

Newsletter

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Society news

The Society is holding its second event for 2021 online instead of in person and a little later than the original date of 23rd June. On 3rd July Rija Rakotoson, who is Director General of Madagascar's National Environment Office, talks on *Preserving natural resources in a time of uncertainty in Madagascar*. This explores the office's role in ensuring that investment does not jeopardise the needs of future generations, at a time when the pandemic combined with climate change have put considerable pressure on the financial resources and natural capital in Madagascar. Rija is a former Chevening Scholar, who studied for a Master's degree in Sustainable Energy & Environment at Cardiff University in 2015.

If the circumstances allow we shall hold a physical meeting later in the year, during the day on Saturday 30th October.

There are details of events and other topics on Facebook and on our website at www.anglo-malagasy.com.

We shall publish the next newsletter as of September 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.

We might need to offer a reward for the elusive four previous editions of the newsletter, which would complete our archive - numbers 7 (1980), 13 & 14 (1984-5) and 16 (1986) - but would still welcome any suggestions. We can also look to renew our offerings from the archive.

Politics in Madagascar

The second quarter of 2021 saw renewed efforts in Madagascar to deal with the impact of a second wave of the coronavirus Covid-19, which was officially recognised in mid-March, as well as the threat of famine in the south of the country.

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While there was no national lock-down, the regions of Analamanga, Atsinanana, Sava, Boeny and Nosy Be faced travel restrictions and a curfew. The Ministry of Health acknowledged that there was a shortage of oxygen for those in hospital with the disease, while denying that there was any plan to charge for it. There were concerns that the government's approach had been too lax while the tourism industry welcomed the decision in March to adhere to the COVAX programme for vaccinations. The government met in the council of ministers online but there were large gatherings over the Easter weekend. The ministry also offered a year's contract to any doctors or paramedics, although the head of the paramedic union, Jerisoa Ralibera, called for a more strategic approach.

At the start of April President Andry Rajoelina appointed three new members of the Haute Cour Constitutionnelle (HCC), whose nine members now comprised a majority of women. Two members then contracted Covid-19 so the election of the court's president did not come until the end of the month, when Florent Rakotoarisoa was elected unopposed; he had held a number of prominent roles, including Minister of the Interior under the Transition.

In mid-April Rajoelina said that the health situation was critical and the Ministry of Health indicated that the current wave of infection might not peak before July. The government converted hotels and schools into treatment centres and moved to import more oxygen, while the Analamanga region was restricted to essential services only at weekends. The president announced a ban on any protest gathering.

On 19th April the government announced that Madagascar would acquire the Chinese vaccine Sinopharm along with those manufactured by Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer/BioNTech and the Covishield version from AstraZeneca, one manufactured in India. The Russian Sputnik vaccine was also under consideration, as deemed effective against the South African variant that was causing the main concern in the second wave. There was also a demand for traditional remedies and the director-general of Pharmalagasy said that there was no shortage of stock for Covid-Organics, although pharmacies ran short of medicines that might treat the illness.

On 20th April the government banned any further arrivals by air, although a weekly Air France flight was still able to repatriate individuals. On 26th April the aircraft still arrived and with some 280 people on board, apparently as approved previously; thirty-four of them tested positive for the virus. One flight brought 2,000 oxygen machines from China and a subsequent one on 3rd May delivered the same number of canisters of oxygen.

The government introduced restrictions on the press as of 23rd April, reserving the right to ban broadcasts it judged detrimental during the course of the medical emergency. There was a deal of protest from civil rights bodies while the Ordre des Journalistes de Madagascar called on the Conseil d'État to annul the ministerial edict. A few days later on 26th April the Ministry of Communications agreed that certain stations could continue to operate under strict conditions. The restrictions were removed in late May.

On 2nd May Rajoelina extended the emergency by a further fortnight and imposed travel restriction on three further regions in Vakinankaratra, Haute Matsiatra and Anosy, while lifting those for Boeny and Nosy Be.

Ahead of the arrival of the first batch of vaccines the deputies in the National Assembly argued that they should be included as a priority group. The eventual plan, as elaborated by the Ministry of Health and the Académie Nationale de Médecine, envisaged three phases running to June 2023. There would be an initial batch of 250,000 to cover those most at risk, in the health sector or aged over 70 (if but 3% of the population); a second phase for the next most vulnerable, aged over 60 or in the security forces; and a third for all the population aged over eighteen.



