

The Continent

Africa's busiest
airport has a
drug problem



Photo: Sara Creta | *The Continent*



Cover: A Kenyan citizen is on death row in Vietnam - but maybe she wouldn't be, if Africa's busiest airport had tighter security. Unfortunately, Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is developing a reputation as a favourite transit hub for intercontinental drug traffickers. Is its dubious reputation justified? (p13)

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Kiri Rupiah, Communities Editor

This newspaper punches well above its weight. That's largely because we have you, readers who take a PDF newspaper seriously and share it forward, getting it to carpenters, tailors and presidents alike. You are now a community of more than 30,000 in 140 countries!

In a departure from conventional wisdom, we chose not to shape our news around what makes a search engine happy. Instead, we've asked you to be the algorithm that gets us discovered and you have delivered.

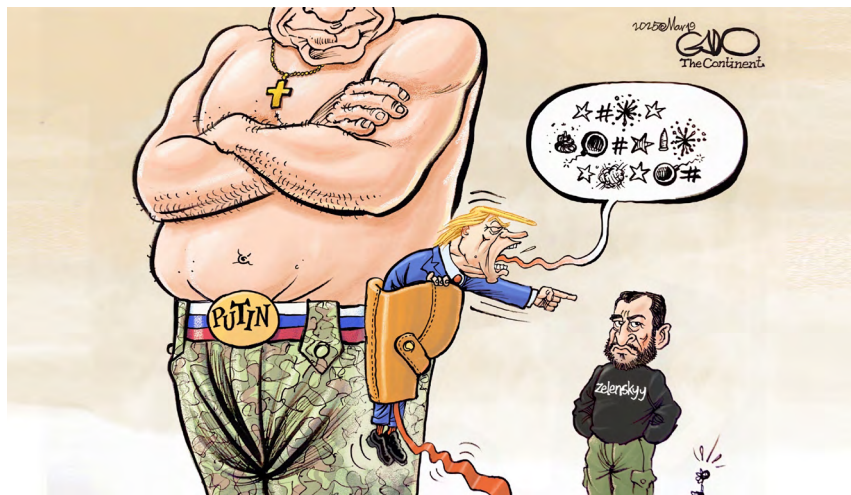
When I was first invited to help build this community – during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown – we were all huddled behind screens, isolated but more connected than ever, reading daily disease updates that left us anxious but hardly informed. We sought clarity and context, but got WhatsApp group conspiracy theories instead. The moment felt – and proved to be – right for peer-to-peer distribution of quality journalism.

The very first readers received *The*

Continent on 18 April 2020. More readers trickled in to subscribe in the following week. That trickle became a stream so fast that WhatsApp started throttling some of our messages, assuming we were another pandemic oversharer. We had to switch to a more robust tech platform to keep reaching all of you. I genuinely miss those early one-on-one chats of ours but a little bit of distance is the price we pay to get each edition out to everyone every week.

Not that we don't hear you. In the Big Annual Survey™, you nudged us to show more ambition, with many of you saying we were not making enough noise about our existence. So – because we are very clever – we asked you to make some noise for us. You did, and then some. In this season we've added over 3,500 new subscribers. Thank you!

To celebrate we're going to make our 200th edition about you. We want to hear your stories of where you go to find peace. And we want to know if you'd like to buy some *Continent* swag – shirts, art, our covers, illustrations, hoodies and, of course, totes. Click on [the thing](#). ■



Shooting from the hip: United States President Donald Trump has been criticised for echoing Russian talking points during negotiations with Ukraine.

CAMEROON

Tech jobseekers freed after being lured by kidnappers

Police in Yaoundé rescued nine men and four women who had been lured to Cameroon from Madagascar and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They were then held captive by fraudsters who forced them to scam their own relatives back home. The 13 had moved to Cameroon because they had been given the impression that they had landed lucrative technology and healthcare jobs, *CRTV* reported. Last month, in Nigeria's Kebbi State, police rescued 165 foreign nationals caught in a similar scheme.

SOUTH AFRICA

Come on you guys, give me a break here, pleads Ramaphosa

Anxious that the American government will impose further economic penalties on South Africa (after Donald Trump suspended aid in February), President Cyril Ramaphosa has asked South Africans to tone down their input on an ongoing spat with the US. His spokesperson conveyed the appeal in a Friday TV interview. South Africans, including ruling party politicians, were planning rallies to welcome Ebrahim Rasool, the country's ambassador to the US who was expelled by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio last week.



Off to the races: Namibia's President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah was sworn in this week. Photo: Simon Maina/AFP

NAMIBIA

NNN takes the wheel, revs engine of state

Namibia's first woman president Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah was sworn into office on Friday. She was elected on 3 December 2024, having served in at least eight other major positions in the government, starting as deputy foreign minister in 1990. She is only the second woman to win a presidential election in Africa, after Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Two other women have led their countries – Tanzania's Samia Suluhu Hassan and Malawi's Joyce Banda – but automatically ascended to the role without election after the deaths of their predecessors.

