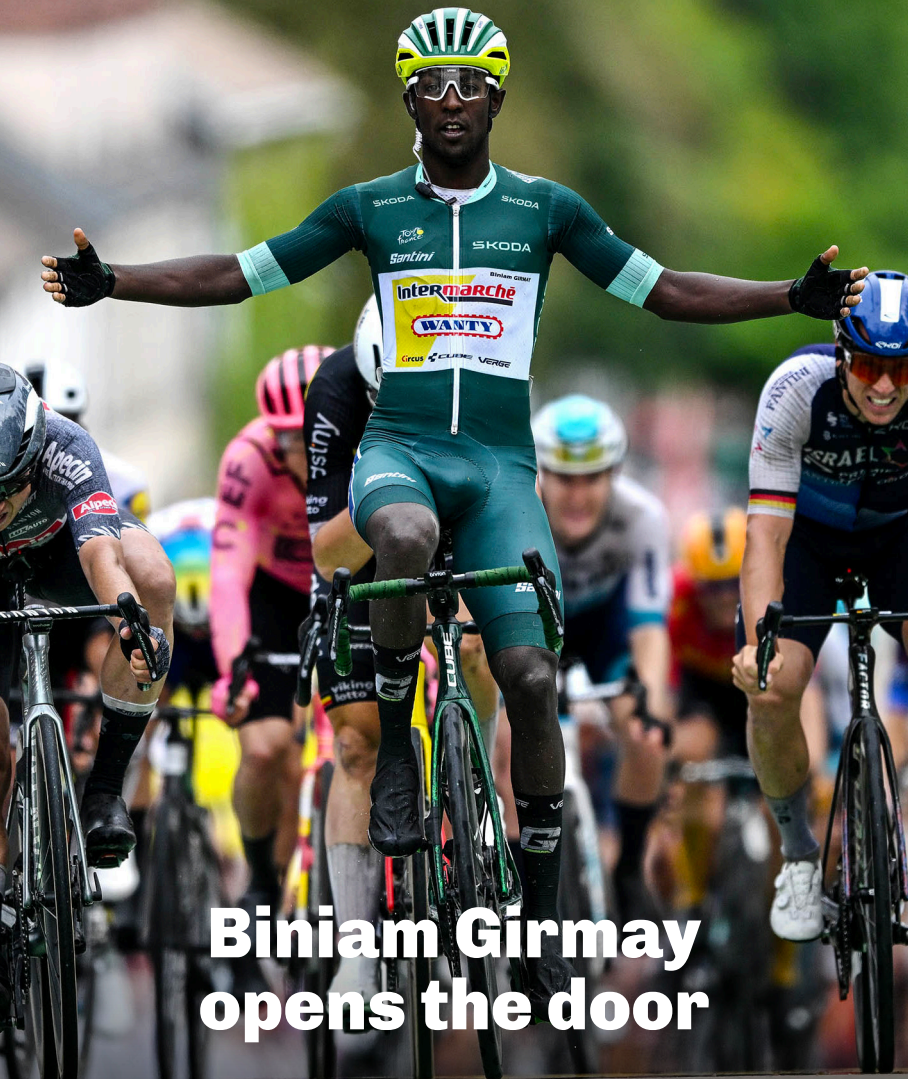


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# The Continent



**Biniam Girmay  
opens the door**



**Cover:** A century ago, Eritrean cyclists were forbidden from riding competitively by their European overlords. Now, an Eritrean cyclist has won three stages of Europe's most prestigious race – overcoming enormous odds to do so. *The Continent* spoke to Biniam Girmay about what this means for cycling in Africa (p17). His extraordinary success is also a propaganda coup for Eritrea's authoritarian government (p20).

# Inside:

- **Meta:** Is Facebook contributing to homophobic violence in West Africa? (p7)
- **Guinea:** Lawyers strike against a repressive state (p8)
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- **Senegal:** Macky Sall's parting gift (p11)
- **Nigeria:** Oil pipeline breaches mean more tankers of death (p13)
- **Afrobarometer:** Two thirds of Africans unimpressed with the economy
- **Review:** Ancient lore informs African speculative fiction (p22)



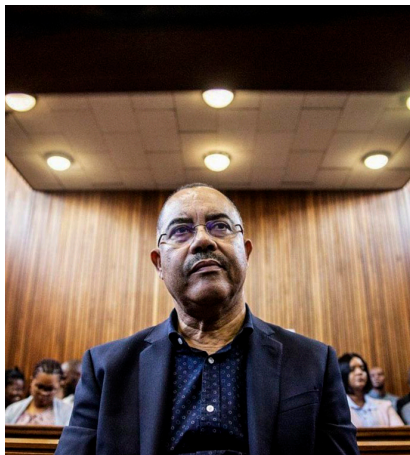
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**MOZAMBIQUE****Big fish on trial in the Big Apple**

The trial of Mozambique's former finance minister, Manuel Chang, started on Monday in New York. In a \$2-billion "hidden debt" scheme involving Credit Suisse that came to be known as the Tuna-bond scandal, Chang allegedly conspired to deepen Mozambique's debt with loans for dubious maritime projects and defraud investors. He allegedly also accepted kickbacks from a shipbuilding company. His comeuppance started when he was arrested in South Africa in 2018 on a US government warrant. He was extradited to New York last July.



