

Covid-19 slows Shire Valley irrigation project

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Covid-19 has slackened work on the ambitious Shire Valley Transformation Programme (SVTP) that will engage 300 000 farmers in irrigation and cash crop growing in the Lower Shire.

Speaking last week when members of the Parliamentary Committee on Government Assurance and Public Sector Reforms toured the project in Chikwawa, SVTP coordinator Stanley Chakhumbira Khaila said the pandemic has affected the project that will see 43 000 hectares covered in the district and Nsanje.

He said: "We planned to get some equipment from Angola but due to Covid-19 restrictions, we had to source them from India. That took more time.

"Besides, some 11 employees of the construction company Conudrill tested positive for Covid-19, so works had to stall. In addition, due to restrictions on gatherings, we have not been able to meet communities on the project."

Khaila, however, said they were optimistic they would finalise the \$563 million (about K434 billion) project and meet



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF STVP

The project's first phase involves digging of canals

the 2031 target for completion.

The project, according to Ministry of Agriculture's director of irrigation services Geoffrey Mamba, is expected to cover 130 kilometres, but they have covered six kilometres since works started in April last year.

He explained: "We have been working on the intake at the Kapichira Dam and digging canals passing through the Majete Wildlife Reserve where care had to be taken not to degrade the

environment.

"We hope to meet the targets as this is an important project that will transform the country and improve the lives of people in the Lower Shire who suffer from perennial hunger due to floods and drought."

On his part, the parliamentary committee's chairperson Noel Lipipa, who is Blantyre City South legislator, said despite the delays, they were satisfied with the progress of the project so far.

"We will report the concerns to Parliament as this is an important project that will help us transform from subsistence to commercial farming while harnessing the water that is lost," he said.

Vice-President Saulos Chilima said during a visit to the site last month that the project is in line with the country's 2063 development targets. It is supported by the World Bank, African Development Bank and the Global Environment Facility. ■

Protecting trees from animals

It is National Forestry Season in Malawi and various communities are planting trees. However, caring for the trees has, over the years, proven to be a challenging task that many communities fail to do. This leads to low survival rate of the planted trees. In Chikwawa, through African Parks' Environmental Education Programme, communities near the once dilapidated Majete Wildlife Reserve—which the organisation has brought back to life with sound park management—have learnt ways of looking after planted tree seedlings. The reserve is an example of a well-managed protected area delivering benefits to surrounding communities. The park provides 100 scholarships to vulnerable children, health care access to 11 906 people and a borehole that provides water to 200 people in the surrounding community. In the picture, some pupils build a hedge around a newly-planted tree seedling to protect it from predators.—THE NATION



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF AFRICAN PARKS

Mining community rebuffs Chinese investors

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The community of Ilomba in Chitipa, through its Mining Development Trust Committee, has rejected a proposed agreement that Chinese investors, who are part of the Ilomba Granite Company (IGC), made.

It follows two meetings—first on December 23 2020 with the committee and village heads, and a second one on December 26 with the community in Mbilima, where the mine is situated.

According to a communiqué, the Chinese investors were accompanied by a consultant Andrew Nkuna and two people who claimed to represent the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC).

Reads the communiqué: "We believe they came to coerce us to sign the agreement for their own benefit.

"For the past 25 years, they have failed to provide cement for the community to construct a borehole. So we have resolved to reject the agreement."

The trust, led by chairperson Samson Kawonga, also wondered why the alleged HRDC leaders were present at the meeting.

But HRDC chairperson Gift Trapence said they did not send any representative to Mbilima.

He said: "We did not send anybody. Let me warn anyone against misusing the name of HRDC. We will deal with them," he fumed.

Nkuna said he had done his part by engaging the parties, and that the company's managing director Faisal Hassan was better-placed to speak on the matter.

Hassan could not be reached when contacted yesterday. But earlier, he told *The Nation* that he has never had problems with community members at Ilomba.

IGC was until June 2020 owned by Hassan under a renewed Mining Licence No. ML0019/95 issued by the Ministry of Energy and Mining on June 28 1995. The first licence was issued in 1988.

Voice clips that were leaked recently detail how a Chinese investor managing IGC in November 2019 dangled \$300 000 (about K234 million) to senior government officials and a minister to renew their licence. The Anti-Corruption Bureau is investigating the matter. ■