

NUCLEAR MONITOR

May 30, 2025 | Issue #927

A PUBLICATION OF WORLD INFORMATION SERVICE ON ENERGY (WISE)
AND THE NUCLEAR INFORMATION & RESOURCE SERVICE (NIRS)

WISE/NIRS

Nuclear Monitor

The World Information Service on Energy (WISE) was founded in 1978 and is based in the Netherlands.

The Nuclear Information & Resource Service (NIRS) was founded in the same year and is based in the U.S. WISE and NIRS joined forces in the year 2000 to produce Nuclear Monitor.

Nuclear Monitor is published in English, 10 times a year, in electronic (PDF) format only. Back issues are published on the WISE website two months after being sent to subscribers (www.wiseinternational.org/nuclear-monitor).

SUBSCRIPTIONS

10 issues

NGOs / individuals 67,50 Euros

Institutions / Industry 235 Euros

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www.wiseinternational.org

ISSN: 2542-5439

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World Information Service on Energy
founded in 1978

Opposition and Resistance re: Exploitation of Uranium in Africa

Gunter Wippel, uranium-network.org with information from WISE Uranium Project

In NM925, we told the stories of resistance against uranium developments in South Africa's Karoo region, in Tanzania as well as in Mali.

In this issue, we explore the long history of uranium mining and resistance in Namibia and in Congo. We also take a look at Malawi where uranium exploitation was contested by civil society and may resume later this year.

Belgian Congo / DR Congo

The first country to experience uranium exploitation on the African continent was 'Belgian Congo', now Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

How did this happen?

After the discovery of radioactivity by Henri Becquerel and Radium as a source of radioactivity by Marie and Pierre Curie in 1898, Radium became a commodity for luminescent watches, as a cancer treatment, and was used and misused in a variety of ways.

Request for radium surged; it was mined in a variety of places, some still bear witness to the extraction of radium: Port Radium, Canada, or Radium Hill, Australia; Shinkolobwe mine in Belgian Congo's Katanga region was another important source.

After nuclear fission's first performance in 1938, and the perspective of building a powerful weapon with uranium, the military became interested in uranium. With radium being a decay product of uranium, obviously

uranium must be present where radium was already mined.

Thus, Congo's Shinkolobwe mine – at the time under Belgian rule – attracted the military's interest. With an exceptionally high grade of uranium, Shinkolobwe provided much of the uranium used for the US nuclear bombs dropped on Japan in 1945.

Further reading

The forgotten mine that built the atomic bomb, BBC, 4 August 2020

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200803-the-forgotten-mine-that-built-the-atomic-bomb>

From that time, no resistance against the exploitation of radium or uranium in DRC is reported. Congo was a colony under Belgium rule (after being a personal possession of the Belgian king who had exploited the country and brutally oppressed its inhabitants). Mining was – and is – a source of income for families although the health impacts are serious, and (lethal) accidents happen.

The exploitation of uranium officially ended with Congo's independence in 1960.

Rumors of uranium smuggled out of the country via Zambia and Tanzania was investigated by the UN in 2002¹. The issue surfaced again in 2010s.

The matter is rather complicated, and we will not deal with it here.

In March 2009, France's then president Sarkozy and AREVA's then CEO, Anne

¹ "Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo", UN Security Council, 16. Oct 2002,

www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/{65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9}/DRC_S_2002_1146.pdf

Lauvergeon, clandestinely tried to make an agreement with the (autocratic) Kabila government granting exploitation rights for uranium to French AREVA.

Human rights activist and president of Association Africaine de Defense des Droits de L'Homme (ASADHO, Association for the Protection of Human Rights), Katanga chapter, Golden Misabiko, protested against the deal, making it public.

This action did not go well with the Kabila government: Misabiko was incarcerated, tortured, and might have died in prison. It took interventions from international Human Rights organisations such as amnesty international and FrontLine Defenders to get him released from prison and out of the country². One of Misabiko's colleagues died in a car accident.

Misabiko lived as a refugee since, in South Africa, and in Europe. The government denied his wife children to leave the country.

In 2009, AREVA announced that it's unlikely they will develop a uranium mine in DR Congo while the country remains politically unstable³. The situation in regard to uranium mining has not changed so far.

In 2014, Misabiko was awarded the Nuclear-Free Future Award, category Resistance⁴. The news made it rapidly to DR Congo and spread there via radio. His wife, hospitalized in the Gecamines Hospital, for a non-lethal disease, passed away shortly after.