On 8th May Madagascar received 250,000 doses of the Covishield vaccine. As of that date the country had registered 38,874 infections and at least 716 deaths. The health minister, Jean-Louis Rakotovo, was the first to be vaccinated although over the first three weeks only a limited number of doses were given, suggesting some reluctance (if including a score of deputies).

Rajoelina announced plans to focus recruitment on education, health and security, with a further pledge of \$50m over the remainder of his term to fund hospital equipment such as scanners and oxygen machines.

On 10th May the National Assembly took the decision to limit broadcasts of its sessions, after some concerns over comments by deputies in the previous one over priority vaccinations and police recruitment. The HCC endorsed the move a week later. On 18th May the eighteen members of the Senate all made the required wealth declaration, if later than within three months of appointment as stipulated. An increasing number of deputies at the National Assembly also complied, with thirty still to do so. On 24th May the Senate started to review a proposed statute on the formal status of the opposition, which it had first considered then adjourned in 2019. The Senate on 27th May approved unanimously the new statute by which the official leader of the opposition would be a deputy in the National Assembly, who would also serve as the seventh vice-president of the lower house. TIM, whose leader Marc Ravalomanana was not a deputy, said it would not put forward a candidate.

The Ministry of Health announced on 17th May that the peak in the second wave of infections had been in mid-April and there were further adjustments to the restrictions in place. At the end of May Rajoelina maintained the state of emergency but lifted the weekend lock-down in Analamanga as well as the travel restrictions in that region, Vakinankaratra, Haute Matsiatra and Anosy.

The National Assembly decided to defer at the start of June a proposed change to the law on nationality, which would have included extending from five years to ten the minimum term of residency before application for citizenship. The topic raised some heated comments over the potential for foreigners to gain and given concerns over the sale of ancestral land. The civil rights body KMF/CNOE called for a wider debate outside of parliament and for any proposals to be made available in the Malagasy language. The Council of ministers on 9th June confirmed the law that created a twenty-third region from the separation of Vatovavy-Fitovinany into two, with the full details to follow. The Senate postponed with no given reason the proposed

reform of the Pôles Anti-Corruption (PAC) as well as the setting up of a commission of enquiry into gold smuggling, although it did then pass the PAC law on 21st June with a number of amendments. At the end of June the HCC adjudicated in support of the proposed legislation adopted by the National Assembly that would limit the leader of the opposition to being an elected member of the house, while also suggesting that any opposition activity should be limited to the chamber. On 29th June the Assembly approved a revised Budget or Loi des Finance after a stand-off with the Ministry of Finance, which had proposed a reduction in funds for the body.

By 7th June, after the first twenty-five days of the first phase of the vaccination programme, only 62,622 doses had been administered. While there was then an accelerated uptake there were still 51,060 of the initial 250,000 doses unused by the end of the run. The French embassy imported 6,000 doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to inoculate its own and other European citizens. A statement from the French ambassador that the Covishield vaccine included in the Covax programme was not recognised in Europe caused some consternation, although a representative of the UN said they would continue to use it. The Ministry of Health authorised private firms to import their own vaccines.

On 9th June France formally established a natural reserve centred on the archipelago of the Iles Glorieuses, part of the Iles Eparses, a move that Madagascar had opposed as it laid claim to what it called Nosy Sambatra. A brief visit to Europe for family reasons by Rajoelina in mid-June prompted speculation that he had been vaccinated, while the presidency maintained that he had entered on the basis of a negative PCR test. France moved at the end of June to ban the import of certain goods from Madagascar.

The commemoration of Madagascar's national day on 26th June took place at the newly-rebuilt Barea stadium, named after the country's football team after works by a Chinese contractor that doubled its capacity to 40,000. Neither Ravalomanana nor the other surviving former president Hery Rajaonarimampianina attended. The president pardoned or reduced the terms for a substantial number (10,840) of detainees. The prime minister, Christian Ntsay, announced a further fortnight's extension of the state of emergency after the national day.

Economic and social matters

Famine in south

At the end of April the World Food Programme (WFP) highlighted the continuing crisis in the south of Madagascar. WFP said it would need \$74m over the next six months to save lives and to avoid a catastrophe; twenty-two people were reported to have died in the Ambovombe district in April. The drought had been compounded by deforestation, with sand covering agricultural land, and by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic as well as the continued insecurity in the region. Crop production in southern Madagascar in 2021 was 10-30% below the level in 2019 and 50-70% below the five-year average.

In May Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières) were amongst those to highlight the risk of famine and they called for an immediate, substantial increase in food aid. There are details at <https://www.msf.org/food-aid-needed-famine-looms-southern-madagascar> which includes the finding that in some villages in the Amboasary district an average of 28% of children under five were acutely malnourished, one-third of whom had severe malnutrition and were therefore at a high risk of death.

