

# Dream fades for inland port project

IRIN

Visitors arriving in Nsanje, the sleepy capital of Malawi's southernmost district, are greeted by a large yellowing billboard announcing: "The dream becomes reality. Nsanje Port opens October 2010." But those who go to the port will find little more than a concrete quay with a couple of dozen mooring posts and a few fishermen manoeuvring crude dug-out canoes through the murky brown waters of the Shire River.

For former President Bingu wa Mutharika, the construction of an inland port at Nsanje meant linking land-locked Malawi with the Indian Ocean port of Chinde, 238km away in neighbouring Mozambique, through the Shire-Zambezi Waterway project. The aim was to reduce the high costs of importing and exporting goods by road via Malawi's commercial capital, Blantyre, and the Mozambican port city of Beria – a round trip of about 1200km.

But Mr Mutharika's enthusiasm for the project was not matched by his counterpart in Mozambique. As Mr Mutharika presided over the official opening of the port in Oct 2010, flanked by former Zambian president Rupiah Banda and Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, he had to admit to the crowd gathered to witness the arrival of the first barge that the Mozambican Government had called for environmental and feasibility studies before it would allow any barges to navigate the Zambezi River portion of the waterway, which flows through its territory.

Since then, the port has sat idle, gradually shedding nuts and bolts to vandals and becoming the focus of increasing resentment from local people promised jobs and development. Nsanje resident Rose Samuel, 32, said the only improvement to the town has been the paving of a 50km stretch of road linking Nsanje with Bangula, the next town. Much of the remaining 130km of road between Nsanje and Blantyre has yet to be tarred.

"There's no evidence that Nsanje will ever be a big port city," said Ms Samuel. "We've heard that down the river it's so narrow that a ship can't pass, so we don't think [the port] will be in use any time soon."

## Land grabbed

Ms Samuel has more reason to be bitter than most. Her



TONY KARUMBA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Nsanje Port officially opened in 2010, but has yet to become operational.

family was among about 300 that used to farm land now occupied by the port. In early 2010, the Government communicated through the local Traditional Authority [the chief] that the land was needed for the port and families would be compensated according to the size of their plot.

“There’s no evidence that Nsanje will ever be a big port city.”

Local resident

“Those families affected had to uproot maize that was already planted,” said Ms Samuel. “Some were old people who left crying – that was their only source of income.”

Ms Samuel's family received a mere 5000 kwacha (\$A20) for one hectare of ancestral land, for which they had no title deeds. Her family now survive by doing piece-work and renting a small plot of land to grow food. “The weather here is bad always and most of the time we live on potatoes. By the river it was wetter and the soil was better,” she said.

Many others have yet to receive anything. “People are worried that if they can grab land without paying, what will stop them removing more people from the area.”

Her concern is justified. Townspeople have been told by the Traditional Authority not to build any new houses

because the land has been earmarked for development and Nsanje's District Commissioner, Rodney Simwaka, told IRIN that his office has received 4000 applications for land from developers who are banking on the port eventually becoming operational.

Mr Simwaka said the applications had not yet been processed, but village headman Black Richman Khembo told IRIN: “Lots of land has been bought by rich people hoping to make money. So far, they are letting people remain on the land, but someday they will probably kick them off.”

## Project shelved

Mr Simwaka declined to comment on recent statements by Jerry Jana, Director of Economic Affairs for the People's Party, Malawi's new ruling party following Mr Mutharika's unexpected death in April 2012, that long-term projects like the Nsanje port would be shelved for the time being

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while the Government focused on issues of immediate concern, like the country's crippling shortages of fuel and foreign exchange.

“We need full support of the Mozambican authori-

ties to go ahead,” Mr Jana told IRIN, adding that the requested environmental impact and feasibility studies had yet to be carried out.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) has agreed to fund the feasibility study that formed part of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Shire-Zambezi Waterway project signed by Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia in April 2007.

Responding by e-mail to questions from IRIN, AfDB's resident representative for Malawi, Andrew Mwaba, said the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the executing agency for the project, is “working on fulfilling conditions precedent to the first disbursement [of funding for the feasibility study]” and that the study was proceeding. “The project is in the interest of three governments and shelving [it] will be against the MoU the three governments signed.”

