
Madagascar: IMF-promoted mining threatens littoral forests

Madagascar is considered as the world's 11th poorest country and one its top 3 biodiversity hotspots. Originally inhabited by different groups of mixed Asian and African origin who lived on its resources through hunting, herding and "tavy" (shifting) agriculture, in the "way of the ancestors", it was colonised by the Europeans in the 16th century, and became a French colony in the 19th century.

The country suffered huge environmental losses through logging of primary species-rich rainforests used for railroad construction and timber exports; major forest clearance of the most fertile areas was carried out for cash-crops, mainly coffee plantations.

During colonial times, the French implemented so-called "reforestation" activities, based on pines and eucalyptus plantations. They also set up the first national parks for wildlife preservation, but these had damaging social, and ultimately environmental, consequences. The local Malagasy being defined as inferior and incompetent, the parks were managed by colonials --who would often lined their pockets through illegal logging. With a narrow protection approach, locals were thus simply deprived of their traditional means of subsistence, generating extreme hardship, resentment and leading to more intense "tavy" cultivation for subsistence elsewhere. The French banned "tavy", but this backfired as it became a symbol of independence and liberty from colonial rule.

Independence came in 1960, and after failed attempts to improve the country's economic situation, Madagascar finally embraced privatisation and market liberalisation and was forced by the IMF in the early 1980s to adopt structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) to secure World Bank funding, with detrimental effects.

In the 80's, "natural" disasters of droughts and cyclones swept the Malagasy territory. Carbon emissions from industrialised countries are heavily implicated in global climate change, including increases in the frequency and severity of extreme weather conditions. While the Malagasy practice of "tavy" naturally adds to carbon emissions, its contribution to the global greenhouse effect and thus exacerbation of natural disasters is minimal compared to the fossil fuel emissions of the richer nations.

Madagascar's deforestation has major impacts on its own. The resulting erosion and silting up of rivers facilitates the kind of devastating floods the island experienced in 2000; the flooding, in turn, contaminated water supplies thus worsening the epidemic of cholera still playing havoc across the island.

While its forests are further threatened by western business interests such as mining, IMF pressure continues to open the economy to foreign investment, as through eliminating export taxes. It is along these lines that the government has recently announced its decision to grant an environmental permit to QIT Madagascar Minerals S.A. (QMM) (owned 80% by Rio Tinto and 20% by a Government of Madagascar agency called OMNIS) for its proposed ilmenite mining project in south-eastern Madagascar, in the Autonomous Province of Tulear, near the town of Fort-Dauphin (Tolagnaro).

A report commissioned by Friends of the Earth (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) for presentation to the Malagasy government, underlines the impact of such activity. The mining of the Mandena sector, according to QMM's own data, will destroy 203 hectares of littoral forest. The company's calculations may also go awry should "significant migration to the area occur without proper planning". It confesses in its own Social and Environment Impact Assessment that "it is...difficult to accurately estimate what forest area will remain in Mandena once the mining operations are completed", although "historical trends lead us to believe that the residual forest will have disappeared even before the onset of dredging operations". FOE report found this crucial section of the assessment "unacceptably speculative. It hinges on an unsubstantiated conjecture --indeed the false syllogism-- that, without the mine's conservation components, all the littoral forest will disappear over the next 20 years".

Also Conservation International has denounced that "the mining operation [could cause] a net loss of access to the services and goods on which communities are dependent [from the rainforest]". Crucial supplies of vital resources might be jeopardised, both in quality and quantity.

The company also proposes a new road between Fort Dauphin and Eholá, as an integral component of the regional development plan, omitting to discuss its impact on existing forests and on the local and regional economy which will be thus probably swallowed by the economy market with its notorious impoverishing outcome.