WEST AFRICA

Bolloré thwapped with Francofraud glove

French billionaire Vincent Bolloré built a \$6-billion business running ports in West Africa before going on to creating right-wing media outlets that play up in anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric in France. As *The Continent* reported last year, he is bidding to own Multichoice, Africa's largest private broadcaster. Now a group of NGOs from countries where Bolloré made his fortune have filed a claim against him in France. They accuse him and his son of gaining port concessions illegally, and engaging in money laundering.

SUDAN

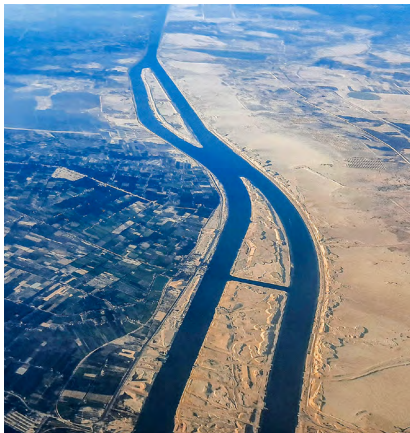
Sudan army retakes presidential palace

In a major symbolic win in its current battle to control the capital Khartoum, the Sudanese army regained control of the Presidential Palace after intense fighting on Thursday night. By Friday morning, soldiers on General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's side of the conflict were posting videos of themselves inside the palace. It had been occupied by soldiers fighting for the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary group led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, since the beginning of the war in April 2023.

EGYPT

Cash flow problems

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi says Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea are costing the Suez Canal \$800-million in lost revenue each month. Protesting against Israel's war in Gaza – which restarted again this week – Houthis have targeted western ships in the Red Sea since November 2023. The attacks force the vessels to reroute around Africa. The Iran-backed Houthis have controlled the Yemeni capital Sanaa since 2014 but Yemen's internationally recognised government is different and run from from Aden.



Houthis and the boat fissure: Attacks in the Gulf of Aden have led to a drop in traffic (and revenue) through the Suez Canal. Photo: Khaled Desouki/AFP

HIV/AIDS

WHO spells out the fatal consequences of US abscondment

The World Health Organisation says Burkina Faso, Haiti, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Nigeria, South Sudan and Ukraine are running out of HIV treatments following the United States aid freeze. It says an extra three million people will die as a consequence of the cuts. The US government is ignoring or skirting court rulings against the freeze, including one that found billionaire Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency likely violated the US constitution in shutting down USAID.

MOROCCO

Deadly measles outbreak linked to 'anti-vax' movement

Moroccan authorities have stepped up efforts to increase measles vaccinations as the country faces an epidemic of "historic levels", *France24* reports. Over 120 people have died in the outbreak local authorities are attributing to the global anti-vax movement which has gained a sizeable following since the Covid-19 pandemic. Measles is highly contagious and can have serious complications. Despite vaccines being the best protection, immunisation rates have declined in recent years.

SENEGAL

After Sall, amnesty not so solid after all

Former Senegalese president Macky Sall might face prosecution despite an amnesty passed while he was in office that forgave him for violent repression of protests. The current government says it has found wrongdoing that falls outside that amnesty: fraud. An audit allegedly found Sall's government underreported national debt. Sall, who now lives in Morocco, could be held accountable for "catastrophic" mismanagement, *RFI* reports.

MALI

Civilians die as army casts care aside

The Collective for the Defence of the Rights of the Azawad People, a coalition of Tuareg separatists in Mali, says an airstrike on a market in Timbuktu has killed at least 18 people. Mali's army says it killed "11 terrorists". Last month separatists accused the army and Russian mercs of executing 24 civilians. Mali has struggled to contain insurgent groups. Some of the groups are linked to al-Qaeda and Isis but others are local rebels who claim no external affiliations.



Cover up: A man steps over the body of a protester shot dead by police. Photo: Amilton Neves/AFP

MOZAMBIQUE

Police use live bullets on Maputo protesters

Mozambican police killed two people and wounded many others on Tuesday in Maputo, journalists and civil society groups say. An *AFP* photographer

witnessed the incident in which police shot live bullets into a crowd of people who had responded to the latest call for demonstrations by opposition leader Venâncio Mondlane, who after a few weeks of relative calm is mobilising protests again. Two weeks ago, Mondlane's motorcade was shot at. His team says it was an assassination attempt by state security.

DRC / Rwanda

Peace talks were dead on arrival (again)

Kagame and Tshisekedi finally had a meeting. M23 kept advancing.

Kiri Rupiah

This was meant to have been a week of peace talks between the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the M23 rebels who are occupying expanses of the country's east. Instead, M23 seized another key town: Walikale, home to the biggest tin mine in the world.

The Rwanda-backed fighters took Walikale just a day after the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda finally met in Doha to talk peace. They had called for an "immediate and unconditional ceasefire".

The surprise meeting, hosted by the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, was the first time that President Félix Tshisekedi and President Paul Kagame had met in years. In December, Kagame pulled out of a planned meeting in Luanda.

Just before the Doha meeting, M23 had withdrawn from separate peace talks

led by Angola. The group blamed new sanctions by the European Union against some of its members for its withdrawal.

The group's political leader, Corneille Nangaa, later told *Reuters* that what the two presidents had discussed and agreed on Tuesday Doha was not M23's concern.