Uranium mining plans by AREVA did not go forward, due to the insecurity in the country.

Further reading

Uranium, cobalt, copper: The painful legacy of the Shinkolobwe mines in the DRC, by [Remy Zahiga](#) 9. October 2023,

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/dr-congo-human-rights-campaigner-held>, and www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/014/2009/en/

www.boell.de/en/2023/10/09/uranium-cobalt-copper-painful-legacy-shinkolobwe-mines-drc

In 2025, media report interest of the US in Congo's minerals, in exchange for money, but probably military help for Congo's fight against M23 rebels⁵. As the Ukraine-Russia war continues, the US are looking to find sources of uranium other than Russia. Whether a deal with DR Congo might include uranium remains to be seen.

NAMIBIA

What is named Namibia today had become a German colony, Southwest Africa, in the 1880s; after WW I the League of Nations mandated South Africa to administer the territory. Uranium was discovered in the 1920s – with no consequences at the time.

After WW II, the South African administration – Apartheid system – continued exploiting the resources of the protectorate, against UN regulations. A liberation movement, SWAPO, fought for independence and exposed the illegal exploitation of resources.

Namibia gained independence by 1990 – later than most African countries.

Serious exploration for uranium started in the 1960s. In 1966, UK company Rio Tinto obtained rights for exploration of the Rössing deposit; mining started in 1976 – clandestinely.

“By honouring contracts it had signed with Rio Tinto Zinc (RTZ), a British-based multinational ... the UK government seemed to be perpetuating unlawful Apartheid rule over Namibian territory. ... The UK contracts came to stand in direct contravention ... of the UN's Decree No. 1 for the Protection of Natural Resources, which ruled in 1974 that “no

³ www.wise-uranium.org/upafr.html#CD

⁴ <https://nuclearfreefutureaward.org/golden-misabiko-dr-congo/>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjrylndddpo>

person or entity” can prospect for and extract natural resources within the territory (UN Council for Namibia 1985).”⁶

Key was the illegal hence clandestine transport of uranium from Namibia to Britain via France, later rerouted through Germany. It was exposed in a documentary “**Follow the Yellowcake Road**”⁷ and in media.

Why this long introduction?

With Namibia being a protectorate of South Africa under Apartheid rule, protests against uranium exploitation in the country were virtually impossible.

Opposition happened mainly outside

Namibia: In UK, the Campaign against Namibian Uranium Contracts (CANUC, formed 1979) and People against Rio Tinto Zinc and Subsidiaries (PARTIZANS) raised awareness on the illegality of uranium imports from Namibia⁸. Nationwide protests were organized in UK in the late 1970s, trade unions joined in; the Labor party opposed the contract. 10,000 petitions were handed over at Downing Street 10 asking to end the contract⁹.

In Germany – the uranium transports had been rerouted – NGOs addressed the issue, too. In 1988, German NGO AKAFRIK published “**Strahlende Geschäfte – Der Tanz auf dem Welturanmarkt**” (‘Radiating Business – The Dance on the World Uranium Market’).

With Namibia gaining independence in 1990, SWAPO’s position towards uranium mining changed; many Namibians depended on the jobs provided by the mine.

Nevertheless, the mine’s contribution to

Namibia’s GDP remains modest (2,5% in 2020)(IFRI).

Further reading

“**The Rössing file: the inside story of Britain's secret contract for Namibian uranium**”, 1980, by [Alun Roberts](#),
<https://search.worldcat.org/de/title/The-Rossing-file--the-inside-story-of-Britain-s-secret-contract-for-Namibian-uranium/oclc/123226013>

2025: A comprehensive **new book** on Rössing and colonialism:

“**Defending the Investment. Rössing Uranium and the Business of Decolonisation in Namibia**”, 2025, by Saima Nakuti Ndahangwapo , 2025 Basel Namibia Studies Series 32, eISBN: 978-3-906927-71-8
www.baslerafrika.ch/defending-the-investment-rossing-uranium-and-the-business-of-decolonisation-in-namibia/

After independence, criticism came from miners who fell sick and felt not treated properly. The issue of health of miners remains problematic to date (see NM 921 p. 11 and 922 p. 11f).

With the uranium price boom of 2007, Namibian authorities were flooded with exploration applications. “**Namibia’s Uranium rush**”¹⁰, a 2013 documentary, describes the situation, based on research by Marta Conde and Giorgos Kallis¹¹.

