

The Continent



A line along the Limpopo

Photo: Paul Botes/*The Continent*

SOMALILAND**Opposition leader wins delayed poll**

Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, leader of the opposition Waddani party, has clinched victory in Somaliland's presidential election, the electoral commission said. Popularly known as Irro, Abdullahi has said he would "review" the January agreement negotiated by incumbent Muse Hibi with landlocked Ethiopia, which would grant the latter a strip of coast in exchange for recognition. Leaders of Somalia and Djibouti, with whom relations were strained under Bihi, have congratulated Irro on his election.



Irro's journey: Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi, Somaliland's president-elect, casts his vote. Photo: Luis Tato/AFP

PALESTINE**ICC issues arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas leaders**

The International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former defence minister Yoav Gallant, and for Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif, saying there were "reasonable grounds" to try them for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza. The US is not a signatory to the Rome Statute governing the ICC, and is not bound to honour the warrants, but European states that have supported Israel are, and will be expected to arrest them should they enter their territories.

SUDAN**So Russia believes some countries do have sovereignty**

On Monday, Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council draft resolution calling on Sudan's warring parties to cease hostilities immediately and allow the delivery of humanitarian aid. All the other countries of the 15-member council voted in favour of the measure drafted by Britain and Sierra Leone. Russia claimed Sudan's sovereignty was being undermined. The war has killed thousands and displaced millions, with many of those facing famine and hunger. Russia is known to see things differently when it suits.



Jailed: Former Islamic Police chief Al-Hassan ag Abdoul Aziz ag Mohamed ag Mahmoud. Photo: Eva Plevier/AFP

MALI

‘Jihadist’ cop jailed

The former chief of the Islamic police in Mali’s historic city of Timbuktu has been sentenced by the International Criminal Court to a decade behind bars for war crimes. In June, ICC judges agreed with prosecutors that Al-Hassan ag Abdoul Aziz ag Mohamed ag Mahmoud’s “reign of terror” in the city included torture, mutilations, public amputations by machete and floggings. Al-Hassan, an alleged member of the al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine insurgent group, became a senior member of the Islamic police during the takeover of Mali’s northern regions by several insurgent groups between April 2012 and January 2013. He was acquitted of rape and sexual slavery, and destroying Timbuktu’s mausoleums. He has 30 days to appeal the sentence. His victims may be compensated with reparations.

ANGOLA

Britain sanctions Isabel dos Santos

The government of the United Kingdom announced on Thursday that it has frozen the assets of Isabel dos Santos, daughter of former Angolan president José Eduardo dos Santos, and barred her from entering the country. The Dos Santos family ran Angola for 38 years and grew considerably wealthy in the process. Ms Dos Santos was once touted as the only African woman billionaire by *Forbes* magazine but it is unclear how much she is worth now, as authorities have gone after that wealth in the years after her father lost the presidency.

TOGO

Moscow to open embassy in Lomé

President Faure Gnassingbé’s government has given Russia the go-ahead to open an embassy in Togo’s capital, Lomé, reports *African Intelligence*. Earlier this month, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he had met his Togolese counterpart on the sidelines of the Russia-Africa forum in Sochi, Russia, to step up dialogue and “invigorate mutually beneficial trade, economic and investment cooperation, and expand humanitarian ties”. The two ministers have met at least five times since February 2020.

WEST AFRICA

Work begins on region's \$15-billion superhighway

Construction of the Benin stretch of what will eventually be a 1,088km highway running from Lagos, Nigeria to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, is now under way, reports the *World Highways* magazine. Last month, the president of the African Development Bank, Akinwunmi Adesina, said that the continental funder would mobilise \$15-billion for the infrastructure project. Upon completion, the highway is expected to handle up to 85% of the goods being traded in the West African region.

SOUTH AFRICA

Thwarted cops want to 'rescue' miners

For a third week now, South Africa's government has kept up a controversial blockade of food supplies to unlicensed miners in the disused Buffelsfontein mine, about 160km from Johannesburg. Last week, a court ordered police to halt its so-called "Operation Vala Umgodi" blockade, and local communities were able to deliver food and other supplies. On Tuesday, police said they were going in to "rescue" those still underground. A local official wanted authorities to "smoke out" the miners but hundreds are said to remain underground, fearing arrest.



Political agenda: Fugitive Zambian MP Emmanuel Banda has been arrested

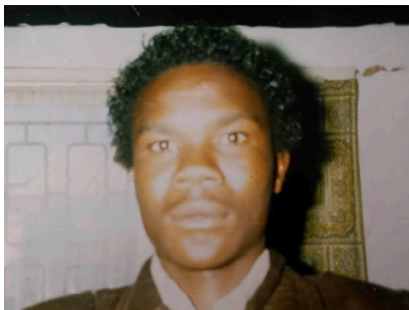
ZAMBIA

Police accused of protecting Hichilema's thin skin

Zambian lawmaker Emmanuel "Jay Jay" Banda has been arrested in the Zimbabwean capital Harare and handed over to Interpol. He says he is being persecuted for his ties to former president Edgar Lungu. Zambian police earlier offered a bounty of 2-million kwacha (\$72,000) for information leading to his arrest for a 2015 robbery of 12,000 kwacha. President Hakainde Hichilema has been accused of using police and the judiciary to target political rivals. Historian Sishuwa Sishuwa, who accused the president of targeting minorities, says a Hichilema "proxy" reported him to police for hate speech and believes this could lead to his forced disappearance.