M23's seizure of Walikale was not unexpected by the local population. The tin mine, Bisie, closed operations last week in anticipation of the development.

Control of Walikale is hotly contested, with DRC troops among the dozens of armed groups operating in the area. Whoever controls the mines there stands to collect up to \$100,000 a month in fees.

Such fees have been one of the ways M23 funds its war. The UN said last December that the group was collecting \$300,000 a month in production fees from coltan-rich Rubaya, which fell under its control long before Goma, Bukavu and now Walikale. ■



Joint statement: Paul, Tamim, Tamim's ankles and Félix. Photo: Mofa Qatar/AFP

Nigeria

Wanted: One (1) big oil boom – just not like this

A crude oil pipeline that transports as much as 245,000 barrels a day from Nigeria's Rivers State was forced to close after a section of it exploded on Tuesday. The cause of the explosion is still unknown, but police have arrested two people in connection with the incident.

The oil that the shuttered Trans-Niger carries each day is worth about \$14-million, and its continued closure could cost Nigeria up to \$440-million a month, *Africa Report* estimates. It moves up to 15% of Nigeria's oil exports. Leaked oil from the explosion also poses a serious environmental disaster in the area.

But this sort of incident is not very unusual. Dozens of attacks on pipelines occur in Nigeria each year. Some are by militant groups and others by people simply looking to steal the oil.

Nigerian authorities estimate that the country loses between 200,000 and 400,000 barrels of oil a day because of such attacks. The losses have been a significant factor in Nigeria's struggle to meet its oil export targets. They reached an all-time high of 1.7-million barrels a day last year but the government would like to see them rise to about 2.7-million.

In Rivers State, the blast took place



Get in line: Nigeria's oil infrastructure is targeted by thieves, vandals and terrorists. Photo: Pius Utomi Ekpei/AFP


amid a political row between cabinet minister Nyesom Wike and local governor Sim Fabura.

In what appears to be part of a wider power contest between the federal government and state authorities, Wike has worked with local legislators to impeach Fabura, who is popular in the state. Some groups allied with Fabura had threatened to attack oil infrastructure in the area, to protest the federal government's meddling.

The Trans-Niger pipeline used to be run by the British oil giant Shell, but repeated security breaches on its on-shore oil operations have seen it sell them off to focus on offshore oil. ■

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South Sudan

The same two old men beat the same old war drums

Salva Kiir and Riek Machar hold the nation's fate in their hands. Again.

Garang Abraham Malak in Juba

Fifteen years into its independence from the north, South Sudan is at a precipice: will it slip back into war or pull back and fully implement the 2018 agreement that ended its first civil war? President Salva Kiir and First Vice President Riek Machar agreed to share power – but not much sharing has actually happened. And now, in the country's Upper Nile State, bullets are flying again and bombs are dropping. Kiir and Machar are once again on opposite sides.

At the start of this week, more than 20 civilians were killed in aerial bombardments of Nasir, a town near the Ethiopian border in Upper Nile. Local residents accused the armies of South Sudan and Uganda of doing the bombing, alleging that residential areas were deliberately targeted. Even though



Shaky ground: Presidents Salva Kiir and Riek Machar. (Oh, and M7.)

Photo: Michael O'Hagan/AFP

Kiir and Machar are in theory both leaders of the government, state forces and their allies like Uganda are seen as serving Kiir.

Earlier this month, government forces had left Nasir amid attacks from the White Army, a militia predominantly composed of Nuer people loyal to Riek Machar. In the most publicised incident, a United Nations helicopter evacuating people from Nasir was shot at, killing a crew member and critically injuring others. The hostilities escalated days later when the White Army executed General Major Dak, an officer of the South Sudanese army who had been captured earlier.

President Kiir has since joined arms with the Ugandan army to fight the insurgents. Blaming Machar, Kiir has arrested or sacked many of his vice-president's government allies and

reinforced hostile security around his home.

In theory, Kiir and Machar are in the same government and are in the same political organisation, the South Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Machar's faction is called SPLM in opposition (SPLM-IO).

Wider peace increasingly fragile

The violence in Upper Nile first flared up when the government announced plans to replace long-serving soldiers with new recruits. Local militia fighters who have long demanded to be fully integrated in the national army now face forced disarmament, and reject the government's plan.

Creating a unified national force was agreed in the 2018 power sharing agreement between Kiir and Machar, but it has not happened. That delay means that there is some public sympathy towards Machar's camp – even as its fight is waged by a militia that has a notorious history of ethnic violence.

Above all, nobody but the belligerents wants a return to full-scale war. The SPLM-IO's Tuesday announcement that it is pulling out of the 2018 peace arrangement has heightened anxiety.

"The opposition should protest the arrest of their leaders but not pull out. Now there's a clear sign that the government may not yield to the IO's demands, increasing the likelihood of war," says Dr. Abraham Kuol Nyuon of the University of Juba.

A coalition of the embassies of Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the

United Kingdom, and the United States in Juba recently offered to mediate direct talks between President Salva Kiir and First Vice President Riek Machar.