In 2014, Marta Conde published a pioneering article “**Activism mobilising science**”, discussing the needed but not always simple cooperation between scientists and activists –

⁶

www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/92664/ssoar-hsr-2024-1-hill_et_al-Follow_the_Yellowcake_Road_Historical.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y&lnkname=ssoar-hsr-2024-1-hill_et_al-Follow_the_Yellowcake_Road_Historical.pdf

⁷ Short clip of the film:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwHIs5BToXM

⁸

www.minesandcommunities.org/partizansarchive/pzhistory.html

⁹ <http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-B4B-84-al.sff.document.acoa000221.pdf>

¹⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zZre4r-VrM

¹¹ www.ejolt.org/2014/05/watch-a-lamca-ejolt-movie-on-uranium-mining-in-namibia/

a cooperation crucial in many controversies on environmental issues¹².

In 2007, the 10 year MORATORIUM on new exploration licenses was imposed; it was lifted in 2017.

Newer developments

Since 2020, Russian ROSATOM (via its subsidiaries UraniumOne and Headspring) plans to establish an in-situ leaching mine in Omaheke region (NM 921, page 8).

The [Stampriet Aquifer Uranium Mining Association](#) (SAUMA) is strongly opposing these plans due to the dangers for groundwater (artesian basin), of vital importance for humans, farming and cattle raising. The minister for Agriculture, Water and Land Reform, Carl-Hermann Schlettwein upheld that water was the most important means of life in (arid) Namibia¹³.

In June 2024, a High Level Meeting on **The impacts of Uranium mining in the Stampriet Transboundary Aquifer System**¹⁴ was held; international experts presented their views on the project¹⁵.

Currently, a variety of companies are applying for exploration licenses in Namibia¹⁶.

MALAWI – Civil Society opposes uranium mine, fights mining company Paladin

Malawi, under British rule during colonial times, gained independence in 1964. A long period as a one-party-state followed. By 1994, a new president, Mutharika, was elected, and reelected – for life (!) – in 2009, becoming more and more autocratic. Under his presidency the agreement with Paladin re: Kayelekera mine was made. Although the country is formally seen as a

democracy, people had different experiences. One person criticizing the government has died under unclear circumstances; NGOs critical of government decisions were facing hard times etc.

In 1998, Australian company Paladin had acquired the Kayelekera deposit. It wasn't until 2007, with the rise of the price of uranium that exploitation was considered; a mining application was filed with the government (see NM921); by April 2007, the mining license was granted.

NGOs questioned the mining as well as the conditions of the mining agreement; they sought cooperation across borders (for ex. with Australian Minerals Policy Institute, or European EJOLT); they also questioned the financial arrangement with the mining company (with African Forum and Network on Debt and Development).

In April 2007, Malawi NGOs Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR), Citizens for Justice (CfJ) and the Institute for Policy Interaction (IPI) called for a stop of the project, and launched court action in May.

In July, an IAEA 3-person-team visited Malawi. The team clearly stated that they had not approved the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) – an impression raised by the government and Paladin in media – due to the lack of a national legal regulatory framework.

"Malawi is not ready to license or permit the mining of Uranium in Malawi" Mr. Waggit of the IAEA team declared.

¹²

www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0921800914001633

¹³

<https://english.news.cn/20240617/a81ed640ce974425acedec4202553116/c.html>

¹⁴ www.unesco.org/en/articles/stakeholders-convene-high-level-meeting-impacts-uranium-mining-stampriet-transboundary-aquifer

¹⁵ Available via contact mail@uranium-network.org

¹⁶ www.wise-uranium.org/upna.html

By November 2007, Australian MPI stated: Paladin's mining application would not be approved in Australia.

Later the same month, Paladin declared all outstanding issues would have been settled with the NGOs; the NGOs denied this and indicated legal action.

By December 2007, it seemed an out-of-court settlement had been reached between NGOs and the Malawi Government. However, a newspaper report said the settlement was a result of death threats received by members of the involved NGOs (Nyasa Times Dec. 3, 2007).

As a result of NGO activities, the Government and Paladin 'have come up with an environmental bond that will see the company save funds to cater for any environmental damage the extraction of the mineral will cause.' "The idea is that at any time the mine closes, there has to be money to address environmental issues." (Malawi Nation Feb. 11, 2008)

Fast forward: How did this plan work out?