Village headman Khembo was among those who lost land when the port was built, but unlike Ms Samuel, he holds on to the hope that the port will eventually open and provide employment, “if not for me then maybe my children”. Lack of jobs has already pushed two of his eight children to leave Nsanje, one for South Africa and the other for Mozambique.

“If the port starts operating, Nsanje will change for the better,” he said. “Then, I won't mind about my land.”

## IN BRIEF

### Guinea-Bissau to get transition govt

Guinea-Bissau coup leaders and west African mediators have agreed that parliamentary speaker Manuel Serifo Nhamadjo will lead a transition Government, ruling out the return of the toppled team. The Nigerian official leading the west African mediation effort said there was no chance the former Government would be restored. There “is no question of the return” of former Prime Minister Carlos Gomes and former interim president Raimundo Pereira, who were ousted on April 12, said Nurudeen Mohammad, Nigeria's state minister for foreign affairs, on May 11. “We have taken the decision, which is the will of the majority of parties. The president of the National Assembly will lead the transition,” he explained. Mohammad is leading an Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) delegation which arrived in Bissau on May 10 and engaged in long discussions with the junta, political parties and civil society.

### De Klerk apartheid comments spark outrage

Former South African president F.W. de Klerk has sparked public outrage after defending the Apartheid-era policy of designated areas for the country's black population under white minority rule. In an interview with CNN, he denied that the black majority was disenfranchised through the creation of 10 tribal bantustans under a “homelands” policy. “They were not disenfranchised; they voted. They were not put in homelands; the homelands were historically there,” Mr de Klerk said. “If only the developed world would put so much money into Africa, which is struggling with poverty, as we poured into those homelands,” said Mr de Klerk. His comments drew an immediate backlash in the South African media. “De Klerk joins a long list of Apartheid defenders. They are not merely denying it, they are justifying it,” said Victor Dlamini, a political commentator and former journalist.

### Deadly lead poisoning continues in Nigeria

An official with Doctors without Borders says a deadly lead poisoning crisis in north Nigeria continues unstopped two years after the outbreak began. Ivan Gayton told journalists on May 10 in Nigeria's capital Abuja that more needed to be done now to stop the outbreak. Gayton said 4000 children in rural villages in Zamfara state have been affected, with 1500 of them not receiving any treatment. Gayton also called Nigeria's Government refusing to send high-level officials to discuss the outbreak at a conference “a great disappointment”. The outbreak began in 2010. The lead poisoning is caused by the processing of gold ore in residential compounds, where people are exposed to toxic levels of lead found in rocks containing the gold.

### Money gone at Di's Zimbabwe home for aged

Workers at a facility for the poor elderly in a Zimbabwe township say there's no money to keep the home running two decades after it was opened by Britain's Princess Diana during her African charity crusades. Administrator Louise Allaart said on May 10 the Society for the Aged Destitute has been forced to reduce the number of elderly given shelter because funding has dried up. She said it has space for 50 people, but now only cares for 24 and has only a few months of funding left. The late Princess Diana opened the home in 1993 as patron of the international HelpAge charity. A sign outside still honours her enormous popularity. The plight of the home is seen as a reflection of Diana's dying legacy in Africa. After years of economic meltdown in this southern African country, those turned away from the home resort to begging on the township streets.

### Judge orders South Africa to probe Mugabe

A South African judge has ordered prosecutors to investigate whether Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's Government committed human rights abuses. The ruling on May 8 by Judge Hans Fabricius is the first under 2002 statutes spelling out South Africa's international law obligations. While the order is important, legal wrangles could derail an investigation. And if it did go ahead, it could complicate South Africa's role as the main mediator in Zimbabwe's political crisis. Human rights lawyer Nicole Fritz, whose Southern Africa Litigation Centre joined the Zimbabwean Exiles forum to bring the suit, said human rights groups have documented cases of torture and other crimes in Zimbabwe. “These crimes of the worst type are the responsibility of all the international community,” Ms Fritz said.

### Thieves make most of Egypt's turmoil

Taking advantage of Egypt's political upheaval, thieves have gone on a treasure hunt with a spree of illegal digging, preying on the country's ancient pharaonic heritage. Illegal digs near ancient temples and in isolated desert sites have swelled a staggering 100-fold over the past 16 months since a popular uprising toppled Hosni Mubarak's 29-year regime and security fell apart in many areas as police simply stopped doing their jobs.