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# The Continent



**Doing Silicon Valley's dirty work**

Illustration: Marc Pohl



**Cover:** Artificial Intelligence is not as artificial as advertised. In fact, programs like ChatGPT and Copilot rely on millions of data workers – actual humans – to do the grunt work. It's tedious, underpaid, and often traumatic. No wonder much of the work is outsourced to vulnerable communities in the global south (p15).

## Openings for you:

The VII Academy has 10 slots for photographers who are citizens of southern and eastern Africa to attend a 12-week tuition-free interdisciplinary seminar by Finbarr O'Reilly. Apply [here](#) by the end of Sunday 18 August 2024.

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**Stunner: Chidimma Adetshina has set xenophobic tongues wagging.** Photo: Chidimma Adetshina/Facebook

## SOUTH AFRICA

### The lady is too pan-African for Mzansi

A beautiful 23-year-old woman is the latest person to find herself in the crosshairs of South Africa's xenophobic debates. Chidimma Adetshina, born in South Africa to a Nigerian father and a South African mother with Mozambican roots, set tongues wagging by competing in this year's Miss South Africa beauty pageant. She is now among the Top 25 competitors and appears well-loved by fans of the contest despite online commentators questioning whether she was even eligible to enter.

## NIGERIA

### Billionaire rebuffed over anti-competitive request

The Nigerian government refused to ban the import of refined oil products at the behest of the country's (and Africa's) richest man, Aliko Dangote. They said that the request by Dangote, who owns a \$20-billion refinery in Lagos, is anti-competitive. But the African Development Bank president, Akinwunmi Adesina, rubbished that assessment, saying: "...let the importers set up local refineries and compete. That is fair and justified competition." A stung Dangote has reportedly pulled plans to build a huge steel mill in Nigeria.

## NATURE

### Botanists drop anti-black slur

All algae, fungi and plants whose botanical names include "caffra" – a racist slur with its roots in the Arabic word for 'infidel' – are getting a rebrand. The "caffra" will be replaced with variations of "afr" for Africa, following a vote by the International Botanical Congress, in which 351 researchers voted in favour of the change. The move will affect more than 200 species. Some 205 researchers voted to oppose the change.

## MALI

## King of the kora takes a final bow

Toumani Diabaté, a renowned musician known as the king of kora, died at 58 after a brief illness. Diabaté, who came from a long line of griots – the guardians of Malian storytelling traditions – is being mourned by luminaries like Senegal’s Youssou N’dour and fellow Malian musicians Oumou Sangare and Salif Keita, who eulogised him with words like “virtuoso”, “unmatched musical arranger” and a “bridge between tradition and modernity.” He made music that blended influences from griot culture and modern genres like the blues and jazz.



**Virtuoso: Toumani Diabaté plays no more.** Photo: Toumani Diabate/Facebook

## SUDAN

## Arms flow unabated by UN embargo

The devastating war in Sudan, which has killed more than 16,700 people, is being fought with weapons from countries like China, Russia, Serbia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, new research from Amnesty International shows. The rights and accountability group says that the weapons shipments are “often in flagrant breach of the existing Darfur arms embargo”. Large quantities of recently-manufactured weapons have been transferred into Sudan in what the UN calls a “global trade in death”.

## ERITREA

## Lost luggage, emotional baggage

Eritrea will suspend all Ethiopian Airlines flights into the country from 30 September, saying that the airline is engaged in “malicious trading practices”, “organised passengers’ luggage theft” and “unjustified and unwarranted price hikes and other irregularities witnessed”. Regular flights between Asmara and Addis Ababa only resumed in 2018, after a 20-year break, as the two neighbouring countries were in a state of war. The new suspension suggests that relations between the two countries are declining again.



## NEPAL

### Plane crash kills 18 people

On Wednesday, a plane skidded off the runway at Kathmandu's international airport, managed to take off but then crashed and killed 18 people. It's monsoon season in the country and the airport is surrounded by mountains. Visibility is often bad, earning Tribhuvan International Airport notoriety for being difficult for less experienced pilots and bigger aircraft to navigate. A pilot is the lone survivor of the Saurya Airlines accident. The flight was headed to a resort town.

## ALGERIA

### Heated Earth? More like the Death Star

A year ago, at least 34 people were killed and thousands evacuated from wildfires across 16 Algerian provinces. It's happening again. On Monday, Algeria's Civil Defence Agency said it had extinguished 26 fires in 24 hours as the country battled another outbreak. Rising temperatures have prolonged droughts in recent years, increasing the frequency and severity of the fires. Authorities have rolled out a prevention system which includes water-bombing aircraft and 100 monitoring drones.

**SOUTH AFRICA****Walter White wishes he had a cut in this drug operation**

Police say they have made South Africa's biggest-ever drug busts after raiding a manufacturing operation on a farm in Groblersdal, Limpopo province. They seized drugs of an estimated \$109.5-million street value and arrested at least four suspects, including two Mexican nationals, from the "industrial-scale" meth lab on the property. South Africa's position along global sea routes, and its growing domestic market for recreational drugs, has made it a major drug transit hub, according to the United Nations.