The idea of a fund, fueled by Paladin, to cover costs of environmental damages, sounded good. However, things turned out differently: When Paladin closed the mine in 2014 and sold it (2019/20, see: NM 921/922), the fund (US\$ 10 Mio) was returned to Paladin without any substantial rehabilitation work done. Paladin used the dollars to try and save its Langer Heinrich mine in Namibia. The new owner of Kayelekera, Australian company LOTUS, is supposed to contribute to a new fund.

(see: **Who cleans up the mess when an Australian uranium mining company leaves Africa?** by Jim Green, 18th June 2018, <https://theecologist.org/2018/jun/18/who-cleans-mess-when-australian-uranium-mining-company-leaves-africa>)

Back to 2008: In September, the Commission for Justice and Peace of the Roman Catholic diocese of Mzuzu launched a project to monitor uranium mining, focusing on Paladin's Kayelekera mine (Ecumenical News International Sep. 17, 2008).

Things did not go well with workers on site, either: In March 2009, workers fought for better working conditions and went on a sit-in. In response, armed police ruthlessly fired teargas at workers; senior managers had to be evacuated.

In October 2009, the fourth lethal accident occurred at the mine; numerous accidents, spills and secrecy, put the mine in WISE Uranium Project's "**Hall of Infamy**" ¹⁷.

In August 2011, a community group's task team from Malawi's northern region district of Karonga asked for access to information to effectively monitor mining activities in the area for compliance with fundamental human rights and labour standards.

In September 2011, a student of Polytechnic, critical of President Mutharika, was hunted by police, and then found dead at his university campus. The student wanted to petition the Australian government to get Paladin to make financial transactions public due to allegations of questionable dealings of some Government officials with Paladin.

In May 2012, workers at Kayelekera mine went another strike due to bad labor conditions.

In December 2012, a person running an anti-nuclear website (www.antinuclear.net) had posted comments critical of the mine, was threatened by a law firm, ordered by Paladin; to no avail, though.

By April 2013, the Malawi government gave in to pressure from activists to renegotiate the Kayelekera deal with Paladin; a main issue was

¹⁷ www.wise-uranium.org/ucpalhi.html

to remove the confidentiality clause (Malawi Today Apr. 14, 2013). Malawi never was a member of EITI, the Transparency Initiative.

The suspicion that the agreement between the Malawi government and Paladin was unfavorable for the country, was underpinned by a report by the [African Forum and Network on Debt and Development](#) (Afrodad): Malawi lost over US\$ 12 million due to tax waivers for Kayelekera uranium mine (Daily Times May 31, 2013).

In 2013, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, visited Malawi. He stated the uranium mining deal was one of the investments through which Malawi was losing resources otherwise available for food security. In the life span of the mine Malawi is expected to lose almost US\$281 million, he said¹⁸.

In September of the same year, people complained about symptoms of what might be radiation-induced diseases; no proofs were found. The absence of evidence may be due to Malawi neither having the equipment nor the experts to investigate the kind of allegations reported in local media.

Instead, government was relying on the assessments of the mine's owner, Paladin Africa.

Malawi had not established any kind of nuclear regulator so far.

By February 2014, Kayelekera mine was 'suspended', and sold to Australian company LOTUS in 2019/2020.

Problems continued after closure of the mine: Wastewater from ore processing was discharged into a nearby creek, spills occurred, etc. In 2012, CRIIRAD collected samples and performed radiation measurements in the surroundings of Kayelekera mine¹⁹. They showed uranium concentrations in the water of the Champhanji creek 40 times higher than before mining.

Latest developments

Lotus intends to restart the mine in late 2025 and got a government approval on May 5, 2025²⁰. However, civil society organisations voice serious concerns:

"Those reviewing this plan today bear a non-delegable duty to future generations. Uranium's hazards last billions of years - approving a flawed cover system constitutes a betrayal of intergenerational justice," reads part of the letter to the Minister of Mining. The letter calls for an immediate amendment of the closure plan order to align with the IAEA guidelines. They say in the absence of relevant Malawian laws, the country risks embarking on projects with remedial costs far exceeding the mining benefits." (Malawi Times Apr. 12, 2025, underlining not in the original).

The struggle continues.