SOUTH AFRICA**Apartheid-era cops deny killing activist**

Three former apartheid-era police officers have denied participating in the 1987 murder of South African student activist Caiphus Nyoka. Appearing in a Johannesburg court on Tuesday, Pieter Stander, Leon van den Berg and Abram Engelbrecht pleaded not guilty to the charges of murder. Another former officer, Johan Marais, pleaded guilty and was convicted last week. Nyoka, 23, was a member of the Congress of South African Students. He was shot dead on 24 August 1987 in his parents'



Apartheid target: Student activist Caiphus Nyoka was murdered in 1987.

house in Daveyton. In his guilty plea last week, Marais directly implicated the other Security Branch officers, saying he was instructed “to take the deceased out”, *News24* reported.

CAPITALISM**Ever so briefly, crime didn't pay for Adani companies**

In the hours after United States prosecutors indicted Indian billionaire Gautam Adani for fraud and a \$265-million scheme, his companies lost \$27-billion in value as panicked investors sold off shares at low prices. But by Friday morning, that brief wave of consequence was passing. Indian media outlets reported that share prices for group subsidiaries like Ambuja Cements were rising again. Even those that bear the billionaire's name, like Adani Enterprises and Adani Ports, had stopped their nosedive.

GABON**Putschists get a new constitution, but keep it in the family**

Gabon has approved a new constitution, a year after long-time president Ali Bongo Ondimba was overthrown in a coup. Voters approved it by a landslide 92%, with 53% turnout, according to *Reuters*. The new constitution will do away with dynastic rule – a direct rebuke to Bongo's rule which was marred by allegations of graft, mismanagement and attempts to extend his rule. He succeeded his father, Omar Bongo, who ruled for 41 years. General Brice Nguema, Bongo's cousin, is leading the country's transitional committee.

Kenya



Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP

President Ruto has had a week

Maureen Kasuku

This has been a week to forget for Kenya's President William Ruto.

It began with the unexpected backlash from the Catholic Church, which released a scathing statement slamming Ruto's government for corruption, increased killings and abductions, and normalising lies by elected leaders.

Ruto's hasty attempt at making amends – a Ksh2.6-million (\$20,000) donation for the construction of a priest's house

– was shot down by church leaders who refused it point blank, citing ethics and a desire to avoid being seen as politically compromised. Religious leaders and their followers have typically been a big part of Ruto's base.

Then, on Wednesday, at the United Nations headquarters in New York, a bid to turn Kenya's policing mission in Haiti into a UN peacekeeping mission was vetoed by Russia and China.

This setback raises questions on how Kenya will recover the Ksh 2.1-billion (\$16-million) its treasury has reportedly already spent on the mission. Claims that the United States would fully fund the mission were apparently exaggerated.

A third blow to Ruto's standing came from US prosecutors who indicted his business buddy, Indian billionaire Gautam Adani on bribery charges.

Controversially, Ruto's administration had entered a \$1.85-billion 30-year deal to redevelop and manage the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. On Thursday, Ruto ate humble pie and told Parliament that all partnerships with the Adani Group would be cancelled.

In addition to the airport deal, the Adani Group also had a \$736-million deal to build and run power substations and transmissions lines in Kenya. Both deals were being challenged in court. ■

Uganda

Museveni's archnemesis abducted in Kenyan raid

The taking of Kiiza Besigye is just the latest instance of opposition figures being abducted while abroad.

Kalungi Kabuye

When Ugandan opposition politician Kiiza Besigye didn't contest for the presidency in the 2021 elections, it seemed his violent dance with long-time President Yoweri Museveni had ended. Then, this week, Besigye was kidnapped from Kenya, taken to Kampala, arraigned in a military court (despite having retired from the army), and placed on remand in Uganda's Luzira Maximum Security Prison until 2 December.

Besigye's relationship with Museveni morphed from wartime comrades in the 1980s to political rivals in the early 2000s. In the subsequent decades, the Museveni regime arrested Besigye so many times that he was claimed to be the

world's most frequently arrested person. In 2021, he passed that burden to Robert Kyagulanyi, who ran against Museveni for president and has now been arrested several times.

News of Besigye's latest ordeal was broken on Sunday by his wife. Posting on X, she called for Ugandan security operatives to release him from a military facility. Besigye had travelled to Nairobi to attend the launch of a book by former Kenyan justice minister Martha Karua. He never made it to the event.

Kenya's foreign ministry denied allegations that Kenyan security forces abducted Besigye and delivered him to Uganda, saying investigations into how he was taken from Nairobi had begun. But the Kenyans are on shaky ground.

Four months ago, 36 young members of Besigye's Forum for Democratic Change were taken by masked men from a workshop in western Kenya, driven across the border and charged with treason in Kampala. In October, masked men abducted four registered refugees of Turkish origin. Kenyan authorities then deported them to Türkiye where they are wanted for alleged treason.

Besigye, along with prominent opposition figure Hajj Obeid Lutale Kamulegeya, was charged on Wednesday with illegal possession of firearms, negotiating to buy arms and conspiring to cause instability in Uganda. ■

Botswana

Basarwa patriarch to be buried on the land of his ancestors – finally

The new president has followed through on his work as a human rights lawyer.

Keletso Thobega in Gaborone

One of the first decisions of newly elected President Duma Boko has ended a years-long human rights saga concerning the remains of a Mosarwa (San) man.