**TANZANIA****President sacks suspected challengers**

Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan dismissed two ministers from her cabinet, amid rumours they are secretly plotting to challenge her in the next elections. Foreign minister January Makamba and information minister Nape Nnauye received the boot on Sunday, although Hassan is yet to publicly declare her intention to run for office. Tanzania is expected to hold presidential elections in October 2025, the first time that Hassan's rule will be put to a popular vote. She ascended to the presidency in 2021.

**MOROCCO****(Literally) Riding into Olympic history**

Noor Slaoui, a 29-year-old Moroccan horseback rider, is riding into history today (Saturday) as the first North African athlete to participate in eventing at the Olympics. She is also the first Moroccan rider to compete internationally in the sport. With her horse, Cash in Hand, Slaoui has spent the last year racking up points for qualification. Coming from what she describes as a "non-horsey" family and riding for fun, Slaoui made a late start to the sport but trained at France's École Nationale d'Équitation de Saumur.



**Not horsing around: Noor Slaoui locked in a top-two ranking to qualify for Paris**

# Uganda

## Protest repression goes viral

**In Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda, authorities unleash violence and jail on people demanding better governance.**

**Lydia Namubiru**

**O**ver a hundred people were arrested in Kampala this week to stop them from protesting against widespread corruption by marching to the parliament. Charged with “being a public nuisance”, most were immediately sent to prisons.

The protestors are demanding a cut in the number of Parliament members whose annual budget is reportedly 900-billion Ugandan shillings (\$240-million) – nearly three times the national health budget. They are also demanding the resignation of the speaker of parliament, Anita Among, who is among several government officials sanctioned by the UK and US for corruption.

Leaked documents – shared earlier this year on social media by campaigning

journalist Agather Atuhaire – showed that the speaker’s office spends as much as \$100,000 a week in public funds. In 2023, the speaker was also implicated in stealing iron sheets for poor people in the country’s neglected Karamoja region. She returned the iron sheets and deflected further negative press on the matter by championing the passing of Uganda’s anti-homosexuality law.

Across the continent in Nigeria, security forces have also preemptively deployed to scare off protesters who plan to take to the streets from 1 August to demand solutions to the country’s economic hardships. Like President Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, President Bola Tinubu has accused the protest organisers of “sinister motives”.

In Egypt, according to Amnesty International, authorities have arrested nearly 120 people this month alone following online calls for widespread protests over the cost of living.

And in Kenya, where President William Ruto appeared to be listening to people protesting against tax hikes and corrupt governance, the police have reverted to firing teargas and bullets at what remains of the protests in Nairobi. Activists say police have killed up to 50 people and arrested nearly 500 since mid-June. Dozens are still missing after being abducted. ■

# Ethiopia

## Mudslides cause tragedy

**At least 250 Ethiopians have died in the country's deadliest-ever mudslides.**

**Kiri Rupiah**

**T**wo deadly mudslides claimed the lives of at least 250 people in south-western Ethiopia and the United Nations has warned that the eventual death toll could be more than double. Many people remain buried and the search for survivors and casualties continues.

The mudslides in the remote mountainous area of Gofa Zone, roughly 320km southwest of the capital, Addis Ababa, are the deadliest ever reported in Ethiopia. The first landslide happened on Sunday and was followed by a second on Monday which buried some of the first responders.

“Those who rushed for life-saving work have perished in the disaster including the locality’s administrator, teachers, health professionals and agricultural professionals,” local administrator Dagemawi Ayele told the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation on Tuesday.

Like other Global South countries, Ethiopia is ill-prepared for extreme

weather events that climate change has made much more frequent and severe.

In 2022, the country had one of the most severe droughts in the last 40 years, preceded by four consecutive rainy seasons which did not produce enough rain. The drought left the Gofa Zone, which is part of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples’ Region, water insecure. Now it is drowning in rain.

The Ethiopian tragedy comes months after heavy rains flooded central Kenya between March and April, claiming at least 210 lives and displacing 3,100.

Over the same period, floods and landslides killed more than 150 people in Tanzania. In Burundi, nearly 100,000 people have been displaced in this year’s rainy season. ■



**Deadly rains: Flooding has smashed communities across the continent.**

Photo: Gofa Zone Government Communication Affairs Department/ESN/AFP



# Health

## 'Please, let us breathe'

**African politicians, cash-rich countries and Big Pharma could end Aids. But will they?**

**Josephine Chinele**

**I**f nothing changes in the global Aids response, about 46 million people will be living with HIV in 2050 – worse than the current 39.9 million.

It doesn't have to be that way. UNAIDS says an additional \$9.5-billion by 2025 could help eliminate Aids by 2030. Another major development is the development of Lenacapavir, a drug that provided 100% protection against HIV in clinical trials. The only problem? The drug would need to be made available at one-thousandth of its current cost in order to be rolled out to everyone who needs it.

But none of that is guaranteed to happen, as this week's debates from the 25th International Aids Conference in Munich, Germany, proved.

For the first time last year, most new HIV infections happened outside sub-Saharan Africa, showing that the region's Aids response is more effective

than others. However, the situation could change as debt-laden countries cut spending on health care. Even now, "they are spending more on servicing debts than paying for their people's health," said UNAids director Winnie Byanyima.

Doubling down on discrimination is also a concern. Byanyima said that laws curtailing the rights of women and LGBTIQ people are pushing them away from health care.