France24 included a report from its journalist Gaëlle Borgia who had travelled to the Anosy region, at <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20210514-starving-in-silence-in-madagascar>. The report prompted a strong reaction and some controversy, with Reporters Without Borders calling for an end to a smear campaign against the journalist; the details are at <https://rsf.org/en/news/smear-campaign-targets-prize-winning-reporter-madagascar>.

In June the WFP reported again that southern Madagascar was experiencing its worst drought in four decades and that more than 1.14m people were in need of food supplies with some 14,000 already facing catastrophic conditions. A WFP director David Beasley repeated the call for funds and stressed in an interview with CNN the challenges in the country; the report is at <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2021/06/23/madagascar-droughts-famine-climate-change-beasley-intv-anderson-ctw-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn/video/playlists/around-the-world/>. Beasley emphasised the impact of climate change not conflict, and Madagascar is the only country that is not at war or in conflict that still has people facing the most extreme state of Famine-Humanitarian Catastrophe in the United Nations food security classification.

The US government promised up to \$40m in additional support to provide emergency food aid, treat malnutrition and improve hygiene, as well as rebuilding wells to ensure access to clean water. The UN released \$8m from its Central Emergency Response Fund while the African Development Bank Group provided a grant of \$686,000 to the WFP. ReliefWeb carried an article that explained the cycle and the potential benefit of introducing a wider use of sorghum <https://reliefweb.int/report/madagascar/study-reveals-ancient-cereal-grain-maybe-link-helping-drought-affected-countries>.

Finance and aid

According to IMF data in April Madagascar imported \$470m of goods from China in 2020, more than from France, the US and the UAE if down sharply on the \$781m figure in 2019. China was the country's sixth largest export market at \$92m behind Japan, India, South Korea, the US and France, if likewise down on 2019 when the total value was \$165m.

In April the International Monetary Fund expressed concerns about the Central Bank of Madagascar's purchase of unrefined gold from local producers, which it considered might interfere with the bank's autonomy. In May the World Bank estimated that the pandemic might have reversed previous progress in reducing the rate of poverty in Madagascar, which it estimated stood at 78% in 2021, the same level as in 2009. In June the Isle of Man sent £800,000 to the World Health Organisation (WHO) to support Covid-19 work in Madagascar and South Africa; it had identified a number of countries where there were significant funding gaps in tackling the pandemic, while Madagascar formed part of efforts to support small islands.

Health

In June the WHO announced that in the month to 20th May there had been 109 cases of human Rift Valley fever in the regions of Vatovavy Fitovinany, Haute Matsiatra, Alaotra Mangoro and Analamanga, with two deaths recorded.

Madagascar announced a programme due to start in August 2021 to combat malaria, for which there were 2m reported cases in 2020. USAID said in April that it would donate 3.667m treated bed nets, with the Global Fund due to provide the 10m others expected.

There have been incidents of people falling in when eating rosary peas as a natural remedy, even though they are classified as poisonous.

Business

In April the FT reported that the US telecom group Millicom was pulling out of Africa to focus on Latin America and had sold its Tanzanian operations to the Madagascan operator Axian. In May the former French president Nicholas Sarkozy took on an advisory role at Axian. The details are at <https://www.ft.com/content/cf45dac2-8eb3-45a0-9972-04131c1940f8>.

Insecurity

Incidents of zebu theft, banditry from *dahalo* or bandits and summary justice continued in the second quarter of the year, in spite of an increased military presence. There was also a renewed incidence of kidnappings.

In June the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime reported that corruption and its strategic location were behind Madagascar's emergence as a hub for drug trafficking. Shifts in drug routes along the East African coast had seen disembarkation points for drugs move from Kenya to Tanzania and to ports in northern Mozambique, while the majority of heroin arriving in Madagascar was trafficked to other Indian Ocean island states or to an extent by air to Europe and North America.

Energy

In May the Off-Grid Market Development Fund, which had been established by the Malagasy government in partnership with the World Bank, made \$2.5m available to a dozen companies to distribute electricity access kits, ranging from solar lanterns to solar home systems. The companies will be eligible for an additional \$25.5m in subsidies, if specific targets are met.

In June Axian Group announced plans to double the size of its 20MW Ambatolampy photovoltaic power plant, which went into operation in 2018. The plant is a joint venture with Green Yellow Madagascar, and the €17m project is due to be complete by the end of 2021.

