

MADAGASCAR: A year of crisis



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Madagascar's political deadlock masks an increasingly fragile humanitarian situation that will keep deteriorating if no solution to the ongoing crisis is found.

A year after former President Marc Ravalomanana was forced from power by current President [Andry Rajoelina](#) and part of the army, the country is still without an internationally recognized government.

The African Union (AU) is set to announce what action it will take against Rajoelina and his administration, known as the Higher Transitional Authority (HAT), should they fail to implement agreed power-sharing measures - signed in 2009

Waiting for the latest crisis to blow by

with the leaders of Madagascar's three other main political parties - by March 17, exactly a year after the coup-style change of leadership.

Amid the political turmoil and economic decline, aid organizations are worried about a worsening [humanitarian situation](#) and diminishing capacity to [respond](#) to emergencies on the [disaster-prone](#) island - in the most recent calamity, [tropical storm Hubert](#) struck Madagascar's east coast on 10 March, killing at least 36 people and leaving some 37,000 homeless.

Dramatic cuts in public spending by a government struggling to deal with the combined economic impacts of a domestic political crisis and the global financial crisis has meant that basic commitments in sectors like health and [education](#) cannot be met.

"The one thing that ... [everyone] should be able to agree upon is that the longer the crisis drags on, the worse the economic situation becomes for the Malagasy people," said John Davis, Madagascar country director of CARE International, which works to reduce poverty.

"What has been difficult over the last year is that food security issues in the south have become more severe, and we have seen tropical storms and flooding affect some areas. As a result, we are seeing signs of declining livelihoods, but it is hard for outsiders to understand these various distinct and recurrent humanitarian crises and separate them from the political situation," he told IRIN.

Economic hardship

It's been a tough year. The World Bank noted in its [February Programme Update](#) that "the existing political situation and the global financial crisis are exacting a heavy toll on Madagascar's economy, leading to a decline in economic growth and job losses."

Falling demand for Madagascar's main export products, including vanilla, cloves, coffee and shrimps, has reflected the downturn in global trade. As a direct result of the political crisis, international donors cut non-essential humanitarian aid, which previously accounted for up 70 percent of government spending, the International Monetary Fund noted.

The World Bank put job losses at 228,000, mainly in urban areas and largely as a result of a sharp decline in tourism and the suspension of a preferential trade agreement with the US, on which Madagascar's textile industry had relied heavily. Up to 50,000 jobs are at risk as textile factories that can no longer afford to export to the US start closing.

According to the Bank, economic growth in Madagascar collapsed to just 0.6 percent in 2009, from 7 percent in 2008. The figures suggest that public investment is down by around 30 percent, construction by 40 percent, imports by 22 percent, and energy consumption by 15 percent.

Tax collection was down about a quarter in 2009, and a February brief by the Bank's Lead Madagascar [economist](#) concluded that "authorities need to get more out of each dollar they spend. The local economy has certainly been in recession since the second quarter of 2009 and perspectives are even more sombre for 2010."

Social hardship

Nearly 70 percent of Malagasy live below the poverty line, according to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). "In this context ... ensuring the basic rights of the population remains crucial," UNICEF said in a report released in February. "The situation presents a risk of increasing vulnerability levels, particularly of children and women."

With social investment estimated to have shrunk by around US\$200 million, the corresponding cut in the health budget has brought the provision of basic services into question, in particular common inoculations like measles, tetanus, polio and BCG (Bacillus Calmette-Guérin - a vaccine against tuberculosis), up to half of which is paid for by the government.

"Our priority now is to monitor child vulnerability and to respond accordingly, taking into consideration the erosion of essential services for children," Bruno Maes, head of UNICEF Madagascar, told IRIN. The agency projects that expenditure on routine vaccinations will double in 2010 to plug the gap in government funding and ensure that children receive routine inoculations in 2010.

Continued support

Despite some [donor disengagement](#) the international community has remained remarkably supportive said Benoit Kalasa, acting Resident Coordinator for the UN system in Madagascar. "They have not abandoned the Malagasy population ... who have already paid a high price for political instability in the past."

The World Bank, Madagascar's largest donor, has processed no fund withdrawal requests since 17 March 2009, but "with a view to minimizing adverse impact on the lives of poor Malagasy citizens", the Bank had resumed disbursements for critical project components with a "direct bearing on human well-being", such as nutrition, HIV/AIDS and food security, the Bank said in its February statement.

USAID, another large donor, halted "development" aid but increased "humanitarian" aid. Richard Marcus, Director of the International Studies Programme at California State University in the US, who has just returned from Madagascar, noted that "very few donors have pulled out" completely.

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Besides the money, it was also important that donors stayed "because it is relatively easy to ramp up funding if conditions allow when there is still an operating country office ... it can take years before new funding initiatives can be negotiated and the infrastructure for funding can be established," Marcus told IRIN.

Still, the reduction in project spending by donors is being felt, particularly in social sectors like education and healthcare, and "that pressure will increase dramatically in 2010," Marcus warned.

"The current government is surely under financial pressure", he said, and without external support from donors "It will be increasingly difficult to meet public salary demands. That is a priority in Madagascar, as civil servants are well organized and have a history of leading social action, particularly in the capital."

Breaking the cycle

Resolving Madagascar's political crisis is a long-term project that will take complex political reform and education. Since the beginning of the crisis the international community has taken the winding path of reconciliation between the island's current and three former presidents. An International Contact Group has been formed to broker dialogue between the parties.

"There were several factors that sparked the current crisis: first among them was poor governance, characterized by a collision between public and private interests [under former president Ravalomanana]," said Guy Ratriamoarivony, director of the Centre for Diplomatic and Strategic Studies, based in the capital, Antananarivo.

"This helped spark popular discontent at a time when Madagascar was also suffering from the global economic crisis. Rajoelina was a catalyst, the person that came to represent the opposition." He suggested that political dialogue should include national discussion of issues as complex as federalism and decentralisation.

"To avoid a repeat crisis, I believe the civil society should play a role, and that it is necessary to completely restructure the republic. We need to start from the base, to see what people want and what they attach value to," said Ratriamoarivony, who believes that Madagascar needs a new constitution to lay the foundation of a more stable state.



Photo: [Christina Corbett/IRINNEWS](#)



2009 was marked by political demonstrations

However, some observers say the strength of the civil society movement in Madagascar has historically been weakened by political bias. "Civil society is not independent, and successive governments have worked only with those groups that support them," Hanitra Rafolisy, president of the National Union of Human Rights, a platform for rights groups, told IRIN.

"The number of people out of work rises every day, the number of children not in school rises every day, and every day the security situation deteriorates," he commented.

Ratriamoarivony said finding a sustainable solution to Madagascar's seemingly chronic political instability could take many years. "Education is fundamental; we need education and time. This may take one or two generations, but we must start now to change the mentality of young people."

Marcus pointed out that "Every president since independence has manipulated the constitution to suit his needs. The populace appears, if anything, sickened by leadership, and perceive the problem as a battle between leaders from which they suffer, but of which they are not a part."