Funding for the global Aids response could also continue to fall short, especially as cash-rich countries spend on wars in Ukraine (\$500-billion a year, according to Byanyima) and Gaza (\$67-billion by the end of 2025, according to the Bank of Israel governor Amir Yaron).

**Debt-laden countries  
'are spending more on  
servicing debts than paying  
for their people's health'**

Lastly, the price of Lenacapavir depends on the bottom line of pharmaceutical giant Gilead, which sells it for about \$42,250 for a year's treatment. A study presented at the conference says that generic versions would still turn a 30% profit if sold at \$40 a year. "Please, let us breathe," said the Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, calling for better access to HIV drugs in the developing world. ■

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# Cameroon

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## Chocolate rush sparks land disputes

**A rush to cash in on high cocoa prices is turning neighbours into knaves.**

**Francis Tim Mbom in Limbe**

**F**armers in Kumba and other areas of Cameroon's southwest region have started planting more cocoa beans. This is for two reasons: the recent spike in world market prices for the beans used to make chocolate, and a reduction in hostilities between warring parties in the Anglophone conflict.

In late 2023, there was a significant drop in cocoa exports from Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, the world's top two producers. Farmers there were severely affected by extreme weather events linked to El Niño. This led to a price surge: today, cocoa goes for as much as \$8 per kilogram, up from around \$2.40.

Cameroon is the world's fifth-largest cocoa producer. Its cocoa farms tend to be further from the coast and were spared the worst effects of El Niño. Although Kumba, the country's cocoa-producing hub, is located in the Anglophone region

– gripped by a secessionist conflict since 2017 – hostilities are reducing. According to an analysis of incident reports collated by the Armed Conflict Events Data Project, attacks by both rebel and government soldiers this year are down 46% compared with the first seven months of 2023.

Relative peace is allowing people to return to farming while high cocoa prices last. But the potential for a windfall is sparking messy fights over land use, with some landlords attempting to walk back land-lease agreements to profit themselves.

**The potential for a windfall is sparking messy fights over land use, with some landlords attempting to walk back land-lease agreements in order to profit for themselves.**

“Some farm owners who had leased out their farms turn round to sue those they leased to for ‘destruction,’” says Talla Agah Kitts, a Kumba-based lawyer. He says the number of clients he is representing in such cases has risen sharply. He often advises parties to settle out of court to save time because the informal agreements typically entered are usually not legally airtight.

In some cases, family members turn on each other. Mossongo Nosaka and



**Sweet pickings: Farmers harvest cocoa in Ekoumdouma, Cameroon, in 2021. The country is the world's fifth-largest cocoa producer.** Photo: Saabi/Anadolu Agency

Illorson Solomon started farming their inherited land two years ago when an aunt peacefully vacated it. She had held and farmed it in trust since their father's passing 10 years ago when Nosaka and Solomon were minors. With cocoa prices rising lately, the aunt has allegedly pushed the young men off the land, and they have asked a court to intervene.

According to one police officer at Kumba's Central Police Station, the station handled at least 10 complaints related to breaches of long-held land leases in May and June alone. "These complaints will certainly increase further

when the farmers start harvesting in September, October and November," says the officer.

The cocoa rush may not last forever, however. Last month, the New York-based Nasdaq stock exchange reported that cocoa prices had fallen to a one-month low due to better-growing conditions in West Africa this year. In addition, Nestlé – one of the world's biggest chocolate producers – is predicting a drop in demand for chocolate as the high prices over the past year are passed down to consumers. This may also cause a dip in the price of cocoa. ■

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# Botswana

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## Government moves to fund political parties

**There is money to make politics less dominated by men of a certain age. There's also the small matter of the incumbent's bid for a second term.**

### Keletso Thobega in Gaborone

**J**ust three months away from October's national elections, Botswana is struggling to encourage broader political participation. President Mokgweetsi Masisi's government has yet to finalise a law that would unlock a 34-million pula (about \$2.5-million) fund for small political parties.

According to finance minister Peggy Serame, who announced the allocation in her February budget speech, the money is meant to "grant equal opportunities" for all to participate in the country's political development.

While it's considered one of Africa's most stable democracies, Botswana's

politics are very marginalising: only 11% of the members of the national assembly are women, none of the MPs are under 40, and none is from the longest-resident population of Khoisan language speakers.

Politics is generally dominated by men over 50, and two of the country's five presidents were from one family: father and son, Seretse and Ian Khama. The ruling party, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), has governed since independence in 1966 and holds a 66% majority in the national assembly, with the other five represented parties sharing only 14 seats.

In the absence of meaningful political choice, voter apathy is widespread. The electoral commission set out to register 1.3-million voters but missed that target by 20% despite three concerted drives in the relatively well-resourced country of 2.6-million people.

Political activists have long argued that many capable and willing Botswana citizens are kept out of political competition because they lack the financial resources to compete against a ruling party with access to state resources and elite networks.

The government appeared to agree by earmarking the new fund for political parties. In a subsequent statement, it reiterated that political funding has the potential to enhance democracy and allow equal participation in the electoral

process.

It's a sound plan if it works, said Kevin Casas Zamora, the secretary general of the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Zamora, who wrote a book titled *Paying for Democracy: Political Finance and State Funding for Parties*. He told *The Continent* that “when the initiative is well-designed, it can make a difference and ensure that those who desire to stand for elections can.” This then leads to more plurality in the political system.