Earlier attempts – including efforts led by the regional bloc Igad, peace talks in Rome, and negotiations in Kenya and Ethiopia – did not advance the power sharing enough to prevent the current escalation. Yet, the alternative is horrific. In 2015, when disagreement between Machar and Kiir escalated into a civil war, an estimated 383,000 died in the three-year conflict and the country was thrust into the 2017 famine which affected six million people.

'There's a clear sign that the government may not yield to the IO's demands, increasing the likelihood of war'

Even with that recent memory, the two sides are not ruling out a return to war. Defense Minister Gen. Chol Thon Balok said: "If IO doesn't dissolve the White Army, we shall fight." General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the head of Uganda's armed forces, the UPDF, said: "I want to offer the White Army an opportunity to surrender to the UPDF force before it's too late. We seek brotherhood and unity. But if [they] dare to fight us, you will all die."

But people directly affected by the current violence strike a different note. "Both parties must stop. Let the cycle of brutality end. My heart is broken," Abul Majur, daughter of the slain South Sudanese army general Majur Dak, said in a statement. ■

Africa's busiest airport has a drug problem

A Kenyan citizen was facing execution in Vietnam. Her horrific ordeal began with lax security at Addis Ababa's Bole International Airport.



All Photos: Sara Creta/The Continent

Samuel Getachew in Addis Ababa

Margaret Nduta, a 37-year-old Kenyan woman, was supposed to be executed in Ho Chi Minh City on Monday evening. She was convicted by a Vietnamese court of drug trafficking earlier this month.

After a frantic last-minute campaign, Kenyan diplomats succeeded in staying her execution. Much to the relief of her distraught family, she lives. For now. Her future remains unclear, with her family and human rights campaigners hoping to get her repatriated to Kenya.

Her journey into a Vietnamese jail cell appears to have started a little closer to home: at Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa. It was here, in July 2023, that her bag was first cleared to cross international borders. It was stuffed with nearly 2kg of cocaine.

Prior to heading into Africa's busiest airport, Nduta – who says she was recruited online for a job in Vietnam – met up with her recruiter, “John”, in Addis Ababa. He apparently handed her a flight ticket, and a bag to deliver to the person receiving her on the other end. The bag cleared security checks at Bole and later Hamad Airport in Qatar, but was more thoroughly examined at Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City Airport, leading to Nduta's arrest.

Drug trafficking through Ethiopia has been on the rise in recent years. Last year, in a rare admission, Ethiopia's customs head Debele Kabeta told parliamentarians that trafficking had increased by more than two-fold that year. As Nduta's case shows, Bole International Airport is one of the porous border points through which this trafficking is happening. A report by the United Nations Office on Drugs





and Crime says it is becoming “a major trafficking hub for cocaine and drugs”.

Illicit hotspot

Bole is Africa’s busiest airport. It is built to handle as many as 22-million international travellers and two million domestic ones. But with traveller numbers pushing upwards in recent years, security lapses have increased.

“Bole needs more trained staff, equipment and resources to help pay higher salaries to avoid corruption that is allowing many drug mules to pass through easily,” says John Wotherspoon, a Catholic priest. Wotherspoon runs a programme that supports Africans imprisoned on drug offences in Hong Kong.

As early as 2020, Wotherspoon was warning that Bole was becoming East Africa’s new hotspot for traffickers of illicit drugs and controlled wildlife products.



He has made frequent visits to Ethiopia’s capital, meeting officials, activists and even offering to raise funds to purchase scarce body scanners for the airport.

Bole’s lax security last came under the national spotlight in 2019 in a case similar to that of Nduta. A 28-year-old Ethiopian civil engineer, who had left the country through Bole, was facing capital punishment in China where he was

arrested with narcotics in his luggage.

In the wake of this case, the Chinese embassy in Addis Ababa started handing out a booklet with each visa to warn travellers about the risk of carrying drugs to China. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed promised there would be better security at Bole Airport, and signed a deal to import 400 sniffer dogs from The Netherlands to help identify drug mules.

It is unclear whether the dogs ever arrived.

"Bole does not have any sniffer dogs to assist us in our operation," Abebe Tadesse, the chief inspector of the Addis Ababa Police narcotics department, told *The Continent*. "While we are catching drug mules regularly, we know there are many who are successfully proceeding to their next destination because we lack the tools to catch them." The airport did not respond to questions.

While on-site checks remain insufficient, the government has taken a more controversial measure: profiling Nigerian travellers.

Amid reports that Nigerian drug traffickers were shifting their operations to Addis – following tightened security at airports in Kenya and Tanzania – Ethiopia stopped issuing visas on arrival to Nigerians in 2022, despite being a signatory to the African Union's free movement protocol. The visa on arrival option is available to all other African citizens.

Nigerian travellers also often undergo extensive searches and inspection, despite evidence that traffickers tend to recruit their mules within the region.



Airport tax

While Bole remains porous for drug movers, it can be an extremely nerve-racking airport for people who do not regularly travel internationally.

Four years ago, Senait Hagos, having moved from the war-torn Tigray region of northern Ethiopia to Addis Ababa, went to Bole with a valid passport, a ticket and a visa for Dubai. She was trying to leave the country for work. It would take four attempts and a family heirloom to get through the airport.

