

## AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

### Madagascar Monthly Briefing October 2020

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#### Madagascar Summary 23 October 2020

*President Andry Rajoelina (2019-present) launches the herbal medicine factory Pharmalagasy, primarily to produce herbal remedy Covid-Organics and its capsule version CVO+, reported to prevent any infection of Covid-19. Rajoelina lifts the curfew imposed to curb the spread of Covid-19, and Nosy Be airport is now open for international travel, with strict protocols in place. Former communications minister Harry Laurent Rahajason has been detained and sentenced to three years in prison after allegedly criticising the government's handling of the Covid-19 national response. The government suspends a controversial gold-mining operation, Mac Lai Sime Gianna (MLSG), in the rural commune of Vohilava, south of Antananarivo, following its detection of mercury used to separate gold from the ore, causing environmental degradation and possible health risks to the local population.*

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#### President Rajoelina launches Pharmalagasy factory...

President **Andry Rajoelina** (2019-present) launched **Madagascar's** first non-chemical herbal medicine factory, **Pharmalagasy**, on 2 October outside the capital, **Antananarivo**.<sup>1</sup> The factory will primarily produce herbal drink **Covid-Organics (CVO)** and its capsule version **CVO+**.<sup>2</sup> Covid-Organics is reported to prevent any infection of **Covid-19** and is created from the Artemisia plant, which has anti-malaria properties (see *ARC Briefing Madagascar April 2020*).<sup>3</sup> President Rajoelina launched the herbal drink at a ceremony in Antananarivo on 20 April, and the capsule version CVO+ alongside the launch of Pharmalagasy in October. Rajoelina said CVO+ is produced for "those who struggle to ingest the infusion". The factory has capacity to produce 32,000 capsules per day.<sup>4</sup>

Although the **World Health Organisation (WHO)** has issued several warning against the use of Covid-Organics based on lack of scientific testing, more than 6.5 million Malagasy have reportedly taken the remedy.<sup>5</sup> President Rajoelina claims that Madagascar is the only country to have conducted three clinical trial protocols against Covid-19 and that CVO also works against stomach aches, bilharzia and dengue fever.<sup>6</sup>

As of 16 October, Madagascar had recorded 16,810 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in its population of roughly 28 million people,<sup>7</sup> with 16,215 recoveries and 238 deaths.<sup>8</sup> In its *Covid-19 Situation Report on the African Region* published on 21 October, the WHO categorises Madagascar as a country recording a decrease in new cases by 20% or above, and the country has a 1.4% fatality ratio compared to the region's overall 2.3%.<sup>9</sup>

President Rajoelina on 6 October lifted the strict curfew imposed on the Malagasy population to curb the spread of the virus. Although masks in public and social distancing are still mandatory, sporting

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<sup>1</sup> News24, 3 Oct 2020

<sup>2</sup> News24, 3 Oct 2020

<sup>3</sup> BBC, 10 Sep 2020

<sup>4</sup> News24, 3 Oct 2020

<sup>5</sup> Eyewitness News, 15 Oct 2020

<sup>6</sup> AA, 2 Oct 2020

<sup>7</sup> Worldometers, accessed 23 Oct 2020

<sup>8</sup> WHO Covid-19 situation update, 21 Oct 2020

<sup>9</sup> WHO Covid-19 situation update, 21 Oct 2020

activities are now allowed with an audience limit of 200.<sup>10</sup> From 1 October, **Fascene Airport** on **Nosy Be** island, 31km off Madagascar's north-western coast, is cleared for international travel with strict protocols in place such as presentation of a negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test no older than 72 hours on arrival, proof of a return ticket, and use of a local phone card for monitoring purposes.<sup>11</sup>

The reopening of international travel may have a positive impact on Madagascar's economy. With tourism making up 15% of the Malagasy GDP, the country is estimated to have lost half a billion dollars in tourist revenue during the Covid-19-related lockdown.<sup>12</sup> Madagascar is known worldwide for its endemic animals and plant species; tourist sites such as national parks and museums have been open to locals since early September.<sup>13</sup> Although some regional airports on the mainland will reopen for domestic travel from 29 October, the main airport in Antananarivo, **Ivato International Airport**, remains closed.<sup>14</sup>

### ... as former communications minister jailed over CVO statement

An Antananarivo criminal court sentenced former communications minister and now opposition figure **Harry Laurent Rahajason** on 15 October to three years in jail over protesting Covid-Organics.<sup>15</sup> Rahajason was arrested on 16 July for inciting hatred and disrupting public order after he was linked to two youths detained on 13 July for calling for the release of the leader of their student group, who was detained following his critique of Covid-Organics on **Facebook**.<sup>16</sup> The two youths were arrested after showcasing a banner on a busy road in Antananarivo and they claimed that Rahajason had instigated the protest. Rahajason was subsequently arrested and placed under house arrest. In court on 14 October Rahajason denied any links to the youths or the student group.<sup>17</sup>

The detainment of protesters against the herbal remedy is not unusual. The publishing director of the Malagasy newspaper **Ny Valosoa**, **Arphone Helisoa**, was sent to pre-trial prison on 4 April for spreading fake news and incitement of hatred towards the president after criticising Rajoelina's handling of the Covid-19 national response.<sup>18</sup> International non-governmental organisation **Amnesty International** has been calling for the protection of detainees from Covid-19 and releasing prisoners of conscience in **sub-Saharan Africa**, and specifically mentions Madagascar in detaining political opponents and government critics as well as overcrowded prisons and the use of illegal pre-trial detention.<sup>19</sup>

The detainment of opponents and critics of the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Covid-Organics remedy is not helping President Rajoelina's case in convincing the international community that Madagascar has produced the solution to the pandemic. President Rajoelina has previously dismissed any criticism of the herbal remedy as "*Western superiority*" (see *ARC Briefing Madagascar July 2020*),<sup>20</sup> but the WHO continues to highlight the lack of peer-reviewed evidence and testing, which reduces the credibility of the proclaimed Covid-19 cure.