However, given how close the government is to cutting it in releasing the funds, its opponents are starting to fear that the plan was mere electioneering. Prominent opposition politician Dumelang Saleshando of the Botswana Congress Party wonders out loud if it was probably just a trap to give political aspirants false hope while endearing the ruling party to voters. “The delay by government has inconvenienced other political players who need funds for their campaigns,” he told *The Continent*.

### Popular president, chaotic times

Masisi, 62, is running for re-election. He is popular, especially because he has flexed considerable muscle to renegotiate and rebalance the country's relationship with the De Beers diamond company.

But his presidency has been clouded by high unemployment, widespread gender-based violence, and his legendary fallout with former president Ian Khama, who handpicked him as successor. Masisi claimed Khama got upset because he refused to appoint his younger brother,

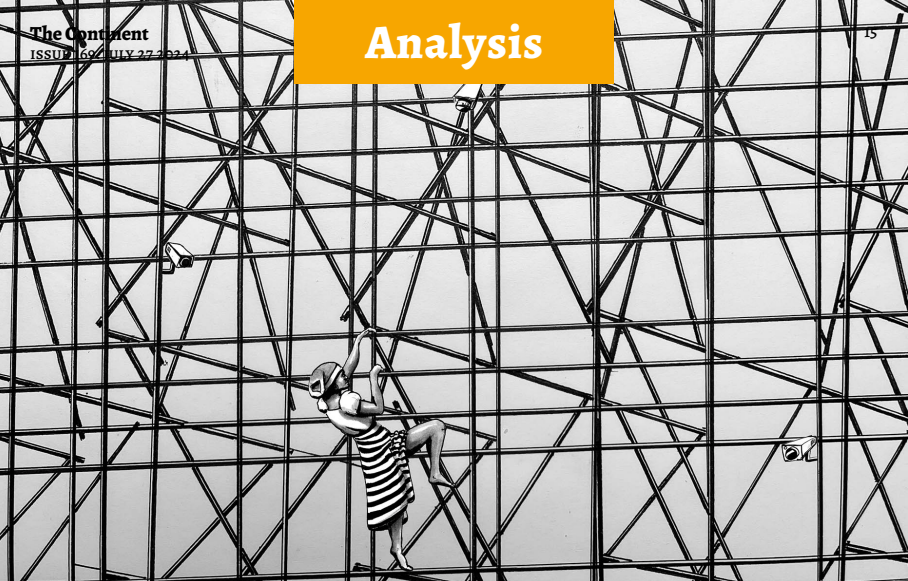


**Limited choices: A woman casts her vote at a polling station in Gaborone in 2019.** Photo: Monirul Bhuiyan/AFP

Tshekedi Khama, as vice president. Khama has been in self-imposed exile from Botswana for about 30 months now.

Masisi also got caught up in the Botswana iteration of global campaigns against LGBTIQ rights. He promised to decriminalise homosexuality, and with his nod, Botswana's highest court repealed the country's colonial-era anti-homosexuality law in 2019. However, when the justice minister moved to delete the law from the books last year, the formality triggered backlash from a coalition of evangelical Christian churches and was deferred.

His own party's conduct also does not do him any favours. Last weekend's BDP primaries descended into chaos with allegations of cheating. Party members assaulted some journalists with brooms and fists to keep them away from the vote-counting stations and refused to answer questions about the process. The BDP has since released a statement condemning the attacks and calling for calm ahead of the national elections. ■



## Meet the people in the machine

**Behind the miracle of supposedly autonomous software is an army of underpaid, exploited and vulnerable data workers.**

**Simon Allison**

**F**amously, the titans of Big Tech look after their employees. Tech workers receive lavish salaries and scarcely believable perks on glittering campuses in the United States designed by some of the world's leading architects. The perks include free gourmet meals, fresh juices and barista-made coffees, laundry services, valet parking, access to gyms and yoga studios, and psychologists on call when everything gets a bit much.

The Nairobi offices of Sama – an outsourcing firm that has provided services to tech giants including Meta and

OpenAI – are very different, according to some former employees, who speak about their experiences in the *Data Workers' Inquiry*, a new report published by the Distributed AI Research Institute.

The report describes a vast, heavily surveilled warehouse floor near one of the city's poorest areas, where mosquitoes buzz incessantly along long lines of functional desks. It is hot and chaotic, with loud music blaring at all hours of the day. Supervisors patrol the floor, and breaks are tightly monitored.

The data workers' accounts sound more like a sweatshop than Silicon Valley.

At those desks, thousands of people

do the work that is too expensive – or too boring, or too traumatic – to be done by the Big Tech firms themselves. This work includes annotating images to help companies build their Artificial Intelligence (AI) models, making snap decisions on social media posts that might constitute hate speech or incitement to violence, and reviewing photographs and videos of extreme violence and child pornography.

“It’s literally like a cinema for horror shows, where you go to see explicit horror scene content every day, except it’s in real life”, said Lethabo Lubanzi, a former Sama employee from South Africa. For this, data workers receive a monthly salary of 27,469 Kenyan shillings (\$211).