Senait says that on her fourth try, she was placed in a small room with other adolescent girls who were heading to the United Arab Emirates for work, where she was advised to pay some form of pre-departure fee. Legally, no such thing exists.

Senait says she handed over some of her belongings, including a gold chain that a family member had passed down to her, and the little money she was carrying. According to her, most of the other girls had nothing to offer and were denied departure.

Martha Senbete, a 24-year-old, had a similar experience. The Gondar native worked low wage jobs in Addis Ababa for four years to save enough to pay a middleman for a job in Dubai, and for passport fees that increased by 500% last year. Then at Bole she was turned away,

allegedly because she was unable to pay the airport authorities for departure.

“For four years, I did the most demeaning jobs, including as a day labourer, domestic worker and maid, to afford a passport and an agent to find me employment only to be ambushed with another payment at the airport,” she says.

The payment allegedly demanded at the airport was equivalent to one more year of work in Addis.

Senbete has resigned herself to never making it out of Ethiopia. ■

'Borderlands' is a series of features by The Continent, reporting from some of Africa's most interesting border crossings. The series was made possible with support from the African Union and GIZ





Brick wall: Survivors of gender-based violence in Nigeria struggle to be heard.

Photo: Temiloluwa Johnson

Home away from toxic home

A pandemic spike in violence against women prompted one woman to open a shelter for survivors.

Rahma Jimoh in Lagos

In an ordinary year, one in three Nigerian women will suffer domestic violence. When the world stayed at home trying to survive the Covid-19 pandemic, the violence got a lot worse for women whose homes were already unsafe. Betty Abah did something about it: she opened Hearts of Hope Shelter in Lagos.

Even though she recognised the need, the desperation for such a sanctuary took her by surprise. “We once had people come to the shelter barefooted from Akwa-Ibom,” Abah says. Nigeria, where

nearly 113-million women and girls live, has just 20 shelters for survivors of gender-based violence. The Netherlands, with a female population of about 20-million, has 5,000.

In its five years, the shelter has housed at least 100 survivors. Most of them had not even known beforehand of the option to leave their toxic homes for a shelter.

Omotoyosi Okoli endured nine years of violence from her husband, believing she would otherwise have to live on the streets.

At 22, in her third year of university, she met a man, married him shortly after

and started working at his hotel. When the violence started – coercive control, hair pulling and other assaults designed to leave no scars – he also would instruct the hotel not to pay her. For years, she felt stranded. “I didn’t think I would find help, or that there was a place I could run to,” she says.

When he strangled her one morning at 5am, he finally gave her “concrete evidence” with which to report the abuse to the police.

At the Ilupeju police station, the husband didn’t help his case: he reacted violently and rudely to the officers so they locked him up and sent Okoli to the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency. It’s here that she was directed to the shelter.

Other women who don’t know where to turn – police officers can be bribed by their abuser, neighbours can stigmatise or ignore them – often report their violence to prominent feminists. At least two survivors at the shelter said they went to feminist podcaster and activist Lolade Ajayi, who then referred them to Hearts of Hope.

For now, such individual efforts stand in for what should be society-wide care. One can stay at the shelter for up to three months while they learn some skills and try to find their footing.

But some Nigerian feminists believe that nothing short of a state-declared “state of emergency” would truly meet the challenge. Through a non-profit, Ajayi runs a Femicide Observatory. Last year, it documented more than 100 femicides in Nigeria.



Left to live: Nigeria has just 20 shelters for survivors of gender-based violence.
Photo: Temiloluwa Johnson

Yet, official solutions can be even more fragile than individual responses. In 2020, with more talk about gender-based violence because of the Covid spike, Nigerian authorities did something too. They created an inter-ministerial committee to work with the State of Emergency GBV Movement on solutions. “That committee didn’t meet more than twice,” Chioma Agwuegbo, who spurred the movement, told *The Guardian* in February. ■

Wanted: Water for a thirsty land

Glacier preservation – the theme of World Water Day 2025 (22 March) – may not be the most salient issue for Africa, even if the continent’s vanishing glaciers (we do still have some, believe it or not) make for a sad story of their own.

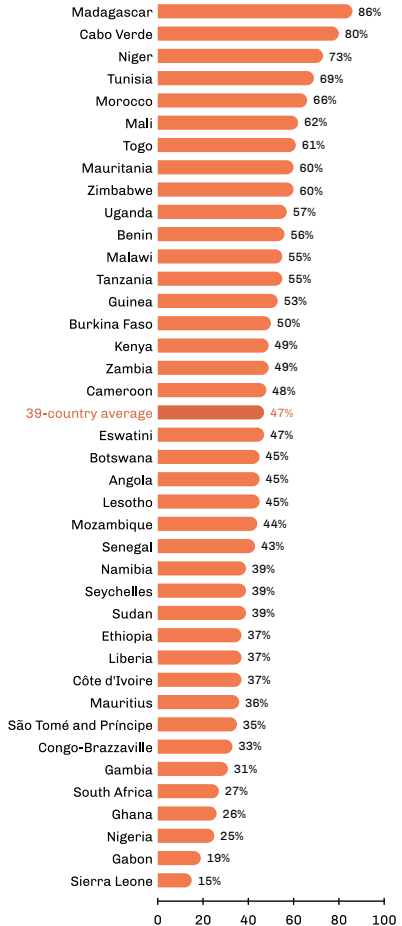
“Innovation and adaptation”, the focus of the World Water Congress later this year in Morocco, is more to the point as Africans struggle with poor water supply compounded by climate change.