The body of 77-year-old Gaoberekwe Pitseng has been kept in a mortuary for nearly three years, accruing a mortuary bill of nearly one million pula (\$73,000), as a mammoth legal case raged. The dispute pitted the state against his family, who wanted to bury him on ancestral land in Metsiamanong, located in the modern-day Central Kalahari Game Reserve.

The Basarwa people have resided in Botswana longer than any other group, but modern ideas of land use – especially diamond mining and tourism – keep displacing and dispossessing them.

Boko, who first came to prominence in the mid-2000s as a human rights lawyer who defended Basarwa land rights, has agreed to honour the wishes of the Pitseng family. In his inaugural State of the Nation

address this week, Boko announced that the Pitseng elder will finally receive a dignified burial on International Human Rights Day: 10 December.

“Our father will finally rest in peace,” said Lesiame Pitseng, who dragged the government to court in 2021, in a bid to have his father buried in Metsiamanong.

This was after a local council stopped the Pitsengs’ burial plans, saying they needed permission from the department of wildlife and national parks to access the game reserve that now stands on their ancestral land.

The family’s subsequent application for that permission was not approved.

When the Pitseng family took the case to the high court in Botswana, the presiding judge, Itumeleng Segopolo, instead ordered them to bury their patriarch in New Xade. This is the village to which the Botswana government moved hundreds of Basarwa families after evicting them from the Central Kalahari in 1997 and 2002. The family refused. ■

Tunisia

Even giving aid to migrants is terrorism now

Kiri Rupiah

Anti-terrorism investigators in Tunisia are reportedly holding a prominent human rights defender who worked with migrants in Medenine, a province in the country's south east.

The government-aligned *La Presse* newspaper reported that Abdallah Said, a Tunisian of Chadian descent, is accused of receiving foreign funds “to assist sub-Saharan migrants to enter illegally onto Tunisian soil”.

Said was arrested on 12 November and questioned alongside the secretary general and treasurer of his organisation Enfants de la Lune, said Romdhane Ben Amor, spokesperson for the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights. Two bank officials handling the group's accounts were also detained, Amor said.

Tunisia's President Kais Saied has often voiced anti-migrant rhetoric, including the racist Great Replacement Theory – which claims that there is a conspiracy to replace lighter-skinned populations with black people through migration. It's as popular with far-right politicians

in Tunisia as with conspiracy theorists and right-wing politicians in the Global North.

Being a transit country for migrants who cross the Mediterranean to seek better lives, Tunisia has been pulled into policing migration for Europe. Its government has received at least \$112-million from the European Union to curb this “irregular migration”.

The Continent and other media have reported about migrants being beaten, raped and killed, during or after being intercepted by North African states. The United Nations says that at least 28 people died in the desert region along the Libyan border between July and August.

Violent interceptions at sea or in the desert and collective expulsions without individualised assessments or due process, became the order of the day, and prompted local human rights workers to act in solidarity with migrants. ■



Sunk fallacy: The wrecks of migrant boats in Tunisia. Photo: Fethi Belaid/AFP

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COP29

African negotiator mysteriously dropped from key climate negotiations

The replacement, a Brussels-based consultant representing Honduras, has been rather friendly to EU climate responses that are unpopular with developing countries.

Rishika Pardikar

African negotiators at this year's UN conference on climate change in Baku, Azerbaijan were blindsided on Monday when a facilitator representing Botswana was replaced by one representing Honduras, without explanation.

The dropped facilitator was supposed to lead the conference's track on response measures: negotiating for consensus on the impact of actions taken to combat climate change.

Because climate negotiations (COPs) are done by consensus, where measures only pass if nobody objects to them, it is a tricky and difficult job where who is in the room matters.

"I was not engaged on reasons as to why my co-chair and I wouldn't continue," said Xolisa Ngwadla, the co-facilitator representing Botswana,

told *The Continent*. "The optics of the change by the presidency can raise questions, particularly replacing one set of facilitators and continuing with the others."

Ngwadla's co-facilitator for the same response measures track, who is from Iceland, was also replaced with one from Sweden, but no other tracks had their facilitators switched up.

The COP29 presidency has the prerogative to select facilitators. But delegates were surprised that the replacement was done without consultation with either the co-facilitators or country parties.

The African Group wrote to the Azerbaijani COP29 presidency, seeking an explanation and reassurance that the change in co-facilitators will not delay the process or affect the inclusion of the group's views in texts produced at the conference.

Those texts guide how the world responds to the climate crisis, and how money flows.

The Continent sent queries to the COP presidency. They remained unanswered.

Andrei Marcu, the co-facilitator from Honduras, is the founder and executive director of the Brussels-based think-tank European Roundtable on Climate Change and Sustainable Transition. It works with European governments and industry on things like the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. African countries in particular have raised serious concerns about this tax on imports from polluting industries.

"This is concerning," said Fatten Aggad, executive director of the African Future Policies Hub.

The Continent sent queries to Marcu on Thursday about conflict of interest and the manner in which co-facilitators were changed without a discussion. He did not respond.

Conflict of interest

The United Nations climate convention, in Article 4.8, recognises that countries will be affected not only by climate change but also by measures taken to tackle it.

One example is how countries whose economies depend on revenue from fossil fuels (like Nigeria and Angola) will be affected by a global switch to clean energy.

Another example is trade measures like the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. This puts extra tariffs on products like iron and steel, cement and fertilisers that come from countries where a lot of carbon pollution is generated



All in the same boat: An environmental group protests in Manila ahead of COP29. Photo: Jam Sta Rose/AFP

creating them. That extra cost makes them more expensive and less competitive.