The report details how data workers are exposed to content depicting extreme violence and sexual abuse. They are expected to review new content every 50 seconds over an eight-hour shift. Some developed drug and alcohol addictions, eating and sleep disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

When asked for comment, Sama said that the report contained “gross mischaracterisations and, in some cases, factual inaccuracies” and claimed a 68% employee satisfaction rating in a recent anonymised internal survey. “Sama offices are state of the art, and include thoughtful areas that address employee needs including prayer rooms, nursing rooms, game rooms, and a cafeteria...we strongly dispute the characterisation of Sama as a sweatshop.”

In August 2023, former content moderators in Nairobi sued Sama and



**Harrowing: Data workers are exposed to content depicting violence and sexual abuse.** Illustrations: Marc Pohl

Facebook over these allegedly poor working conditions. The case is ongoing.

### High tech, low pay

In a forthcoming book, *Feeding the Machine: The Hidden Human Labour Powering AI*, British researchers conclude that millions of data workers are involved in the global AI industry. AI programs like ChatGPT, Copilot, and Llama could not function without these human inputs.

“Sophisticated software functions only through thousands of hours of low-paid, menial labour — workers forced to work like robots in the hopes that AI will become more like a human,” they write.

The industry is entirely unregulated, and standards vary wildly between countries. Many data workers are employed remotely or as freelancers,





### **Stressful: Data workers suffer many psychological harms**

making it difficult to access national labour protections – especially if something goes wrong. The *Data Workers' Inquiry* report is one of the few existing attempts to bring together the experiences of data workers worldwide.

There are some common themes.

Much of the work is task-based and precarious. This means irregular hours and unpredictable pay. “We are ghosts to society, and I dare say we are cheap, disposable labour for the companies we have served for years without guarantees or protection,” said Oskarina Veronica Fuentes Anaya, a data worker in Venezuela.

She took on data work when Venezuela's economy collapsed. That's another theme: companies that solicit data work appear to target people in vulnerable countries and communities, where workers will work long hours for little pay, with no recourse if things go wrong. “Many annotators

feel compelled to accept any available work, even if they are not fully available to complete it, due to the irregular nature of the projects and their pressing need for income,” said Roukaya al-Hammada, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon.

Al-Hammada said that initial enthusiasm for data work within the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon – who are not allowed to work in most industries within the country – quickly waned as the psychological impact of the work became more apparent. “While digital work to some extent offers an alternative and is undoubtedly beneficial, the scarcity of project opportunities and inadequate compensation prevents these vulnerable workers from achieving financial stability and psychological well-being,” she said.

As awareness grows of the negative impacts of data work, some efforts exist to create workers' organisations for better conditions. Among the highest-profile of these was the 2023 formation of the African Content Moderators Union by more than 150 data workers in Nairobi. Many of these workers were employed by Sama. “Many data workers in the AI supply chain are exploited, and their work is never acknowledged. What is often overlooked is that there is no AI without us,” said Richard Mathenge, a union member.

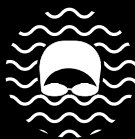
There are, however, other workers. When Sama terminated its contract with Meta, the platform company hired a new provider in Kenya, Majorel.

Majorel reportedly pays its data workers even less. ■

## SPORT

# African Olympians to watch

Over three weeks in Paris, athletes from around the world will be running, jumping, throwing and generally exerting themselves in pursuit of small golden discs. **Firdose Moonda** rounds up Africa's most exciting prospects.



**TATJANA SMITH**  
South African  
swimmer

The holder of the 200-metre breaststroke record, Tatjana Smith (née Schoenmaker), took gold in Tokyo in 2021 and silver in the 100-metre event. Since then, she also won the South African national championship and got married. Former world champion Ryk Neethling says she is on the brink of becoming the country's greatest Olympian. Photo: Oli Scarff/AFP



## **BINIAM GIRMA** Eritrean Cyclist

Biniam Girmay, 24, has become the face of continental cycling. This month, he became the first black African to win a Tour de France stage. He followed it up with two more, taking home the iconic sprinter's green jersey. At the Olympics, he could become Africa's first cycling medallist since 1956.

Photo: Intermarché-Wanty/  
Instagram



## **SOUTH SUDAN'S BASKETBALL TEAM**

A country that only came into existence 13 years ago has understandably never won an Olympic medal – but South Sudan could change that. They are the only African men's basketball team in contention and have already challenged the world's best. They lost to the United States by one point in a friendly and will meet them again on 31 July. The US holds 25 basketball golds. Photo: Henry Browne/Getty Images





**ELIUD KIPCHOGE AND  
TIGST ASSEFA**  
**Men's and Women's  
Marathons**

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At 39, Kenya's Eliud Kipchoge is chasing a hat-trick of Olympic marathon golds and perhaps the perfect end to his stellar career. He won this event in 2016 and 2021 and unofficially ran the 42.2km distance in under two hours, but since standard competition rules did not apply to that race in Vienna, it did not set a new world record. Expect him to push for that in Paris. Photo: Eliud Kipchoge/Instagram



The women's favourite is Ethiopia's Tigst Assefa, who holds the world record for her time. She ran a two-hour, 11-minute and 53-second marathon in Berlin last year and could outrun Kenya's Hellen Obiri, another strong contender. Photo: Paul Harding/Getty Images