Across 39 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer, 56% of respondents report that their household went without enough clean water during the previous year, including 24% who say this happened “many times” or “always”.

Water supply ranks among the top five problems that Africans say their government must urgently address. It takes the number one spot in Benin and Mozambique. Across the continent, six in 10 respondents (61%) lament their government’s poor performance in providing water and sanitation services.

Meanwhile, almost half (47%) of Africans say droughts have intensified in their region over the past 10 years, worst in Madagascar (86%), Cabo Verde (80%), and Niger (73%). ■

Drought has worsened in the region over the past 10 years | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



Source: Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200 to 2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.

More than just another sad story

From Sundance to the Berlinale, a genre-bending documentary on Sudanese life is winning plaudits and prizes. *The Continent* speaks to Khartoum's directors.



Film Review Wilfred Okiche

When Ibrahim Snoopy Ahmad, Rawia Alhag and Anas Saeed responded to a call for pitches in 2021, they were living in the interesting times following the ouster of Sudan's long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir in popular revolution. Times in Sudan became terribly interesting in April 2023 when two generals behind its revolution fell out and dragged the country into violent conflict.

They took upon themselves the hazardous responsibility of documenting these times. The result is *Khartoum*, a documentary that follows five Sudanese residents as they navigate their realities. Five citizens of the capital re-enact their stories of survival and freedom through the country's revolution, and civil war. The film is a feat of imagination – and overcoming production obstacles.

The Sudan Film Factory, with Phil Cox's Native Voice Films, commissioned the film and trained the cohort to create the project, which was envisioned as a cinematic poem about the city.



Filmmaking initially went as well as it ever goes in a resource-thin environment.

Snoopy Ahmad was following Jawad, a Sufi Rastafarian who volunteered with one of the resistance committees that organised the revolution.

Rawia Alhag was documenting two street children, Lokain and Wilson.

Saeed's participant, Khadmalla, was a tea vendor and single mother.

Timeea Mohamed Ahmed focused on



Out of dreams: Ibrahim Snoop Ahmad, Rawia Alhag, Anas Saeed and Timeea Mohamed Ahmed.

Photo: Cindy Ord/Getty Images via AFP

Magdi, a middle-aged civil servant.

Then war broke out.

Production funds had to be redirected to getting the filmmakers and participants out of Sudan. Resettling everyone between Kenya and Egypt took a couple of months and communication broke down between the crew and their subjects. “The priorities changed for a while,” Rawia Alhag, the sole woman in the collective, recalls.

Once people were resettled and had received some therapy, filmmaking could restart. But how do you make a film about Khartoum when you are not even there?

“We did not want the film to be another reportage with footage of war and displaced places,” Snoop Ahmad explains. Instead, the filmmakers found themselves thinking about meta-narratives. Do the people behind the camera continue pretending to be unrelated observers of their subjects?

“We had similar troubles – safety, displacement, passport issues, lack of internet,” says Timeea Ahmed. The collective decided to introduce a green screen component where the subjects



were urged to reconstruct their wartime experience and share their hopes for the future in animated fantasy sequences. Each filmmaker would lead their subjects into the process with their own stories of the war. Some of these meta moments made it into the film’s final cut.

The result is a scrappy but ingenious, ingenious documentary that captures the humanity of its subjects and makers, and testifies that “dreams, hopes and ambitions may change during times of conflict but they remain,” as Ahmad puts it.

“This isn’t a sad story from Africa where we are asking for help. We ask you to know us, feel what we feel, listen to our story and enjoy cinema,” says Ahmed. ■

Peace talks remain the only way out of Sudan's nightmare

The Sudanese Armed Forces may retake Khartoum. But don't expect a decisive end to the war.

Shewit Woldemichael

Sudan's two-year civil war has triggered what is now the world's largest humanitarian crisis, displacing tens of millions and pushing millions more into severe hunger. It is also a growing threat to stability in the wider region, compounding South Sudan's dire economic crisis and putting Chad under strain from the influx of thousands of refugees. To decisively end this horrific war, peace talks must reopen as soon as the dust settles on the recent battlefield developments.

For much of the war which started in April 2023, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a paramilitary group led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, more commonly known as “Hemedti” – has held the advantage. The army, under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, struggled to respond and the conflict got stuck in an ugly stalemate.

But in late 2024, the army and its allies launched better coordinated and well-supplied attacks. The tide of war began to turn. The RSF lost its hold on Wad Medani, capital of Gezira State, in early January, and later that month forces allied with the Sudanese army broke the siege on the army headquarters in Khartoum,

in place since the start of the war. In late February, the army pushed westwards and retook El Obied, the capital of North Kordofan, and Dilling, an important hub in South Kordofan State. The RSF was also being driven out of northern and central Omdurman, Khartoum's sister city on the west bank of the Nile and large parts of Bahri, to the north.

