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WITH VODAFONE



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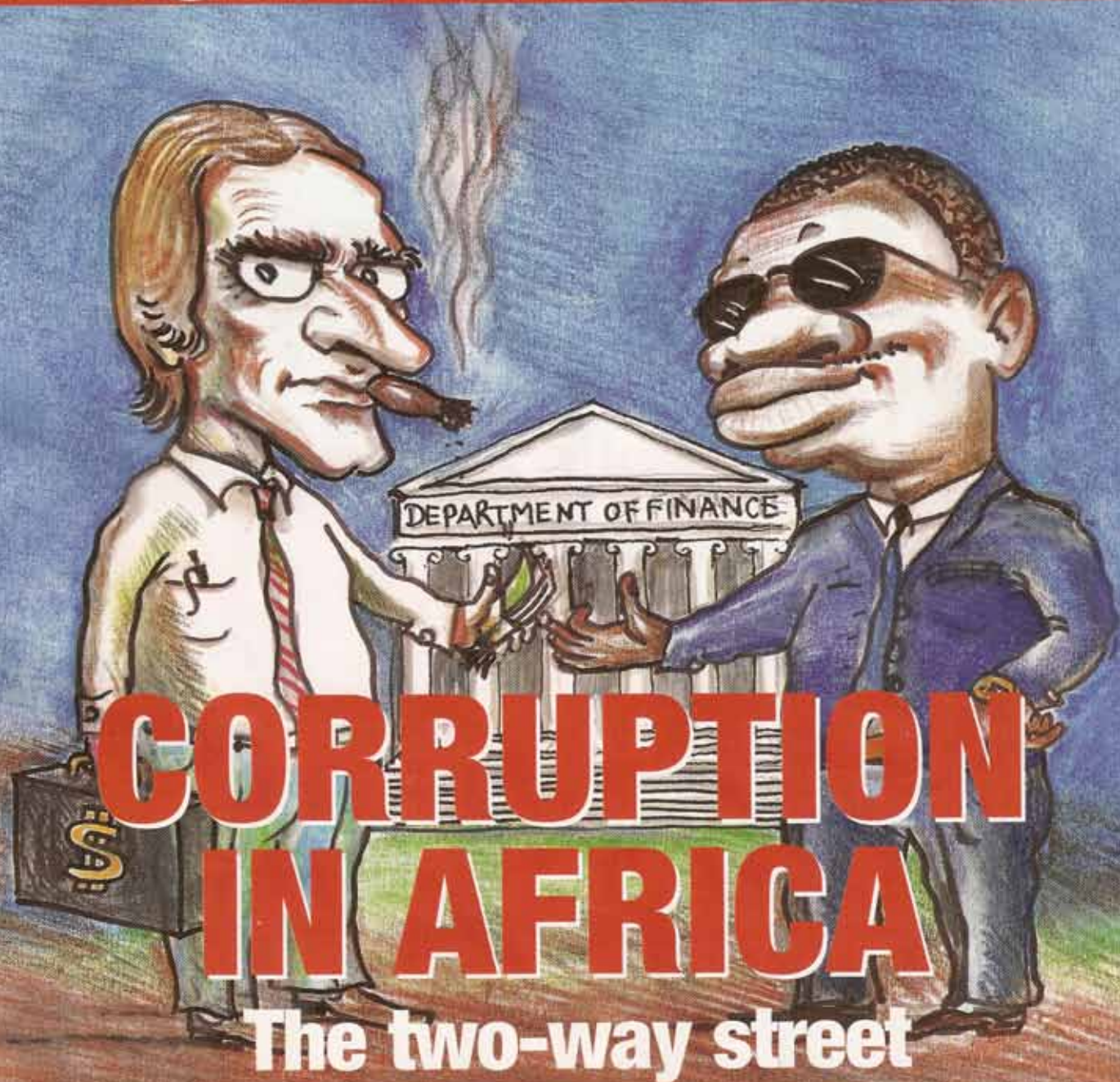


GOVERNANCE
US HAILS THE
BOTSWANA MODEL

Africa's prime newsmagazine

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The two-way street

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All at sea

Situated off the south eastern coast of Africa like some lost ship, Madagascar's natural grandeur cannot mask its turmoil, as Jason Gleeson discovered on a recent visit

NOTHING CAN prepare you for Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar – it is like no other capital in the world. The jacaranda trees are in full bloom, the red clay brick houses and medieval churches cover the rolling hills, coupled with the smog and pollution of traffic and smoky fires of the bricks makers as they fire their bricks amidst the rice paddies in the valleys below. It is an almost pretty sight as you gaze at the scene from behind the double glazed hotel window.

The reality on the street is quite different – you must watch every step you take so you don't fall through the man-sized holes in the pavements. Beggars, pickpockets and ragamuffin children jostle for space with taxis, carts driven by *zebu* (water buffalo). Going anywhere requires endless negotiation. Any kind of town planning seems non-existent and the mounds of rubbish suggest disease is never far away.

The wretched state of living on the streets of the Antananarivo (usually abbreviated to Tana) shows a country with many problems.

Two thirds of the population lives below the international poverty line of \$1.25 a day. Children and teenagers come to Tana with the dream of breaking free from their rural poverty and the promise of a more western lifestyle. Sadly, the most common currency here is cheap labour and prostitution. Children sell their bodies for a pittance. Although I saw a couple of posters at the airport warning arrivals of the authorities' intention to prosecute sex tourists, the practice goes largely unchallenged amidst people's desperation to survive.