Some developing countries have been especially concerned about unilateral trade measures like the border adjustment mechanism. They argue that they are the least responsible for the carbon emissions now trapping heat in the atmosphere, driving dangerous heating, with this year on track to be 1.5°C hotter than average – a mark African countries have pushed to be the agreed limit of heating.

At this COP, Brazil, South Africa, China and India proposed adding wording to climate agreements that raised “concerns” with these kinds of tariffs and trade restrictions. The African Group supported this proposal. But developed countries, and the EU in particular, did not agree. Because COP processes proceed on consensus, the proposal was dropped.

Ngwadla, representing Botswana, would have been a key voice in trying to balance these competing concerns. ■

Malawi

The rich better have my money

Debt-saddled states are going after firms that have failed to pay what they owe on extractive and even fraudulent deals.

Jack McBrams in Lilongwe

The military junta in Mali made global headlines this week for detaining the chief executive of Resolute Mining over alleged back taxes amounting to \$160-million. With its share price tanking, the Australian multinational agreed to pay.

But Mali is not the only African country going hard after global giants. In other lawsuits, Malawi is seeking more than \$314-billion from Columbia Gem House, TotalEnergies and Star Agritech.

The government's move against United States gemstone miner Columbia Gem House is unprecedented. Authorities want to recover unpaid taxes that they estimate to be nearly \$310-billion (including interest).

Columbia Gem House does business in Malawi through a subsidiary called

Nyala Mines. In a letter dated 26 July, the attorney general accused Nyala Mines of under-reporting its income from the sale of Malawian rubies and sapphires as far back as 2008. The letter said Nyala paid a mere \$600 in taxes despite generating an estimated \$24-billion in revenue from the Chimwadzulu mine located in the central region of Ntcheu.

French energy giant TotalEnergies is on the hook for \$4-billion in a dispute over its use of government-owned storage facilities for fuel imports. On every litre of fuel imported into Malawi, TotalEnergies was allegedly required to pay 50% of the gross profit to the government, but stopped the payments in 2006.

The government claims that the halt in payments caused it substantial financial losses and will now sue the French company in an international court. The attorney general said preparations for the case "have reached an advanced stage".

Meanwhile, a 21-day payment ultimatum to Turkish company Star Agritech International Turkish expired this week. "They haven't yet responded. The next step is legal action," attorney general Thabo Chakaka told *The Continent* on Wednesday evening.

Malawian authorities want \$15-million from the tobacco trading company, over allegedly fraudulent transactions that involve the state-owned tobacco-buying enterprise, Malawi Leaf Company



Up in smoke: One firm ordered 3,000 tonnes of tobacco – but did not pay.

Photo: Gianluigi Guercia/AFP

Limited. The dispute dates back to 2013 when Malawi Leaf offered a company registered in Hong Kong, Star Tobacco International – the predecessor of Star Agritech – a block sale of more than three-million kilograms of tobacco at pre-agreed rates. A partial shipment of 52 containers of tobacco was made but the buyer allegedly failed to pay.

Malawi Leaf halted further shipments and eventually took legal action in Hong Kong, where a court ruled in its favour. However, the judgment could not be enforced because it turned out that Star Tobacco International was an asset-less shell company and none of its directors resided in Hong Kong.

The Malawian government says the deal was designed to defraud it and it will pursue civil claims and potential criminal proceedings against Star Agritech.

Frank Namangale, the spokesperson

for Malawi's justice ministry, told *The Continent* that the government is only "claiming what rightfully belongs to the Malawian people" and the funds which "represent a significant portion of the nation's wealth" and were "unjustly withheld".

He added: "The delay in taking legal action was due to the complex nature of these cases and the need for thorough investigation and preparation to build a robust case."

The Continent contacted all three companies but none sent substantive comments. Columbia Gem House chief executive Eric Braunwart promised to respond but did not, despite several reminders. A spokesperson for TotalEnergies in Malawi said they can't comment because of the ongoing legal process and Star Agritech didn't respond.





Free movement – if the price is right

People are moving relatively freely through Beitbridge, southern Africa's busiest border post – just not in the way the African Union intended.

Photo: Paul Botes/*The Continent*

Sihle Nyathi in Beitbridge

South Africa and Zimbabwe are divided by the Limpopo River. There are many different ways to cross that river.

The busiest post of all – the busiest border crossing in all of Southern Africa, and perhaps in the continent as a whole – is a squat, single-lane bridge named after Alfred Beit, the notorious German diamond dealer who founded De Beers alongside Cecil Rhodes.

Welcome to Beitbridge.

On most days, 20,000 people move across the bridge between the two countries, according to *The Herald* newspaper. That number can triple during public holidays. All travellers must, in theory, have their documents checked and stamped by border officials on both sides. On a good day, this takes less than

an hour. On a bad day – well, people have been known to wait in slow-moving queues overnight, while lines of trucks can stretch back for kilometres.

Those trucks – around 900 per day – are laden with everything from fresh produce to construction materials to mining equipment. They are not just shuttling between South Africa and Zimbabwe, but also link Zambia, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and northern Mozambique to Africa's largest economy: South Africa.

This makes Beitbridge one of the most important economic nodes in the region. But for Zimbabweans who live and work in South Africa, the border post represents something even more important: it's their main connection to the country, and the people they left behind.





Photos: Zinyange Auntony/The Continent

Money talks

The decades-long collapse of Zimbabwe's economy has forced more than a million Zimbabweans to make a new life in South Africa. Despite populist rhetoric to the contrary, this has been an economic win for South Africa: a study in *Strategic Review for Southern Africa*, an academic journal, found that immigrants may increase the country's per capita income by as much as 5%.