¹⁸ www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2013/07/hand-outs-rights-breaking-cycle-perpetual-food-insecurity-malawi?LangID=E&NewsID=13569, Report: www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2013/07/end-mission-statement-special-rapporteur-right-food-malawi-12-22-july-2013?LangID=E&NewsID=13567

¹⁹ Impact of the Kayelekera uranium mine, Malawi, by Bruno Chareyron, EJOLT Report No. 21, Feb. 2015, www.ejolt.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/150222_Report-21.pdf

²⁰ <https://times.mw/csos-raise-concerns-over-kayerekera-uranium-mine/> and www.wise-uranium.org/umopafr.html#MW

Serious failure at Sweden's largest nuclear power plant

Jan van Evert

The failure that occurred in April this year at the Oskarshamn nuclear power plant, Sweden's largest, is classified by the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority as the most serious in five years.

A pipe outside the reactor vessel has broken and because of the position, the fault is classified as a category one, the most serious fault. The last time this happened was five years ago. This means that the reactor cannot be put into operation until the Swedish Radiation Safety authority approves it.

Uniper, the main owner, expects the plant to restart on August 15th at the earliest. The reason for the prolonged work is that the pipe is so difficult to access that a special working group had to be appointed to decide how the repair should be carried out.

Basically, it is a leak that has been detected in the primary system. It has been identified in a place where there are very high requirements for integrity of these structures. "We definitely don't want leaks there," says Francesco Cadinu, inspector at the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority.

The reactor was taken out of service in March for annual maintenance. During the audit, a crack was discovered in a pipe outside the reactor vessel. "During the audit, it was discovered that a pipe that is stupidly located

was broken", says Désiree Liljevall, press officer at Uniper.

Because the fault is classified as a category one, the reactor can only be restarted after the authority has approved it. Initially, the reactor owners categorised the fault as less serious, but the Swedish Radiation Safety Authority made a different assessment.

"We have decided that this incident needs to be classified as a category one instead. There is a team working on this case," says Cadinu.

He emphasises that the fault does not pose any risk at the moment. "At the moment there is no risk linked to the damage, because the reactor vessel is empty and the plant is shut down.

The other day, the owners of the nuclear power plant announced that the earliest it can be operational is August 15th. "This is what it's like to operate a technically advanced plant. Sometimes components break down and need to be repaired. We need the summer to repair the pipe and get approval", says Liljevall.

Last year, one of Sweden's nuclear power plants was also out of service for an extended period. Forsmark 3 was repaired for five months. This year, that reactor has also been out of operation for a few weeks due to a fault in the valves, but it is currently being restarted.

Nationwide anti-nuclear campaign in The Netherlands

Jan van Evert

On May 17th WISE Netherlands held a nationwide campaign against nuclear power in fifteen cities. The campaign focused on the skyrocketing costs and slow realisation of nuclear power plants in The Netherlands. The question asked to the passing public was simple: "Do you want to pour billions down the drain of new nuclear power plants? Or do you want to use those billions for more useful things, such as lower energy bills, better public transport and better healthcare?"



The actions took place across the country from Eemshaven in the far north (one of the proposed sites for the new nuclear power plants) to Middelburg in the south-west. The passing public was asked: "What would you do with 20 billion euros?" Most people chose for education and other purposes, only ten percent for nuclear power.

In Nijmegen, in the east of the country, fifteen activists gathered in front of the railway station. They brought a piece of nuclear waste and a Geiger counter to demonstrate radioactivity. The public could also admire a scale model of a nuclear power plant.

Lisa Busink, campaigner for WISE said: "Nuclear power is an expensive distraction from real solutions. With billions of taxpayers' money, we could do a lot more if we invest in things that benefit people now".

In Almelo, also in the east, the campaigners visited the Urenco uranium enrichment plant and deployed a banner. In Maastricht, near the Belgian border, local activist Leo Maathuis said: "Why does the government want to spend billions on money-guzzling, unnecessary and slow nuclear power plants, while cutting the budget for green hydrogen and batteries? To save the climate? Even Minister Hermans admits they would arrive too late for that".



The protest also included a petition entitled 'Not one cent to new nuclear power plants: nuclear power is bloody expensive!' 141 people signed the petition that day. The total score is now 798 signatures.

NUCLEAR NEWS



World Nuclear Power Status



Compared to the last edition of the Nuclear Monitor (926);

- ✓ In China, the construction of Shidaowan-2 has started.
- ✓ The status of 1 nuclear power reactor (Maanshan-2) in Taiwan has been changed from operating to closed.