Madagascar gained its independence from France in 1960, followed by years of dictators, dwindling resources and uncertain rule until the present. On my second day in Tana I am awoken by the sound of gun shots and screaming – five people are injured as the military-backed government open fire on the crowd with rubber bullets. People had been on the march demanding a date for elections.

There has been unrest in the capital since

January 24, when the then president, Marc Ravalomanana, ordered his bodyguards – mostly of South African mercenaries – to fire upon the crowd as a last resort to prop up his presidency. More than 130 people were killed, and possibly a 100 more have died since in other protests in Fianarantsoa and other cities. Ravalomanana is now living in exile in South Africa but the political struggle with his 35 year old rival Andry Rajoelina, the man who finally ousted him as president in March with the backing of the military, continues. Yet another power-sharing deal was brokered this month giving one of the two newly created co-president posts to one of Ravalomanana's allies.

The turmoil of recent months has more or less killed off the tourism industry. Although breathtakingly beautiful and renowned for its unique flora and fauna, Madagascar enjoys very few visitors and most of the holiday hotels are completely empty. Indeed, in most instances I was the only foreigner for miles around.

The other mainstay of the economy is vanilla. Madagascar produces 60 per cent of the world's vanilla harvest, most of which is used in American ice-cream, while the rest goes into expensive perfumes such as Thierry Muggers Angel. It is also used in cakes and confectionery and it is a secret (not so secret any more) ingredient for Coca Cola. Once the second most expensive spice in the world after saffron, its price fell from \$200-\$500 a kilo in 2004 to \$25 a kilo as of today because of the ascendancy of artificial vanilla flavouring. As one of the most labour intensive crops to grow – the flower has to be fertilised by hand and, once matured, has to be dried and cured – the impact of this on an already depressed economy is considerable.

Less than 10 per cent of Madagascar's wildlife rainforests existed before this year's military coup and the economic slump has placed them under even greater pressure. As I drove to Andapa on the edge of the Marojejy National Park, I noticed there was no rainforest at all – just a kind of green anaemic grassland with the occasional burnt or burning spots on the mountain-sides. This is where trees have been burnt for charcoal as they stand to save people the bother of felling and stripping them. Madagascar is in the throes of an energy crisis and the more I travelled the more burning trees I saw. There are fires everywhere so much so that it is affecting the nation's health – almost everyone seemed to have a bad cough.

Meanwhile, illegal loggers have seized the opportunity created by the political instability to further pillage Madagascar's natural

Protests in Tana in January: The country continues to be rocked by political feuding





resources. The target is rosewood and other precious hardwoods. A documented 45,000 rosewood trees from the north eastern coast have already been exported to China between March and April after park rangers abandoned their posts following Ravalomanana's removal from power. The logs are felled near rivers and then floated downstream by young men with long sticks. The work is treacherous and has a high death toll – rosewood trees grow up to 30 metres in height – falling between the logs is almost certain death. One charity working in the area says at least two young men lose their lives doing this work every week.

The forests form a vital part of the island's eco-system and their plunder leaves Madagascar more vulnerable to the floods and droughts that have brought it to the brink of disaster in recent years. Trees act like conveyor belts sucking up moisture, which causes clouds and eventually rain and transport the water inland. Satellite images prove the devastation from logging and soon a possible loss of this climatic feedback loop.

The more I moved around, the more I got the impression that Madagascar is a country falling apart at the seams. Travelling by road is a nightmare – there must be better roads

on the Moon. There is only one road crossing from east to west in the north of the island and many places are only accessible by air. Any travel during the rainy season is impossible. On some of the journeys I made by taxi, I had to get out to help push the car along the dirt track and fix bridges with pieces of wood and rocks so we could drive across. On one occasion, I sat terrified as the driver nonchalantly negotiates wooden bridges with holes big enough for a car to fall through.

Traffic fatalities are amongst the highest in the world. On one trip from Morondava (on the west coast) to Tana, about an 18-hour journey, I saw several accidents in a single night. Taxis may slow down a bit to avoid any further collisions but soon after they manoeuvre around the wreckage they are back at top speeds.

It's possible that these speeds are to make up for all the police checkpoints drivers have to stop at, sometimes every 30 minutes on some of the major routes. The stops are mysterious, which involves the driver leaving the car with a book, which contains all the papers and a 5000 ariary note (\$3). 'I'm thirsty,' is a phrase I heard a few times from policemen. After much negotiation and very

Lone survivor of a burned section of the Madagascar's fast dwindling rainforest

little investigation into the state of the taxi and its carriage – bribe is passed over. The correct papers or a licence is not necessary.

The mobile phones was one of the few signs of buoyancy and optimism that I witnessed during my five-week stay. Almost everyone I met in Madagascar had a mobile phone and were more than eager to give me their phone number. Mobiles are exceptionally cheap. I was able to make calls, surf the internet and check my email everyday for a month for a few dollars. If only such enterprise existed in other areas of life.

'Madagascar is a country of great potential... and it always will be...' was a phrase I kept hearing during my travels. As I flew home over the barren red treeless wasteland, the rivers ran red into the sea, as if they were bleeding, taking with it Madagascan precious topsoil. Madagascar is a country in the grip of crisis – if only the political establishment would stop squabbling amongst itself and notice. □

Jason Gleeson is a filmmaker and writer - you can view video clips from his Madagascar travels on his website: www.audiovisualwelding.com