There are various visa regimes that allow Zimbabweans to live and work within the borders of their more prosperous neighbour. These are enforced erratically, and are subject to sudden change.

Not everyone qualifies. Sylvia Jakachira, for example, is a Zimbabwean domestic worker based in Johannesburg. She travels between there and Harare every three months.



Domestic work is not considered a critical skill by South African authorities, which means she does not qualify for a long-stay visa.

Her employers, taking advantage of her irregular status, pay her a pittance – but it's better than sitting at home in Harare doing nothing, she says.

South African law allows Zimbabweans to visit the country for 90 days without a visa.

This is, however, subject to the

discretion of border officials, and repeat visits are strongly discouraged. To get around this, Jakachira says that she pays between R100 and R300 (\$17) per trip to get the necessary stamp in her passport.

Her journey to the border, like many others, begins at the Powerhouse Bus Station in central Johannesburg. This is the place to hop on a bus, no questions asked, with bus operators adept at navigating both official and unofficial bureaucracy. There is one rule: “Vapeyi mari tiende” – give them money so we can go. A hundred rand here, another hundred there, nobody asks questions.

“As long as money exists, hapana chekutya; there’s nothing to fear,” Bernard Katadza*, a bus operator, told *The Continent*.

Typically, after a quick stop in Pretoria to collect more passengers, a conductor stands in the middle of the bus to explain how the journey will progress. There will be only one more stop – a 20-minute recess at a Sasol petrol station in the town of Musina – and then the bus will head to the Beitbridge crossing.

For passengers with questionable documentation, this is the time to speak up. In hushed tones, money exchanges hands: R400 for someone who has overstayed the 90-day stamp; double that for someone who is completely undocumented; and R1,000 (\$55) for a solo parent travelling with a child but without the necessary affidavits.

These rates are negotiable. Passengers never pay border officials directly.

At the border, all passengers are asked to get off the bus to queue in a

Photo: Zinyange Auntony/
The Continent



Photo: Paul Botes/
The Continent



nondescript, poorly air-conditioned border management hall. It is hot and dry, and mosquitoes abound.

There is one immigration queue for each bus, first come, first served.



Photo: Zinyanga Auntony/The Continent

These days, following the completion in 2023 of a \$300-million redevelopment of the Zimbabwean side, the process is usually complete within an hour – even for the people with “complicated” situations.

Neither South Africa nor Zimbabwe have ratified the African Union’s 2018 protocol relating to the free movement of people across borders. This envisions giving African citizens the right to live and work in any member state, visa-free.

Nonetheless, Beitbridge’s informal economy appears to have arrived at the same conclusion, though the movement is not totally free.

Vapeyi mari tiende.

On the fence

In August, *Carte Blanche*, a South African investigative journalism programme, captured video footage of Zimbabwean nationals bribing South African

immigration officers to extend their stay in the country. This did not come as a surprise to Michael Masiapato, the head of South Africa’s Border Management Authority, who told the programme: “One thing that we cannot deny is the reality of corruption.”

Masiapato said his agency, responsible for operating South Africa’s 71 border crossings, is chronically understaffed. At Beitbridge, he is only able to deploy 10 border guards per shift. He believes the solution lies in advanced technology, in the form of digitised records, surveillance drones and body cameras. When deployed, these will allow his officers to monitor travellers more effectively – and allow him to monitor his officers.

Authorities have long struggled to control movement across the Limpopo River. Successive South African administrations have tried, and mostly



Photo: Zinyange
Auntony/The Continent



Photo: Paul Botes/
The Continent

failed. The apartheid regime built an electrified fence along much of the border, and patrolled its 233km with men and dogs in an effort to keep out potential freedom fighters, some of whom were in exile in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Tanzania.

When that didn't work, they imported a pack of wolves – yes, *wolves* – from North America and bred them to hunt down insurgents. That failed, too. As it

happens, wolves make terrible watchdogs, and they are now in an animal sanctuary in the Eastern Cape.

In recent years, the government of the new, democratic South Africa spent over \$2-million to reinforce the fence along parts of the border.

The reinforcements did not last long. Dilapidated and missing entirely in some places, the fence is now derided as “the Beitbridge washing line”. Discarded baby clothes and suitcases are caught in its razor-wire, snapshots of irregular entries gone right, or horribly wrong.

The Beitbridge shipping line

There is plenty of traffic that does not go through official crossings. At a spot about 45 minutes away from Musina, *The Continent* speaks to one “businessman” who has been working the border since 2018. Addressed as Mukoma Jimmy by his crew, he drives his 15-tonne truck to and from the banks of the Limpopo River to fulfil orders from Zimbabwe.

Jimmy speaks freely, claiming that he is friends with the local police, tax officials and soldiers on both sides. He says he is not a smuggler, but is doing good, honest work: in Zimbabwe, many basic goods are priced exorbitantly in US dollars. Jimmy, and many other operators in what is known as the “Beitbridge shipping” network, buy products much more cheaply in South Africa, and deliver them to Zimbabwean customers.

Jimmy takes orders for food parcels, small and large appliances, clothes, alcohol, cigarettes, and even bee-keeping equipment. You name it, he can get it.



Photo: Zinyange Auntony/The Continent

He works with a few young men who do all the heavy lifting, often in sweltering heat. They offload goods from a truck onto donkey-drawn carts on the river bed, which make their way through the veld to deliver them to Zimbabwe.

