

Madagascar faces devastating famine

By Barry Mason
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As famine continues to spread across Africa, disaster faces the tropical island of Madagascar, which lies 250 miles off the continent's east coast.

The World Food Programme had to suspend food distribution in southern Madagascar in June due to lack of funds. It has only received 57 percent of what it needs to maintain its work on the African island. While 175,000 people are getting food in aid in Madagascar, an estimated 600,000 are in need of emergency feeding, according to the World Food Programme.

The immediate cause of the famine is the drought in the southern part of the island and the cyclone that hit the east this year. But the former French colony is chronically impoverished. The majority of the population survives on less than \$1 a day. Farmers do not have any reserves to fall back on, and the island lacks even the most basic infrastructure. Aid agencies are finding it difficult to deliver food because roads are so bad on an island two and half times the size of Britain.

Southern Madagascar has suffered from food shortages since the drought of 1992. But the situation has worsened since a struggle for political power between two rival presidential candidates last year. From the end of 2001 until June 2002, following a contested presidential election, a power struggle took place between millionaire businessman Mark Ravalomanana and incumbent president Didier Ratsiraka for the presidency.

Ravalomanana eventually prevailed and was able to win the majority of the army to his camp. The decisive point was his recognition by the United States, when on June 26 last year American ambassador Nesbitt presented Ravalomanana with a letter from US president Bush acknowledging him as the president. The conflict became one of near civil war. Ravalomanana's power base was the capital Antananarivo where he had been the mayor. As part of

the campaign by Ratsiraka's supporters to isolate Ravalomanana, bridges and other communication lines were destroyed.

The conflict between the rival elites inflicted a heavy toll on Madagascar's population. The country had ranked 135 out of 162 in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ratings before the struggle for the presidency began. A UNDP report of July 2002 stated that whereas in 2001 Madagascar's projected poverty rate was 65 percent, it was expected to be back to the 1997 rate of 73 percent. It had become an important centre for textile production exploiting the island's pool of cheap labour. But during the conflict, many workers were laid off or left unpaid.

In April of this year, Ravalomanana made an official visit to France to renew ties with the former colonial power. He met with politicians and officials of the French employer's organisation MEDEF. He has no policies to relieve the poverty and despair of the majority of the Malagasy population and has adopted an economic programme in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in an attempt to attract investment. In a desperately poor society torn by the fighting and dislocation surrounding his seizure of power and beset by growing social and political tensions, this promises to produce even greater social devastation.

Although few economic statistics are available, the country's manufacturing sector is in disarray. According to Pepe Andrianomanana, an economist in the capital of Antananarivo, "There are currently no statistics on how people are coping, but many people are out of work... Most of the factories that closed down during the troubles still have not reopened. Instead of waiting for these factories to open, some people have found employment in the informal market. But the meagre amount of money they make doesn't compare to the salaried job."

Whilst the West has refused to respond effectively to the famine in the south of the island, big business in the form of Rio Tinto has plans to exploit the area and take advantage of the Malagasies' desperation. The company has proposals to mine an area of more than 60,000 hectares by dredging for the mineral ilmenite (titanium dioxide), used as filler in toothpaste and in paints. The project would involve creating a huge artificial lake and sifting out the mineral.

Rio Tinto claims there will be little environmental or social impact, and that it is carrying out research that will enable it to re-create the ecosystem. The government of Madagascar has given the go-ahead to the project, which is due to commence in 2005.

Environmentalists and NGOs working with local people dispute the claim that the mining will not be detrimental to the environment or the population. Friends of the Earth (FOE) claims that local people are being tricked. Mark Fenn of the World Wildlife Fund has warned of the social impact of the scheme. He claimed it would bring prostitution and the risk of AIDS/HIV into an area that has so far been relatively free from an infection that is causing a social disaster in Southern Africa. He told the *Guardian* that Rio Tinto is responsible for encouraging charcoal burners to destroy forests in the proposed mining site in the 1990s whilst it was negotiating mining rights in the area.

Famine is accelerating the ecological damage as farmers are forced to cut trees to make charcoal that they can sell to support their families. Charcoal is the most widespread fuel because few people can afford electricity. According to a report in the *Observer*, middlemen buy it at the equivalent of 30 pence for a sack, which is sufficient to buy only six cups of maize.

One woman explained how her husband and children work in the forest to produce the charcoal. In a month, they can produce 20 sacks. To do this they must burn 15 trees. Such is the rapaciousness of the destruction, that the forest she recalls once coming up to the edge of the village is now a three- to four-hour walk away.

Not only does this deforestation threaten Madagascar's unique wildlife, such as the lemur, but it also increases the risk of environmental disasters in the future. Removing tree cover causes soil erosion and landslides, reduces soil fertility, and worsens drought. Only 6 million hectares of forest are left.

Madagascar has to compete for aid with the much

larger famine in Southern Africa, where 6.5 million people depend on food aid. Over the next year, the World Food Programme must find 500,000 metric tonnes of food for Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Swaziland, Malawi and Zambia.

The worst hit area is Zimbabwe, where grain production is down by 40 percent. In what was once a grain-exporting country, forcible land redistribution has added to an agricultural crisis caused by the implementation of IMF measures and the spread of AIDS/HIV.

Across the region, drought has precipitated a famine because the economies of Southern Africa are already in such a weakened state that they cannot sustain any extra burden.

The famine that is stalking across Africa is a man-made disaster. Western governments are culpable because of the policies they have imposed on African governments through the IMF and because they have failed to respond to the crisis they have created. As with their refusal to put in motion an adequate response to the AIDS/HIV epidemic, their indifference to the growing famine engulfing wide areas of Africa is tantamount to a deliberate act of genocide.

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