

Madagascan president aide told undercover UK police she 'needed to be paid' for mining scheme

12 Feb 2024 | 16:19 GMT | **Insight**

By [Martin Coyle](#) and Abishek Kumar

An aide to Madagascar's president told an undercover police officer acting as a Gemfields consultant that she "needed to be paid" as part of a deal to help the UK gems company secure mining rights on the island, a London court heard today.

An aide to Madagascar's president told an undercover police officer acting as a Gemfields consultant that she "needed to be paid" as part of a deal to help the UK gems company secure mining rights on the island, a London court heard today.

Romy Andrianarisoa, 47, is standing trial at London's Southwark Crown Court on allegations that she approached Gemfields and offered to help them obtain mining rights in Madagascar in return for 250,000 Swiss francs in bribes (around \$290,000), plus a 5 percent cut of any future mining deal. Gemfields estimated this cut to be potentially worth \$4 million.

Andrianarisoa said that half of the payment would be used to secure Gemfields a meeting with Madagascar's president Andry Rajoelina.

Andrianarisoa has been charged under the UK's Bribery Act following a National Crime Agency prosecution. During the investigation, an undercover investigator covertly record her and Philippe Tabuteau, a French national, allegedly ask the company for kickbacks at a restaurant in London, in June 2023. She denies the allegation. Tabuteau is not on trial.

— Recording —

The undercover officer, known only as Charles, was in court today behind a screen to protect his identity. The court then heard the covert recording of that meeting held at Sofitel in London's St James district in June 2023. The conversation took part between Andrianarisoa, Gemfields head, Sean Gilbertson, a French adviser, and Charles.

Charles told the pair that he was acting as a "buffer" and "firewall" for the company and said that if the negotiations were "exposed" things needed to be "explainable."

At the restaurant, Charles asked what Gemfields would receive for its 250,000 Swiss francs payment. "Is this a fee for getting to see the president, what are we paying for?," he said. "If we are speaking to the chief of staff why are we having to take a step backwards to pay a consultant? It seems a little bit counterintuitive," he added.

"125,000 for preparing a few meetings seems a little excessive," Charles said.

Andrianarisoa said that Madagascar didn't have any money and that she would "mobilize" a pool of experts that would help with building the contract. She said that the government also needed to work with the opposition to get any deal with Gemfields voted through the country's parliament. The fee is "reasonable," she added.

"I want revenues to come back to the country to support sustainable efforts and the president needs roads. But for that, I need to be paid," she said.

Andrianarisoa told the undercover officer that she had come back to the country to "maintain a certain level of living."

She also told Charles that the president knew about the meetings with Gemfields but wasn't aware of any requests for payments from them.

Near the end of the meeting, Charles told the pair that he was "fascinated" by the country, and asked about the country's president. "Which one is the president? Is that the ring tailed lemur?," he joked in an apparent reference to the movie Madagascar. "I like to move it, move it," he then sang in reference to the film's soundtrack.

The court was told that after some initial introductions, Gilbertson left the meeting as he said he needed "total deniability"

and needed to distance himself from discussions between Charles and Andrianarisoa. Gilbertson and Gemfields are not accused of any wrongdoing.

— “shifty” —

The court also heard from Algy Strutt, a senior manager at Gemfields, who was involved in negotiations over the Madagascan proposals. Following a meeting Strutt had with Tabuteau in March 2023, the Gemfields executive wrote an internal memo describing him as “shifty” and “pretty cagey.”

Tabuteau had asked for fees for helping the company to meet the Madagascan president. “I was immediately suspicious of this ... the scope for corruption was very high ... I would advise proceeding with extreme caution,” he wrote in the memo, adding that any fee proposals should be taken “with a pinch of salt.”

Strutt added that although Tabuteau appeared to know what he was talking about, he had a “slightly disheveled air” about him.

In an email sent to the NCA in April, Gemfields said it believed it had an opportunity to catch a “senior political appointee ... red-handed.”

“We initially tried to report it to the Swiss police, but the police referred us to the NCA,” said Strutt. “We thought there was an opportunity for the authorities to catch them,” he added.

The case continues.

Please email editors@mlex.com to contact the editorial staff regarding this story, or to submit the names of lawyers and advisers.

Areas of Interest: Financial Crime

Industries: Mining & Extraction

Geographies: Europe, Northern Europe, United Kingdom