“These boys would be sitting at home doing nothing, or worse getting into trouble if I didn’t give them something to do, maona [you see]? I am an employer.”

He does not transport people, illegal cigarettes – or cars stolen in gruesome hijackings, an increasingly worrisome practice. Stolen vehicles are trafficked elsewhere – at places like Mrs J’s farm.

Mrs J does not want to be identified. She runs a successful game farm not far from where Jimmy’s crew loads their truck. Convoys of stolen vehicles cut across her farm, usually at night, en route to buyers in Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

It’s a sophisticated operation: criminal syndicates use drones to evade detection. The police and the army appear powerless. So is Mrs J. Occasionally, a stolen vehicle is recovered on her property. Their interiors describe journeys brutally interrupted: Unfinished meals. Bags neatly packed. Blood splatter. Lives cut short.

Mrs J and her husband have coordinated with other farmers and the South African army to intercept the gangs. But without political will or police muscle, it’s a dangerous and thankless job.

“They’ll be bailed out,” she says. “And that’s the end of it.” ■

‘Borderlands’ is a new series by The Continent, reporting from Africa’s most interesting border crossings. The series was made possible with support from the African Union and GIZ



Heart of the matter: Agadez, the 'Gateway to the Desert', is key to Niger's talks with rebels. Photo: Camille Laffont/AFP

Words over war

By prioritising peace talks in areas where rebel movements cropped up, the military junta in Niamey may have secured its rule, and saved Nigerien lives.

Beverly Ochieng in Dakar

Fighters from two armed groups that have opposed Niger's military government are preparing to lay down their arms. This is a milestone for the planned national dialogue process.

Dozens of insurgents, some based in neighbouring Libya, have reportedly returned to Niger as part of an amnesty programme established by the junta to forestall an insurgency in the northern region of Agadez. Their return is likely

to divide the rebel groups that took up arms against the putschists who staged the July 2023 coup and removed the elected president Mohamed Bazoum.

After a spate of rebel attacks that began in June, transitional authorities and local leaders in the communities from which the insurgents are drawn began discreet talks. They seem to be paying off.

Most of the rebel attacks – including the killing of several soldiers in Agadez and a deadly attack near the Agadem oil pipeline – were claimed by the Patriotic

Liberation Front (FPL). It formed to pressure the junta, which calls itself the National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland, to restore Bazoum.

The group also sought to undermine the junta's economic interests by threatening commercial operators on the pipeline, a project that the FPL leader, Mohamed Salah, has previously been convicted for targeting. Other armed groups joined the fray, including the Patriotic Front for Justice which attacked the northeastern town of Bilma in June.

In recent months, the insurgents appeared to be building alliances in and outside Niger.

In September, FPL met Malian separatists in Tinzaouaten, near the border with Algeria, after which they pledged to coalesce armed opposition towards their military governments.

FPL then unveiled a rebel coalition with three other armed groups in Niger, dubbed the Coordination of Free Forces of Niger. In mid-October al-Qaeda's Sahel branch, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin claimed a rare attack in Agadez where it reportedly killed seven soldiers and a civilian.

Jamaat Nusrat is the most active transnational fighting group in the Sahel but it's mostly active in Burkina Faso and Mali. In Niger, it had mostly been active in the southern parts bordering Benin, where it staged two deadly attacks against security forces this year.

With its Agadez attack, a coordinated coalition against the junta seemed to be coalescing further north where government security thinned out last year

after government soldiers were mobilised towards Niamey, to prepare for a military intervention threatened by the Economic Community of West African States in response to former president Bazoum's removal.

Pragmatic approach

Niger has prioritised talks with rebels over an armed response, a significantly different path from what the juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have taken.

Militarised responses could have heightened resistance, drawn community or political support for FPL affiliates from the junta in Niamey whose acceptance is still shaky, or simply stretched Niger's security forces even thinner.

Instead, since the start of November, tens of FPL insurgents have surrendered their arms to the Agadez governorate and more appear intent to heed to the junta's "Call to the Fatherland".

The surrenders – and the junta's well-received promise to protect commercial assets in Agadem and Agadez – can weaken the political clout of the exiled leaders of the rebel groups. That sets the military government up nicely for influencing the progress and outcome of a future national dialogue.

The junta has not addressed the persistent and broader uncertainty over how much longer it intends to stay in power, and the future of political representation in Niger. ■

Beverly Ochieng is a senior associate and analyst with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies and Control Risks

Tumaini at 10

Malawi doesn't let displaced foreigners integrate. So the residents of its only refugee camp hold a festival each year to celebrate their cultures together.

Jack McBrams in Dowa, Malawi

Before 1994, Dzaleka was a political prison. The site, about 50km outside Lilongwe, has since grown into Malawi's largest and only permanent refugee camp. It's a sprawling symbol of the country's controversial encampment policy, which bars displaced non-citizens from integrating into local society, schools or job markets.

Once a year, for 10 years now, it becomes a site for joy, talent and multicultural celebration.

"We look forward to Tumaini all year," says Michelle, a Burundian refugee who has lived in the camp for 22 years. "It reminds us of our culture, our joy, and everything we left behind. People here deal with unimaginable hardship, but Tumaini gives us hope. It's a glimpse of a better tomorrow."

The Tumaini festival was founded in 2014 by Congolese artist Menes La Plume, and born of his own displacement journey. The hip-hop artist, writer, and slam poet fled the Democratic Republic of Congo after his art put him at odds with authorities. "I had to escape, but I didn't leave behind my desire to use words and music to open minds," he says.