## DJAMEL SEDJATI

### Men's 800-metre

A continental contest awaits at the men's 800 metre with Algeria's Djamel Sedjati expected to show out after missing Tokyo. Sedjati is the third fastest man in history over this distance and will have to see off the Kenyan pair of Emmanuel Wanyonyi and Wyclife Kinyamal to win. Photo: Artur Widak/NurPhoto via Getty Images



## FAITH KIPYEGON

### Women's 1500-metre

Look no further in the women's 1,500 metres than Kenya's Faith Kipyegon. The 30-year-old took gold in this distance in the last two Games and set a new world record of 3:49:04 at the Meeting de Paris earlier this month. Kipyegon is considered one of the greatest 1,500m athletes the world has ever seen. Photo: Jewel Samad/AFP



**SOUFIANE EL BAKKALI  
& BEATRICE  
CHEPKOECH**

**Men's and Women's  
3000 metre  
Steeplechase**



**Above:** Moroccan defending champion Soufiane El Bakkali won back-to-back gold medals at this event after his victory in Tokyo. The 28-year-old will compete with Ethiopia's Lamecha Girma, 23 – an all-African rivalry in action.

**Below:** The same applies to Kenya's Beatrice Chepkoech, 33, who will want to make up for an injury-ridden performance at the last Games with a statement win. She is up against Ethiopia's 19-year-old star Sembo Almayew, who set an under-20 record last year. Photos: Cameron Spencer/Getty Images and Andy Astfalck/BSR Agency/Getty Images

# Justice is an urban affair in Nigeria's insecure north

**In the north-central state of Niger, lawyers and magistrates say that they are being asked to choose between life and rural court users. They choose life.**

**Justina Asishana in Minna, Niger State**

Last year, on the instructions of a senior colleague, James Jiya travelled 500km to represent a client. But he only appeared once in the court, before abandoning the client.

After that first appearance in Birnin Gwari, a town at the border between Kebbi and Niger states, Jiya was on his way to the bus terminal for the seven-hour journey back to the state capital when he saw a bullet-riddled car. "It had blood stains inside, and I heard the people who towed it say the driver was killed in an attack. I did not conclude that case. I had to abandon it."

Insecurity in Niger state, where more than 1,270 people were reported killed by armed attackers between January 2022 and July 2023, according to collated press reports, has contracted public life to the areas in and around Minna.

That increasingly includes the court system.

Some justice workers continue to work in the rural parts of the state despite the insecurity. Magistrates move around,

sharing court premises with peers when some areas get too dangerous, said Ahmad Abubakar Nami, the spokesperson of the Niger state government.

The former magistrate recalls that in 2022, bandits killed a man near a court he was presiding in. "Those in the court were scared, but I told them we cannot end the session. We could only shorten it."

Such courage can cost everything. In April 2023, bandits abducted Mallam Muhammad Namaru, a registrar of a sharia court, from the court premises in Ibbi, Mashegu, 260km from Minna. They later killed him.

**Such courage can cost everything. In April 2023, bandits abducted Mallam Muhammad Namaru, a registrar, from the court premises in Ibbi. They later killed him.**

Living on edge is not for everyone. The insecurity leaves many rural residents without legal representation when needed, as lawyers and magistrates refuse



**Too risky: Insecurity in Niger state has contracted public life – and justice – to the areas in and around Minna.** Photo: Kola Sulaimon/AFP

to work outside Minna.

Mikail Usman said he would have abandoned a client last year had they been unsuccessful in applying to transfer his case from Kuta, Shiroro, to Minna. “I told him I would not put my life under such risk.” The day he applied for the transfer, Usman had hidden off the road for a fear-filled 30 minutes amid reports of a bandit attack.

**The day he applied for the transfer, Usman had hid off the road for a fear-filled 30 minutes amid reports of an attack.**

Sometimes, the courts have to be

abandoned. The chief judge of Niger state said last year that insecurity had forced her team to close 15 courts.

Yet moving cases to Minna brings its challenges. Rural litigants, witnesses and police officers are then expected to risk the precarious and expensive journey to and from Minna for each court sitting. They often abandon the cases instead.

Yunusa Umar, who went to court with a land dispute last year, now swears he will not turn to formal justice again as long as he still lives in Munya, 95km out of Minna. “I had to go to Minna for each court sitting. There are courts here, but magistrates are not willing to sit due to the security situation.” ■



# Being intersex in Malawi

**An intersex person who has taken bullying, erasure and ignorance for 22 years hopes to vote for better leaders now that he is old enough to.**

## Josephine Chinele in Blantyre

**I**n April 2002, Bauleni\* stood outside the home of a traditional birth attendant in his central Malawian village, waiting to welcome his fourth child into the world. He grew increasingly anxious, though, watching a flurry of activity as village elders paced to and from the delivery room.

“My instinct told me something was wrong, although I didn’t know what it was,” he recalls. “I had heard the baby’s cry, a sign of life, but their actions prompted fears of losing my baby.” He told the elders to go home.

Nachisale\*, the now-retired birth attendant, explains what caused the commotion: the baby was intersex. “I was shocked – for the first time ever, I helped deliver a child with both male and female genitalia. I didn’t know what to do since I hadn’t heard of such a thing in my life.”

Intersex people are born with sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, or chromosome patterns that don’t fit typical male or female definitions. Globally, they face discrimination, stigma, and rights violations. Michael Kaiyatsa, director of the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, says the Malawian

government operates as if intersex people don’t exist, serving to intensify discrimination against the marginalised and maligned community.