Tourism

The tourism industry in Madagascar has remained under pressure given the lack of visitors, while the national airline Air Madagascar has faced continued financial pressures.

Minerals and mining

In April Tirupati Graphite announced the opening of a second mine at its Vatomina project, which was due to see the commissioning of processing plant by June for an initial 9,000 tonnes pa. Tirupati has revealed plans to produce up to 30,000 tonnes pa by the first quarter of 2022 as part of a strategy to become a key supplier of the mineral, which has seen increased demand in clean energy uses. In May the Canadian company NextSource announced an agreement with thyssenkrupp for the supply of 35,000 tonnes pa over ten years from its Molo graphite mine. The company is considering a second phase expansion of at least 150,000 tonnes pa to follow the \$25m first phase of 17,000 tonnes pa of concentrate.

In May the Andrew Lees Trust shared an evaluation by Dr Steven Emerman of the report that was issued in March 2021 on waste water from the ilmenite mine and it called for a national enquiry into the impact on the Anosy region. The report indicated that the QMM/Rio Tinto mine was exposing local waterways to levels of uranium and lead that were fifty and forty times respectively in places the WHO guidelines for safe drinking water. The evaluation is available at http://www.andrewleestrust.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ALT-UK-Evaluation-of-QMM-_Wastewater_Discharge_by-Dr-S-Emerman-2021.pdf.

In May the Chinese oil company CNOOC was reported to be interested in taking on a number of licences formerly held by BP and Exxon.

Climate and conservation

Forests and protected areas

In April BirdLife International published an obituary by Roger Safford in honour of Rado Andriamasimanana of ASITY Madagascar, noting his contribution to conservation in the country. The tribute is at <https://www.birdlife.org/africa/news/remembering-rado-leading-figure-madagascars-environmental-movement-passes-away>.

The climate activist Marie Christina Kolo was one of two young people who spoke to the UN Secretary-General António Guterres ahead of the International Mother Earth Day on 22nd April. She explained her concerns over the impact on Madagascar of the pandemic and climate change, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/04/1090272>.

A project by the Missouri Botanical Garden, Kew Madagascar Conservation Centre, the IUCN and the University of Antananarivo formally assessed the trees in Madagascar, which has 5% of the world's species and a high level of endemism if also a high rate of deforestation. This was the first systematic evaluation for over 90% of the 3,118 species in the report, a tenth of which are in the IUCN's critically endangered category. Mongabay carried the details at <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/05/madagascars-vanishing-trees/>.

In June the NGO Alliance Voahary Gasy reported that the dry forest in the protected area of Menabe Antimena might disappear in four years, as illegal activity already occupied 45% of the area.

Species

In May researchers reported that the use of a gillnet known as *jarifa* used for shark-fishing in the waters around Madagascar had led to an increased incidence of catches of the coelacanth. The report in the *South African Journal of Science* found that the capture of thirty-four creatures from 1987 to 2019 pointed to Madagascar being an epicentre for the species as well as to the threat of extinction.

A new study by the Wildlife Conservation Society around the Makira Natural Park which is in *Conservation Science and Practice* (2021 DOI: 10.1111/csp2.441) indicated that 53% of households had eaten lemur meat over the previous year and 24% had eaten fossa meat.

NPR broadcast a ten-minute interview with Alastair Harris of Blue Ventures on the work of marine conservation with the Vezo fishing communities. There is a transcript and link to the broadcast at <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1009941696?t=1624715766075>.



In May SEED Madagascar published a blog on the impact of deforestation and forest degradation was having on its Renitantly beekeeping project. The details are at <https://madagascar.co.uk/blog/2021/05/deforestation-beekeeping>.

Books and events

Hanta Rakotomavo in Strasbourg is helping to promote a new book by Professor Huguette Fugier *Comment la parole accede à l'espace public dans le Royaume d'Imerina*. The proceeds will help to fund an environment project by the Association Solidarité Alsace-Madagascar in tree planting and the provision of ovens. Details are at <https://alsacemadagascar.blogspot.com/>.

Baritone Michael Arivony from Madagascar won the fourth round of the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World 2021 with a programme of Ravel, Schumann, Schubert and Vaughan Williams. There is an excerpt at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/events/r2hzp6/play/p091plx2>.

Charities and NGOs

A report in May described how the Prince Albert II Foundation and the One Drop Foundation had launched a five-year initiative for clean water in Madagascar as the Telomiova Project. There are details at <https://www.monaco-tribune.com/en/2021/05/monaco-to-madagascar-prince-albert-ii-supports-access-to-clean-water/>.