Starring: Malawi's Lawi headlined this year's festival. Photos: Jack McBrams

Across three days, the festival features multiple stages, an area for visual art displays, an outdoor cinema, a children's playground, workshops and speaking panels.

The star of this year's festival was Jetu, the 72-year-old singer and social media star who became a sensation last year when she followed her grandchildren's lead and started making skits for TikTok and YouTube.

Reprising the catchy tunes that



launched her late bloom, Jetu stole the show on the festival's closing night.

"At my age, not many people get this chance," she told *The Continent*, thrilled to have travelled over 400km to perform.

Drawn in by the festival's good cause, South African musician Maveriq Mavo also performed this year, saying: "Some things aren't about money; they're about purpose. I wrote a song dedicated to the refugees here."

Pulling the festival off is a tremendous feat – this year's crowdfunding campaign raised only \$400 of the \$10,000 sought.

But it does "open minds" as La Plume intended.

"This is the one time each year that we can come together, Malawians and refugees. People here are like anyone else – they have dreams, talents, and a love for life. The festival shows that," said Malawian festival-goer Yasintha Kanyoza.



Pinking ahead: Jetu, the 72-year-old musician and Tik-Tok star from Malawi, performs at the Tumaini festival

And La Plume now hopes to expand its vision to other African countries. "Tumaini has grown into more than a festival," he said. "It's a movement for economic, cultural, and psychological empowerment for refugees. Many of us now feel a sense of belonging and mental clarity because of this festival." ■

Freeze speech?

Most Africans (68%) say they feel free to speak their minds. But whether it's the polarising nature of the topic or fear of reprisal from the powers that be, when it comes to politics, they change their tune.

On average across 39 African countries, almost two thirds (63%) of adults say that in their country, people “often” or “always” have to be cautious when discussing political matters.

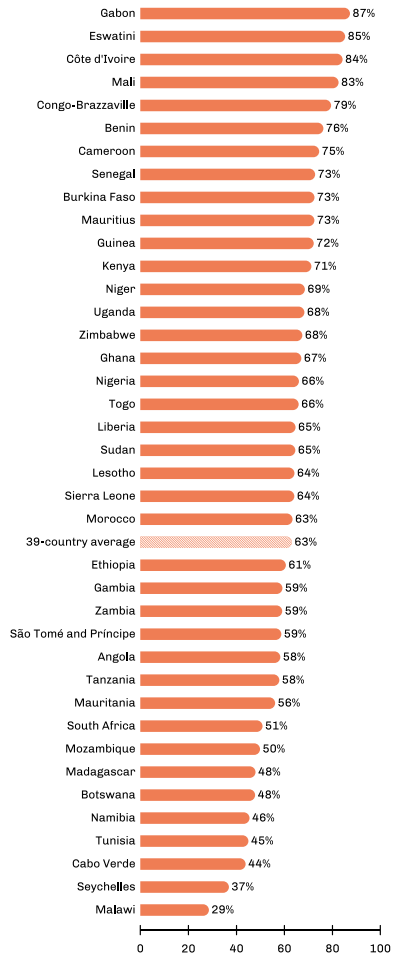
That seems especially the case in francophone West and Central Africa – Gabon (87%), Côte d'Ivoire (84%), Mali (83%), Congo-Brazzaville (79%), Benin (76%), Cameroon (75%), Senegal (73%), and Burkina Faso (73%) are all in the top 10.

In contrast, only 29% of Malawians and 37% of Seychellois think they have to tread carefully during political conversations.

Senior citizens (over age 65) are a little less worried than younger generations about discussing public affairs (54% vs. 62%-65%). And the wealthy (55%) feel freer than their poorer counterparts (63%-66%) to say what they like.

Fortunately, there's one place where most Africans feel free to express their political views without feeling pressured – the ballot box (85%).

Often/Always have to be careful when talking about politics | 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 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.



When love goes south

Could this really be a take on the cross-cultural, strangers-to-lovers trope that actually feels fresh?

Wilfred Okiche

Zandi J (Cindy Mahlangu) is a Cape Town-based podcast host and relationship influencer who has just been served a bitter pill.

Her childhood sweetheart has left her at the altar, sending her on a downward spiral that shakes the core of her hustle.

Enter Edward Obi (Efa Iwara), a charming Nigerian trust fund baby

masquerading as a professional photographer to avoid dealing with family duties at home in Lagos. They meet-cute, some screwball shenanigans ensue, and sparks fly. Will they, or won't they?

Naturally, obstacles arise to threaten the consummation of the affair. Edward's mother (Carol King) is on the verge of retirement and wants him back home. The family business isn't the only complication that awaits him at home. The plot is set up to ensure that Cindy and Edward are kept apart until the final act when it can all be sealed with a kiss.

Soft Love is a straight-up romcom directed by Awa Holmes, working from a screenplay by writer and producer Paballo Molingwane that deals with the familiar but presents its case in a way that still manages to come off as refreshing.

The action shuttles between Cape Town and Lagos for plot fidelity – and for co-production operations realities. But, truth be told, Cape Town does the heavy lifting here, providing a gorgeous backdrop for the antics of the protagonists.

There is never a doubt about where the action is headed, but the above-average writing and pleasant visual design of the film, paired with the loads of chemistry that erupts between Mahlangu and Iwara, are enough to keep audiences invested.

A wholesome Nigerian-South African romance for these troubled times?