This week, Burhan's forces retook control of the Presidential Palace which the RSF has occupied since the beginning of the war – a major symbolic victory.

A number of factors explain this turn. First, the RSF is struggling to supply its troops in Khartoum with arms.

Second, the paramilitary group's forces launched offensives across vast swathes of Sudan over nearly two years of war and now seem to be overstretched. And some of its top commanders recently defected to the Sudanese army, pointing to serious internal frictions within the group.

Finally, the army mobilised new militias, and allied with others, including Darfuri armed groups and Islamist brigades. The army has also recently mastered drones, supplied by Türkiye, one of its external backers.

Burhan and his allies now seem

confident that they will retake the whole of Khartoum, where RSF forces remain in the centre of the city, and the army's advance into the Kordofans may be a precursor to a broader offensive into Darfur, which is still mostly under RSF control.

An uncertain future

Retaking Khartoum would not end the war. What happens after is unclear.

Pushing into the RSF home turf in Darfur risks plunging Sudan into another protracted stalemate. The RSF could prove more difficult to defeat there, especially if its chief backer, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), continues to provide support. This could enable the RSF to regroup and even launch new offensives in time. Worse, prolonged instability on that front could spread along the border into Chad, turning a national war into a regional one.

The other possibility is that Sudan becomes irrevocably divided, with each side entrenching itself in zones of influence. The complex web of external powers involved in the war, including the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, each with their own vested interests in Sudan, complicates things further.

A third way is to talk, of course.

Talks are unlikely to happen right now when the army and its allies believe they are on the cusp of a military breakthrough. But should Burhan retake Khartoum, he could feel that he is negotiating from a position of strength, which would open up opportunities for mediation.

If his campaign drifts into a new stalemate, both sides could finally see that it is in their interest to seek a final, non-



Cloud control: Aerial bombardment is bringing further ruin to the urban battlefield of Khartoum. Photo: Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/Reuters

military, resolution.

At either juncture, discussions between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, the regional powers with the most at stake in the conflict, will be critical. The new United States administration, which has yet to show any interest in Sudan's war, should encourage Riyadh, Cairo and Abu Dhabi to push for negotiations. Meanwhile, the African Union's presidential committee on Sudan, with five heads of state and led by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, should also try to engage the two sides.

Global humanitarian efforts to respond to large-scale food insecurity should remain a priority, especially given the severe reduction of U.S. aid. The alternative is hellish: months or even years of conflict, fragmentation and suffering for Sudanese people who are already in a desperate situation, at risk of spreading to Sudan's neighbours. ■

Shewit Woldemichael is the International Crisis Group's Senior Analyst for Sudan

Lights, camera and a little too much action

What happens when politics and cinema mix at one of Africa's biggest film festivals?

Èlia Borràs in Ouagadougou

The 29th edition of the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (Fespaco) took place earlier this month, exhibiting films and documentaries from various countries.

Just as *Sira* by Apolline Traoré was a standout at the last edition in 2023, this year Dani Kouyaté's *Katanga, la danse des scorpions* filled theatres. The *Macbeth* adaptation (in Mooré, one of Burkina Faso's official languages) explores themes of power, the occult and ancestral rituals.

The Burkinabé filmmaker spent five years adapting the drama and won the Yennenga Gold Stallion (worth 20-million CFA francs), the most prestigious award of the festival. The last time this award stayed in Burkina Faso was in 1997, with *Buud Yam* by Gaston Kaboré. "I wanted to make a black-and-white film to give it a universal feel, a dreamlike quality, and turn it into a fable about power," Kouyaté said.

The film was shot near the capital,



Cinematic coup: It was juntaful junket at Fespaco 2025. All Photos: Èlia Borràs

Ouagadougou, although Kouyaté initially intended to travel across the country. "Filming began two and a half years ago, but due to security concerns, we had to reduce the number of locations."

Carefully avoiding a journalist's question about the recent coups in the Sahel, he said, without elaborating: "Power is a human and universal theme ... Plots against power exist everywhere."

The Silver Stallion prize went to *The Village Next To Paradise* by Somali director Mo Harawé, while the Bronze Stallion was awarded to *On Becoming a Guinea Fowl* by Zambian filmmaker Rungano Nyoni.

Throughout the week Cine Burkina and Neerwaya, two of the city's most iconic cinemas, were packed with audiences. This year, however, Burkina Faso's capital was more militarised than usual, especially in areas where authorities were present.

Chad's President Mahamat Idriss Déby attended the opening ceremony alongside Burkina Faso's leader, Ibrahim Traoré. The event, co-ordinated by playwright and stage director Aristide Tarnagda, took place at the Palais des Sports De Ouaga 2000. Inside the venue, Chadian and Burkinabé presidential guards stood ready to protect both leaders – a staged display of military control that compromised the artistic performance.