“I’ve heard stories of old grannies killing children who are considered taboo in society,” says Bauleni, who believes that by instructing the elders to leave, he saved his child from being killed at birth.

## Relentless bullying as influential leaders resist change

The baby born that day, Mwayi\*, was raised as a girl until the age of three. Health workers then said his male reproductive organs were likely to be dominant and advised his parents to raise him as a boy. Then, puberty hit. “Adolescence took away my peace of mind; so much changed in my body,” Mwayi says. “I’m not like other men since I have breasts and I menstruate.”

Mwayi’s face lights up when he speaks about soccer, but his enthusiasm dims quickly when he explains why he stopped playing. “Training requires us to remove our shirts. I can’t do this; people would make fun of my breasts.”

More recently, he quit singing in his church choir after fellow choir members tried to strip him to see his breasts – just

one of the many incidents of harassment the 22-year-old has been forced to endure.

Years of harassment and abuse have taken a severe toll on his mental health – he has attempted suicide twice.

“He needs professional counselling support,” says Kaiyatsa. “The bullying that Mwayi is experiencing is a sign that people don’t understand these issues. Government and civil society organisations should intensify awareness for the public to accept them.”

Mwayi’s story is not isolated but instead speaks to widespread prejudice faced by LGBTQIA+ people in Malawi, fuelled by punitive laws and the influence of religious leaders.

**“I’ve heard stories of old grannies killing children who are considered taboo in society,” says Bauleni, who believes by instructing the elders to leave, he saved his child from being killed at birth.**

“Many people look at LGBTQIA+ people as a concept and not as fellow human beings,” says Chikondi Chijozi from the Southern African Litigation Centre. “LGBTQIA+ issues can’t be separated from human rights issues. He [Mwayi] is a human being just like anybody else.”

Chijozi suggests that law reform is the starting point for changing discriminatory narratives. If the law creates room for inclusivity, societal perception gradually shifts to one of acceptance.

“The religious institutions are also very influential in this whole thing. People are disowning their children and living in denial because they want to be accepted by their churches,” says Chijozi.

In 2023 Malawian religious leaders protested against the review of the country’s penal code to decriminalise same-sex relationships. A year later, the Constitutional Court dismissed the petition they were angry about. “The law, as it stands, is a catalyst for discrimination and violence against LGBTQIA+ persons,” Chijozi says.

In April, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted the first-ever resolution denouncing discrimination against intersex people. It was adopted by a vote of 24 in favour and none against. Malawi abstained. Ministry of Justice spokesperson Frank Namangale says Malawi abstained because this is an area that needs further understanding, research, reflection and consultations. But, he adds, the country “progressively examines and re-examines her positions where it’s deemed necessary.” Kaiyatsa believes the government was afraid of a backlash from conservative groups.

Mwayi, who knows the personal price of such political reticence, intends to cast his first vote next year and hopes to elect more progressive leaders into power. “I will vote for leaders who will prioritise protecting the rights of people like me. Ones that will create a conducive environment for awareness for Malawians to know that people like me also exist.” ■

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\* Names have been changed

# A post-mortem of the pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic killed more than 175,000 Africans, and battered households and national economies. Now that our daily lives have, in many ways, returned to “normal”, what can people tell their governments about this shared traumatic experience?

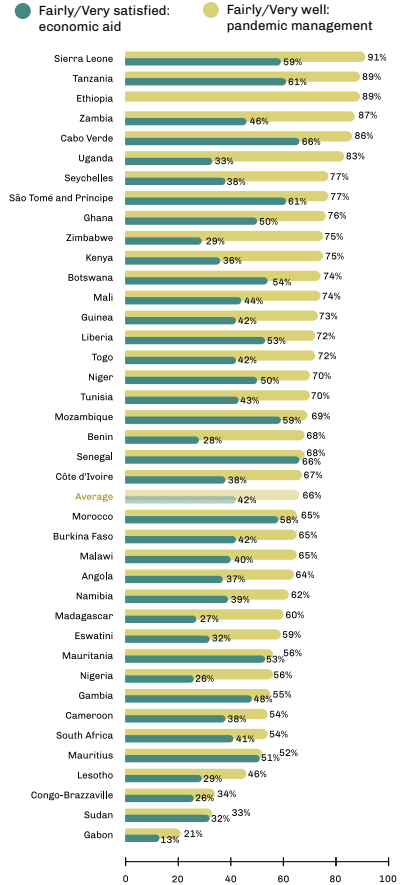
Afrobarometer surveys in 39 countries show that overall, Africans appreciate their leaders’ efforts to respond to the pandemic: on average, two-thirds (66%) say their government did “fairly well” or “very well”.

Slimmer majorities approve of their governments’ performance on minimising educational disruptions (54%) and ensuring that health facilities were adequately resourced (56%).

But satisfaction is considerably lower (42%) when it comes to government aid for vulnerable households, dropping as low as 13% in Gabon. Only 23% of respondents say their families received pandemic-related assistance, and only 27% think government assistance was distributed fairly.