Why not? ■

Soft Love is streaming on Amazon Prime Video

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

"Chad, Mali and Togo are tied for the smallest country in Africa, by spelling."

Photo: Michele D'Amico



- 1_** Which river does Niger get its name from?
- 2_** Who was the queen of Uganda from 1962 to 1963?
- 3_** What is Africa's second longest river?
- 4_** True or false: Dodoma is Tanzania's capital and largest city.
- 5_** Is Mount Stanley (pictured) Africa's second or third highest mountain?
- 6_** Beitbridge is a town in which country?
- 7_** Which country is Africa's largest, by population?
- 8_** Which country is Africa's largest, measured by area?
- 9_** Which country is Africa's smallest, by population?
- 10_** Which country is Africa's smallest by area?

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Another COP, another 'incineration pact'

Drop begging-bowl diplomacy and stress to richer nations that in a catastrophically hotter world, they will burn along with the rest of us.

Patrick Gathara

Meetings of the United Nations' Conference of the Parties (COP) have become little more than talk shops where world leaders and climate activists fiddle while the globe burns. They are always preceded by dire warnings from scientists about approaching tipping points and the need for drastic measures to scale back global emissions but never end with the drastic actions needed.

COP15 in Copenhagen 15 years ago was a particular low point. As it approached, expectations were sky high that a political deal would happen. African countries took a common position and announced they were willing "to walk out of any negotiations that threaten to be another rape of our continent". The president of the Maldives captured the prevailing mood when he declared: "We will not die quietly."

Yet the "Copenhagen Accord" at the end of the conference was what Sudanese delegate Lumumba Di-Aping described as "an incineration pact". The Africa common position had collapsed. Delegates at the conference reiterated the

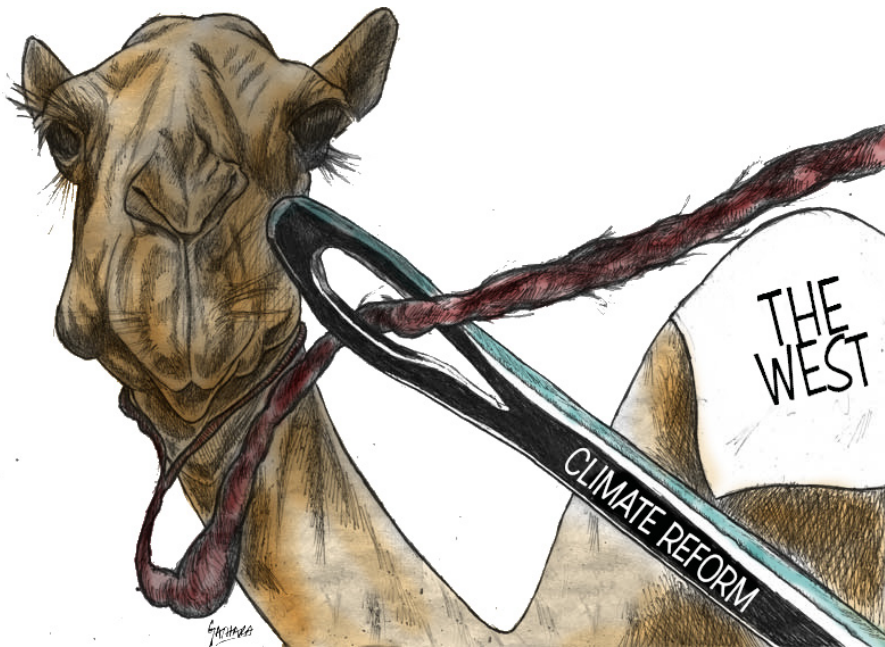
need to keep average global temperature rise to below 2°C but it ended with no commitment to doing so. In fact, one assessment of the emissions reduction commitments made by individual countries found that they would lead to nearly double that warming by 2100.

As yet another COP comes to a close in Baku, the globe needs to find another way of dealing with its climate issues as the urgent and existential threat they are. And that starts with how we talk about who faces risk.

Delegates at the conference reiterated the need to keep average global temperature rise to below 2 degrees but it ended with no commitment to doing so.

At every conference, it is repeatedly emphasised that it is the countries that have contributed the least to the problem that are bearing the brunt of it.

While this is true, it has the unintended consequence of framing the issue as primarily a problem for the so-called Global South. The demands



made on the industrialised world feel like appeals to their charity rather than acknowledgments of common destiny.

The comical scene in the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* where the desirability of a pile of money is weighed against the planet is called to mind.

Africans need to stop talking about this as yet another edition of begging-bowl diplomacy and adopt the language of Di-Aping.

In the wake of the hurricanes that have battered the US, killing hundreds, the wildfires and drought that have ravaged countries across the West leading to steep food prices, it must be stressed that if nothing is done, we will all burn together.

And the blunt talk must start at home. Kenya's president, William Ruto, has previously said that we should abandon the COP framework, but seems to have no idea of what comes next if we do.

Even worse, he has sought to frame the climate issue as an economic opportunity, suggesting we could profit from Western intransigence over emissions by monetising carbon sinks.

But we are not going to "grow" our way out of a wrecked climate. There is no profit to be made from ruining the planet. That is just another incineration pact. ■

Patrick Gathara is a Kenyan journalist, cartoonist and author

THE BIG PICTURE

Professional hugging: Ugandan wrestlers perform at the Nyege Nyege Festival in Jinja, which draws over 10,000 revellers and artists each year – as well as the ire of scandalised religious leaders.

Photo: Badru Katumba/AFP



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