After the two presidents gave the opening clap, the festival was officially launched with the theme “I Am Africa”. This year, a total of 1,351 films were submitted, with 235 from 48 countries accepted and 81 competing for different awards, including the Audience Award and the Thomas Sankara Prize.

“I wanted every African to feel represented at some point in the show,” Tarnagda told *The Continent*.

Figures such as Patrice Lumumba, Muhammad Ali, Ousmane Sembène, and Thomas Sankara were projected onto a massive 20-metre screen. Also featured was Malian filmmaker Souleymane Cissé, a major absence from the festival, who had been set to preside over the non-fiction jury but passed away two days before the festival began.

Chad was this edition's guest of honour, with a much larger stand than the others. “This is where an idea can turn into a film,” said Chadian director Cyril Danina.

The space also featured EkeFlicks, a new African streaming platform reminiscent of Netflix, and a stand for the Alliance of Sahel States, displaying a 2m poster of the three junta leaders who lead

the bloc. This was Chad's first time as the guest of honour.

Benin was originally selected in 2023, but Mali took its place at the last minute. Déby, who expelled French military forces in January – following the path of his Sahelian neighbors – took advantage of Fespaco to hold bilateral meetings with Ibrahim Traoré.

“I define Chadian identity in a way that makes it universal,” said Danina.

Throughout the event, Fespaco was adorned with giant balloons featuring images of President Ibrahim Traoré. There was also a stand collecting donations for the “war effort”.

Burkina Faso, the host of Africa's most important film festival, is also the country most affected by jihadist terrorism, accounting for 43% of global attacks, according to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index published by the Institute for Economics and Peace.

Kouyaté, who also won the Audience Award, dedicated his prize “to the brave people of Burkina Faso and to all those who have died on the battlefield defending our homeland”. ■





Still standing: Moses Rombayi has been waiting 16 years for a process that should take a few months.

All Photos: Emile Bosch

Sixteen years in limbo

An asylum-seeker feeds his community as he waits for the red tape to run out.

Jan Bornman in Johannesburg

Pockets of the Orange Farm community outside Johannesburg have struggled to recover from the economic shock of the Covid-19 pandemic. Every week, hundreds of people still eat at a soup kitchen in the area run by Moses Rombayi. And Rombayi himself is stuck in a different way.

Following Zimbabwe's economic collapse, Rombayi moved to South Africa in 2008 and, like thousands of other Zimbabweans, applied for asylum.

Processing his application should have taken only a few months. He has been waiting 16 years.

He might wait many more.

This time last year, authorities were "sitting with 113,689 appeals of asylum decisions", according to the Democratic Alliance, a member of the ruling coalition of political parties.

Appeals are only a subset of the asylum cases and it would take 68 years for the department of home affairs to clear that backlog alone, said the auditor general's office in a 2020 report. At the time, the



appeals backlog sat at about 150,000 files. When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees gave South Africa \$8-million to help process the appeals backlog, only 10,890 files were processed, home affairs would later report.

The limbo severely limits what people in Rombayi's position can do while living and waiting in South Africa.

"It's not easy to get a job and when you do, they underpay you. I can't open a bank account and I don't qualify for a disability grant," says Rombayi, who moves with the help of crutches.

Rombayi has been industrious even in the limbo: he makes and sells soft toys under his business HelloMo; runs the soup kitchen with his wife Bertha; and founded Arise Disabled People, a project that supports other disabled people to live happy and meaningful lives.

This is despite the fact that politicians

have often responded unhelpfully to the government's failure to process applications and properly document people.

"Instead of fixing the root causes contributing to their failure to properly manage this system, they are turning to amending legislation, making it stricter, unconstitutional and no longer adhering to international law," says Shenilla Mohamed, the executive director of Amnesty International in South Africa.

The politicians' debates on immigration law in turn fuel popular xenophobia towards undocumented people, in a vicious cycle that threatens their safety and their contributions to society, like Rombayi's soup kitchen and support to disabled people. ■

This article was produced as part of the African Union's media fellowship programme

THE QUIZ

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10

"The D in DRC is to distinguish it from Cuba, the Caribbean republic of the Conga."



Photo: One More Adventure Safaris

- 1_** The King's Palace Museum and Ethnographic Museum (pictured) is a reconstructed royal residence of which country's monarchy?
- 2_** Bafana Bafana is the men's national football team of which country?
- 3_** True or false: South Sudan's capital city is Khartoum.
- 4_** Which river separates the two Congos (DRC and Brazzaville)?
- 5_** Mogadishu is which country's capital city?
- 6_** True or false: Cameroon is part of Ecowas.
- 7_** Kenenisa Bekele is a long-distance runner from which country?
- 8_** Ibrahim Traoré is the military leader of which country?
- 9_** Benguela, Lobito and Moçâmedes are cities in which country?
- 10_** From 1884 to 1885 which Sudanese city was besieged by Mahdist forces?

HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to [+27 73 805 6068](tel:+27738056068) and we'll send the answers to you!

THE BIG PICTURE

Life in the fast lane: A musaharati walks through Cairo, beating a drum to wake Muslims for suhur, the pre-dawn meal taken before the day's fasting begins during the holy month of Ramadan.

Photo: Khaled Desouki/AFP



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