Corruption may have added insult to injury: over two-thirds (68%) of Africans think that “some” or “a lot” of pandemic-response funds were lost to graft. ■

## Satisfaction with government response to Covid-19, provision of assistance | 39\* African countries | 2021/2023



\* The question about assistance was not asked in Ethiopia.

**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.

# 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."

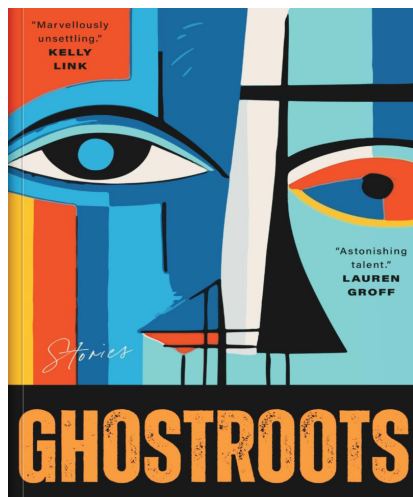
8-10

"I serve as the prime minister of this quiz ... or the mansa. Take your pick."



- 1\_ In which city is the Basilique Sainte Anne du Congo (pictured) found?
- 2\_ Name the only two people who have served as prime minister of Kenya.
- 3\_ Khartoum is found at the confluence of which two rivers?
- 4\_ Port-Gentil and Franceville are cities in which African country?
- 5\_ Which country is considered to be the youngest in the world?
- 6\_ Ramesses the Great was a ruler of which country's ancient kingdom?
- 7\_ Mansa Musa was the ninth mansa of which empire?
- 8\_ Who is Morocco's current monarch?
- 9\_ Which African country has won the most medals in Olympics history?
- 10\_ Which African country has won the most medals in Paralympics history?

**HOW DID I DO?** WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!



## Of ghosts and women

**Even skittish readers may want to try this collection, lest they miss out on a great moment in African speculative fiction.**

**Jacqueline Nyathi**

**Y**ou look like your grandmother, or are possibly possessed by her. Trouble is, your grandmother did terrible things – and then you start to do pretty bad things too, as a pimple erupts on your face for the first time in your life.

So much literature is set in Lagos that even if you haven't, you can feel like

you've been to that legendary place. Pemi Aguda's *Ghostroots* is the latest collection of short stories to tackle Lagos; and, like others, it teems with large city life, and also the supernatural.

There's the night market, that wonderfully spooky urban legend, here called the dusk market, that you don't see unless invited. Salewa, a struggling seller of ogogoro, or moonshine, apparently has been invited, and she wants to escape to it forever when it appears around her. When it disappears, she spends all of her time trying to find it again.

On Alhaji Williams Street, death ominously stalks homes. One boy after another dies, and the protagonist, the only boy of the family in Number 24, watches the fever creep towards him from next door.

There are excellent stories in this collection. *Contributions* and *The Hollow* are feminist tales. The former on the common Yoruba practice of esusu and the latter on a house that protects women. In *Birdwoman*, an unhappy woman turns into a bird, but people misunderstand her right to the end.

Aguda, who will already be known to many African readers (for example, for the intensely creepy *Things Boys Do*, from The Year's Best African Speculative Fiction 2021), is an excellent writer, if somewhat cautious. It is in more daring stories like *The Dusk Market* and *Masquerade Season* that Aguda's talent really shines. Still, this collection is very much worth picking up, and will please readers. ■

# Freetown's flooding is not just a natural disaster

**Systemic failures in urban planning and regulating the construction sector left Sierra Leone's cities unable to withstand extreme weather events.**

**Amadu Wurie Barrie**

**S**ierra Leone has been gripped by a catastrophic flooding crisis over the last two weeks. Heavy downpours collapsed a four-storey building, trapping at least seven people under the rubble, and the fall of the perimeter fence at the Siaka Stevens National Stadium claimed one life. Elsewhere in Freetown and in the rural western city of Waterloo, flooding has left a trail of destruction, displacing residents. The natural disaster has exposed systemic failures that left Sierra Leonean cities vulnerable.

The devastation demonstrates the stark costs of inadequate maintenance of infrastructure, particularly drainage systems, and poor governance of the construction sector. Noncompliance with, and poor enforcement of, building regulations has resulted in structures that are unable to withstand extreme weather events.

Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr and her team from the Freetown City Council have been actively involved in flood response efforts and the National Disaster Management Agency has issued

advisories to residents in flood-prone areas. The community response has been a show of solidarity, with volunteers braving the elements, using their bare hands to rescue those trapped and assist in recovery efforts.

However, prior to the current crisis, authorities failed in their role to ensure the safety of residents. Fit for purpose city infrastructure would have been crucial to mitigating flood risks. Mayor Aki-Sawyerr's appeal to residents to refrain from disposing of garbage in waterways is a step towards community engagement in disaster prevention but only the start of the solution.

The solutions need to go well beyond aid, solidarity and reactive advice. They should be expanded and institutionalised. As Sierra Leone grapples with the immediate impacts of flooding, it must also confront the underlying challenges to build a resilient and sustainable future. ■



*Amadu Wurie Barrie works at the University of Makeni. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa*

# THE BIG PICTURE

Peace-bringer: A boy touches a baby giraffe during community celebrations where wild giraffes arrived as part of a wildlife translocation exercise in Ruko Conservancy in western Kenya.

Photo: Luis Tato/AFP



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