



The former French colony in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Mozambique with a landmass 1.5 times that of Germany, but with a population of only 20 million, is now facing a huge humanitarian crisis, according to Natascha Paddison, acting Deputy Representative for UNICEF: “The country’s health and education systems are not really working, they are crumbling”, she says.

Following the 2009 coup d’état by former mayor of Antananarivo, Mr. Marc Ravalomanana was ousted by Andy Rajoelina who is now heading the High Transitional Authority (HTA), the unrecognized government of Madagascar. The unconstitutional change of power by Rajoelina has made an already dire situation much worse: “Following the coup all aid to Madagascar was suspended”, explains Paddison, “that is catastrophic for a country where foreign aid accounted for 70 % of the national budget”, she continues.

Madagascar is one of the world’s poorest countries and has had a negative growth of GDP in the last year; its external debt is now almost 3 billion US dollars. “In the last two years 77 % of the population have been living on less than 1.25 dollars a day”, Paddison says. According to a US Congress report Madagascar’s infant mortality rate is over 5% and three-quarters of the population is living in rural areas.

“The goal is to have free and fair elections taking place in Madagascar as soon as possible, but that has so far been impossible”, says Paddison. “The current government simply has no vested interest in letting free and fair elections take place, there are rumours that they are so embroiled in corruption themselves”, she explains. The main political opposition leaders are living in exile in South Africa and France. The political impasse makes humanitarian help very difficult Paddison says and continues, “in 2010 the government cut its health budget by 30% there’s no new infrastructure in healthcare being built, no new schools.” According to an Amnesty

International report for 2011, Madagascan authorities have been violating human rights such as excessive use of force and violence, arbitrary arrests and detentions, limiting freedom of expression and unfair trials.

In addition to its political troubles Madagascar is a country prone to natural disasters like heavy floods and severe drought. “Every year we have 3-4 cyclones that hit Madagascar and they knock down schools and houses and leave people pretty destitute, also in the south we have a lot of droughts and floods, it’s not helping the situation,” Natascha Paddison explains. In addition Madagascar’s biologically diverse fauna is facing ever increasing pressure from deforestation, agricultural production and overgrazing, and desertification and water pollution. Paddison says it is highly likely that the government itself is causing damage to the environment: “There is evidence that there is a lot of illegal foresting going on, in addition there are some “ruling families” that control all of Madagascar’s mining for precious stones like diamonds, gold, sapphires, while the population suffers.”

This combination of political misrule and volatile weather leaves Madagascar and its people in dire straits. “The problem is that the government is not prioritizing the social sectors. It is channeling the money into its own affairs”, says Paddison and adds that the only way forward is to help people directly rather than through government channels: “We have a 60 million dollar trust fund for education that usually goes to the government for dealing with these kinds of problems, but recently this fund has gone to UNICEF. We pay local authorities for health workers and teachers directly”.