the pandemic had been spent on health, compared a third on infrastructure projects.

The Ministry of Health reported in February that 65% of children under 15 had suffered from malaria. USAID calculated that 1.4m people or 5.6% of the population had contracted the disease in the first eleven months of 2020, amidst concerns that medicines were going astray.

In March nineteen people, including nine infants, died from food poisoning from a turtle.

Agriculture

A campaign against locusts started in February. In March the government estimated that some 70,000 hectares had been damaged in five districts.

Business

Helios Towers announced agreements with Airtel Africa to acquire for \$108m its infrastructure operating companies in Madagascar and Malawi.

Insecurity

In January the Gendarmerie reported that over the course of 2020 some 17,000 stolen zebu had been returned to their owners and 1,046 *dahalo* or bandits captured, although there was only one reported kidnapping.

The incidents of banditry, summary justice and kidnappings continued apace, nonetheless.

Indices

Madagascar was ranked 149th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's report on global Corruption Perception Indices. While there was a slight improvement in the score to 25/100 this remained short of the target of 40/100 by 2030 under the government's plan.

In February the *Economist Intelligence Unit* (EIU) placed Madagascar 85th in the world in its survey on democracy if in the top ten countries in Africa.

Tourism

In March Aina Raveloson, the president of Madagascar's tourism confederation, said the sector had lost out on \$500m in revenue in 2020. After the first flights resumed to Nosy Be in October there were only an estimated 5,500 passengers by March of whom some 1,700 were tourists. There were concerns that visitors had been a contributing factor in the renewed incidence of coronavirus cases.

Minerals and mining

Production re-started at the Ambatovy nickel and cobalt mine in March after a stoppage that had lasted a year.

Madagascar's graphite production has shown increased potential. Black Earth Minerals signed a supply agreement for its Maniry mine with the German firm Luxacarbon, whose customers are large car manufacturers and chemical companies. This agreement was for an annual supply of 25,000 tonnes out of the mine's expected total production of 500,000 over the next three years. The Indian company Tirupati Graphite is expected to report its first production from the Vatomina and Sahamamy projects by mid-2021 with expected initial annual capacity of 12,000 tonnes; the company is also rebuilding an 100 kW hydroelectric facility at Sahamamy which last operated in 2005. NextSource in March appointed Sir Mick Davis, the former CEO of Xstrata Plc, as Chairman and raised an initial \$6.1m out of a planned \$29.5m funding package for its Molo project, which includes a value-added graphite processing plant to produce spheronised, purified graphite (SPG) for lithium-ion batteries in electric vehicles. The Molo mine is expected to be fully operational in March 2022 with capacity in its processing plant to produce 17,000 tonnes pa.

Climate and conservation

Forests and protected areas

In February the US Department of State's awarded two \$1 million grants for projects that combat wildlife trafficking and illegal logging. One will go to the Wildlife Conservation Society and the Centre for Advanced Defence Studies to improve the capacity of law enforcement to protect north-eastern Madagascar's hardwoods; the second to TRAFFIC and Durrell for their work to reduce trafficking in tortoises, lemurs, and other endangered species in Madagascar.

In March the World Bank agreed with the Malagasy government funding of \$50m under its Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) to reduce emissions from deforestation, to conserve forest carbon stocks and to promote sustainable forest management. The agreement covers some 7m hectares of land in the east of the country, about a tenth of the total surface and involving 177 communes.

In March Mongabay reported how the Ankeniheny-Zahamena Corridor had experienced a surge in deforestation, driven largely by slash-and-burn agriculture deforestation include mining for gemstones and cutting of trees to make charcoal. The article is available at <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/slash-and-burn-farming-eats-away-at-a-madagascar-haven-for-endangered-lemurs-frogs/>.



RBG KEW reported how The British ambassador David Ashley was involved in the planting at a school of over 400 seedlings of native plant species (*Khaya madagascariensis*, *Zanthoxylum madagascarienses* and *Eugenia sakalavarum*) as well as the baobab *Adasonia suarezensis*, <https://www.kew.org/read-and-watch/make-madagascar-green-again>.

Species

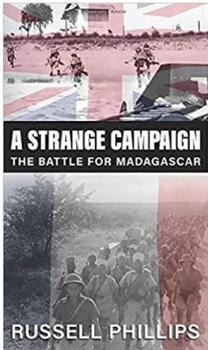


Scientists from Madagascar and the Bavarian State Collection of Zoology in Munich named *Brookesia nana*, a chameleon just 13.5mm long, compared to 15mm for the previous smallest known species, another member of the Brookesia family. The animals were spotted by a local guide during a 2012 expedition, which identified a female carrying two eggs and a male, with genitals almost a fifth of its body size, perhaps needed to mate with the larger female. The findings are in the journal Scientific Reports <http://www.sci-news.com/biology/brookesia-nana-09307.html>

In February *National Geographic* carried an article on how a lemur had died of tuberculosis, as part of a wider review of reverse zoonosis as well as the wider implications of the pet trade.

The details are at <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/animals/2021/02/a-lemur-died-from-tuberculosis-heres-why-that-matters> .

Books



A new book *A Strange Campaign: The Battle for Madagascar* by Russell Phillips will be released on 5th May. It relates to Operation Ironclad in the Second World War when British forces landed on the island in 1942 to help prevent Japan using it as a strategic base to disrupt the supply line to India.

Charities and NGOs

TASC Madagascar have updated their website at www.tascmadagascar.org which covers their work in south-eastern Madagascar.