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<sup>10</sup> BBC, 6 Oct 2020

<sup>11</sup> Lonely Planet, 29 Sep 2020

<sup>12</sup> Lonely Planet, 29 Sep 2020

<sup>13</sup> Lonely Planet, 29 Sep 2020

<sup>14</sup> Lonely Planet, 29 Sep 2020

<sup>15</sup> Eyewitness News, 15 Oct 2020

<sup>16</sup> Eyewitness News, 15 Oct 2020

<sup>17</sup> Eyewitness News, 15 Oct 2020

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International, 9 Apr 2020

<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International, 9 Apr 2020

<sup>20</sup> The New Statesman, 11 May 2020

## Government shuts down illegal gold mine over mercury use

The Malagasy government suspended a controversial gold mine, the **Mac Lai Sime Gianna (MLSG)** gold mining project in the rural commune of **Vohilava**, on 11 October over “illegal” operations.<sup>21</sup> The gold-mining operation belongs to a Malagasy woman, **Gianna Mac Lai Sime**, and is run by **Chinese** workers. The mine has been found to use mercury to separate gold from ore, which causes notable damage to the river. The closure of the mine follows several years of protest from the local population and environmental organisations. A visit by a delegation of officials in late September led to the **Office National pour l’Environnement (ONE)** (national office for the environment) suspending the company’s environmental permit on 8 October.<sup>22</sup>

Vohilava mayor **Marie Claire Razafindravelo** told Malagasy TV station **Kolo TV** on 20 October that “*the land is destroyed, the environment is polluted, the people are sick*”, and there is concern over the public health impact of the mine as local residents of Vohilava, which has a population of over 20,000, use the river water for farming and drinking.<sup>23</sup> The ONE, together with the **Centre National de Recherches sur l’Environnement (CNRE)** (national centre for environmental research) tested the water for mercury and will make its findings public in a few weeks.<sup>24</sup>

This is not the first instance of mercury use being discovered in goldmining in Madagascar. In August 2019 the **Ministère des Mines et des Ressources Stratégiques (MMRS)** (mining and strategic resources ministry) shut down two operations following detection of mercury use.<sup>25</sup> In January 2019, a peer-reviewed journal article written by a team of researchers led by **Mar Cabeza** from the **Finnish University of Helsinki** and published in the **United Kingdom**-based **Zoological Society of London’s Animal Conservation** journal, found that artisanal gold mining in Madagascar’s **Ranomafana National Park** is posing a real threat to the tropical forests and its biodiversity.<sup>26</sup> The research, conducted over a period of 10 years, found that the use of mercury had “*far-reaching effects beyond the area of exploitation*”.<sup>27</sup>

With the gold price currently at around \$1,900 per ounce,<sup>28</sup> gold production could contribute a significant amount to Madagascar’s gross domestic product GDP. While official Malagasy government figures report gold exports at 2.4 metric tons, **France**-based news agency **La Verité** claims the real figure is closer to 20 metric tons.<sup>29</sup> However, the recent controversy over environmental pollution and degradation from mines means the Malagasy government will need to improve mining regulations and monitoring to make sure revenue from gold production does not come at the expense of the health of the local populations.

<sup>21</sup> Mongabay News, 21 Oct 2020

<sup>22</sup> Mongabay News, 21 Oct 2020

<sup>23</sup> Mongabay News, 21 Oct 2020

<sup>24</sup> Mongabay News, 21 Oct 2020

<sup>25</sup> Mongabay News, 21 Oct 2020

<sup>26</sup> Animal Conservation, 19 Jan 2019

<sup>27</sup> Animal Conservation, 19 Jan 2019

<sup>28</sup> [www.goldprice.com](http://www.goldprice.com), accessed 23 Oct 2020

<sup>29</sup> La Verité, 22 Sep 2020

### Planner

11 Dec 2020 (**Madagascar**) Scheduled senatorial elections;  
2023 (**Madagascar**) Potential presidential elections.

### Chronology

21 Oct 2020 **Vohilava (Madagascar)** *Mongabay News*. The Malagasy government shuts down gold mine operations after evidence of mercury use;

15 Oct 2020 **Antananarivo (Madagascar)** *AFP*. Court sentences opposition figure and former communications minister **Harry Laurent Rahajason** to 44 months in prison for protesting **Covid-Organics** touted as a **coronavirus** treatment and cure;

6 Oct 2020 **Antananarivo (Madagascar)** *BBC*. President **Andry Rajoelina** lifts the strict curfew imposed to curb the spread of **Covid-19**, but wearing masks in public and social distancing is still mandatory;

3 Oct 2020 **Antananarivo (Madagascar)** *News24*. President **Andry Rajoelina** launches Madagascar's first non-chemical herbal medicine factory **Pharmalagasy**, primarily set to produce Covid-Organics;

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