

Poverty grows in Madagascar

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A recent British Broadcasting Corporation radio programme, “Crossing Continents”, has highlighted the dire social conditions of the working people on the Indian Ocean island of Madagascar. The programme was first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on July 29 and repeated August 2.

In March last year, Andry Rajoelina took power in the country with the support of the military. Rajoelina, a wealthy business man and former *disc jockey*, entered politics by becoming mayor of the capital city of Antananarivo in December 2007. He used this power base to challenge the then Malagasy president, Marc Ravalomanana, whose increasing authoritarian rule was opposed by the masses.

Rajoelina organised opposition rallies and a general strike to challenge Ravalomanana’s rule, saying he was the real leader of Madagascar. These rallies were met with force by the government and opposition supporters were killed. Ravalomanana sacked Rajoelina as mayor. Rajoelina was able to prevail with the help of the military who put him in power and Ravalomanana went into exile in South Africa.

The African Union denounced Rajoelina’s actions as a coup and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) proposed applying sanctions against Madagascar. Western governments including the United States reinforced this by cutting off aid to the impoverished country.

As the radio documentary showed, it is the masses of Madagascar, not the elite, who are suffering as a result of the ongoing isolation of the country by the international community. The boycott by big donors including the World Bank and the European Union has led to a 50-70 percent cut in state budgets.

Linda Pressly, the radio documentary presenter, went to one of the 45 centres in Madagascar that had been set up to provide intensive nutrition to treat children with severe acute malnutrition, who without this intervention

would die. Prior to the current political crisis, children being treated would get free milk, medication and treatment until they were ready to be discharged.

At the feeding centre attached to Befelatanana hospital in Antananarivo there was only one patient in spite of the fact that half of Malagasy children suffer malnutrition. Three-year-old Donne had tuberculosis exacerbated by his malnutrition. His grandmother explained how she had paid £35 for his 10-day treatment, equivalent to a month’s wage in a factory.

The centres now have to charge for feeding and medical treatment. A doctor explained that parents no longer bring their children because they cannot afford to pay.

UNICEF has not provided any alternative funding despite the growing poverty. A local UNICEF representative said “children are the innocent and unintended victims of political crisis and economic decline.”

Rising poverty means that families can no longer afford to send their children to school and are having increasing difficulty in providing them with an adequate diet. A quarter of all the health care centres have been forced to close. The purchase and distribution of drugs throughout the whole country are collapsing.

Another indication of the growing social crisis is that 18 women who have given birth over the last year have left, abandoning their babies at the Befelatanana hospital. Pascal, a community volunteer, explained that small children are being abandoned on the streets by parents no longer able to afford to care for them. He was distributing posters of a small girl in an attempt to find the parents. This was not a unique case and he knew of many similar instances.

Under Ravalomanana, Madagascar had been able to benefit from the US African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), giving it duty-free and quota-free ability

to export to the US. As a result the country became a cheap labour platform producing textiles for export to the US. Textiles accounted for 60 percent of the country's exports with a value of \$600 million a year. Some 50,000 people were employed in the industry.

Following the coup the US suspended the AGOA agreement and the industry has virtually collapsed. Pressly visited one such factory, which had employed 4,500 workers. It was now deserted. Its rows of sewing machines were mothballed under plastic sheets. The general manager told her that he had been forced to stop production following the suspension of trade with the US.

Rosa worked at the factory for seven years. She explained that she had lost her job and was now at home looking after her two children. Her husband works in the capital city at the informal street markets that have mushroomed since the coup. He is only able to scrape together \$1 to \$1.50 a day. The family can no longer afford to send their children to school. They are falling behind with the rent and fear eviction.

Another product of the political crisis and uncertainty is the explosive growth in the export of rosewood. Rosewood trees abound in the national forests in the north-east of the island. It had been and remains illegal to export rosewood. Prior to the coup controls this meant the trees were not taken except in strictly licensed small-scale instances. Since the coup it has been open season. The wood is highly prized in China and it is thought most of the illegally logged wood ends up there.

Labourers in the forest villages have to rely on this trade as their only source of income. They may get paid \$2 for dragging out the felled trees that weigh around a tonne. Local merchants will pay around \$53 for a 3-metre log of Rosewood, which on the international market could fetch \$1,300.

The trade, which is thought to be worth around \$230 million a year to the handful of timber barons who control it, has generated widespread corruption. Without the right government connections the wood could not be exported. Around 100,000 trees were exported last year. In one case the paperwork, permitting the export of 79 containers of the wood bound for China, was signed by the then prime minister. A government spokesman has since claimed the signature was a forgery.

The illegal logging is leading to the destruction of Madagascar's unique ecological treasures. The island, geologically isolated for hundreds of millions of years, has rare animal and plant species. It is renowned for the many species of lemurs which inhabit the island. The logging is damaging this environment. Lemurs are being hunted for bush meat and the operations to fell and drag out the huge trees are damaging large areas of the forests.

Meanwhile, the political crisis continues because the island remains the subject of rival imperial interests. France, the former colonial power, sent its new ambassador Jean-Marc Chatainger to Madagascar two days after Ravalomanana stepped down. He met with Rajoelina and stressed the importance of the relationship between France and Madagascar.

According to an Africa Confidential report of October 8, 2009, France has continued to send aid to the country and pressed other countries to resume their aid programmes.

Rajoelina keeps promising to hold elections in which he says he will not stand. But so far he has not set a date. Ravalomanana in turn came to power in 2002 after a six-month period of dual power in which he and Didier Ratsiraka, the incumbent president, vied for power. Ravalomanana triumphed after the US said it would recognize him as the legitimate president. Ratsiraka, who had close connections with France, was given sanctuary there.

It is clear that after 18 months of intrigue and political instability it is the poor masses of Madagascar who are bearing the brunt of cuts in aid and trade to this already impoverished country.



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