**Gill-ty as charged? Manuel Chang, ex-finance minister of Mozambique, will face trial in New York.** Photo: AFP

**TUNISIA****Saied doubles down on political lawfare**

President Kais Saied has jailed rivals, dissolved Parliament and rewritten the Constitution. He's not done yet. On Saturday, Ajami Lourimi, secretary-general of opposition party Ennahda, was arrested – joining party leader Rached Ghannouchi who has been in jail since April 2023. The day before, a court gagged and grounded former health minister Abdellatif Mekki, who used to be a prominent Ennahda leader. After the Arab Spring in 2011, Ennahda dominated Tunisian politics until 2021, when Saied dissolved Parliament.

**SOMALIA****Euro 2024 fans killed in bombing attack**

Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for a car bomb that killed nine and injured at least 20 people outside a cafe in Mogadishu, including football fans watching the Euro 2024 final. The insurgent group said the cafe, near Mogadishu's presidential palace, was targeted because security and government workers often meet there at night. An offensive campaign against Al-Shabaab last year raised hope for stability but that the group has regained enough ground that Somalia asked African Union forces to slow down their planned exit from the country.

## EGYPT

## If you can't beat them, arrest them

Egyptian authorities have arrested nearly 120 people so far in July, following online calls for popular protests, according to Amnesty International. The security sweeps rounded up people who had posted online about the “Dignity Revolution” – a call for protests on 12 July (that did not happen) to express anger about rising food prices. Cost of living protests have intensified have more than doubled since the Covid pandemic.

## CRIME

## Interpol mission nets 300 suspects

Global policing agency Interpol says its Operation Jackal III investigation, spanning five years and 21 countries, has led to the arrest of 300 people, the seizure of \$3-million and the blocking of over 700 bank accounts. Among the subjects of the operation was Black Axe, a notorious criminal network in West Africa, which executes cyber fraud and romance scams. The group has also been implicated in human and drug trafficking, and money-laundering.



Paul position: Supporters wave posters bearing the visage of Rwanda's President Paul Kagame. Photo: Guillem Sartorio/AFP

## RWANDA

## Another big win for democracy Kagame

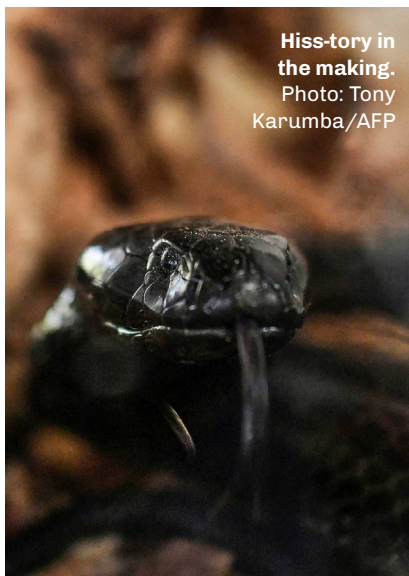
President Paul Kagame won the country's presidential election by 99% of the vote, an improvement from the 98.7% he got

in 2017 and 2010's 93%. Current trends indicate he could win the next one with a modest 100.1%. He was mostly running against himself after state bureaucracy sidelined potential rivals. The electoral commission barred Diane Rwigara from running, while Victoire Ingabire was ruled out by a 2013 conviction.

## HEALTH

## Taking the sting out of snake bites

Although they kill more than 138,000 people a year, snake bites are a neglected health issue. Where antivenom exists, it's in small quantities, expensive and available only at hospitals with facilities for cold storage and intravenous drug administration. There is some good news, however: a study published this week in the *Science Translational Medicine* journal found that heparin – a widely-available blood thinner – could block venom from the spitting cobra. Unlike current anti-venoms, heparin can also heal the tissue damaged by cobra venom.



Hiss-tory in the making.  
Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP

## NIGERIA

## Sorry, Godwin – a note from your mum ain't gonna cut it

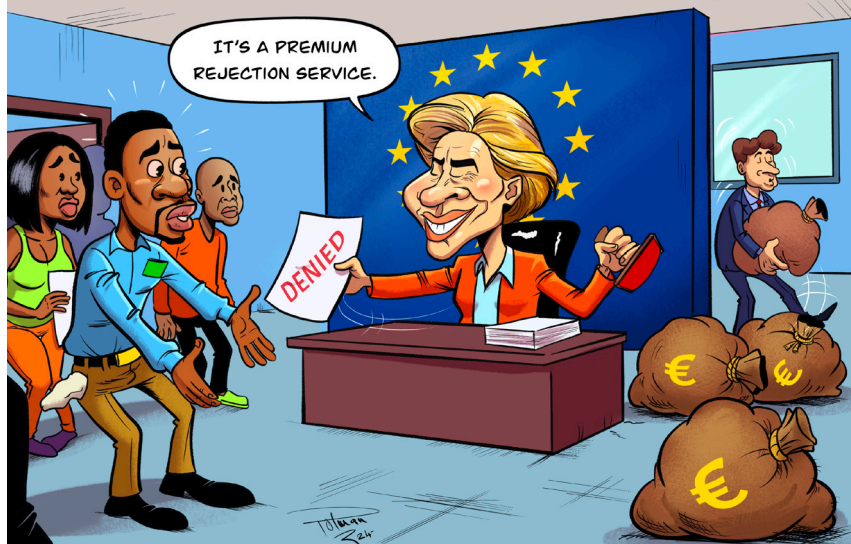
Former central bank governor Godwin Emefiele's request to leave Nigeria for medical treatment has been denied by a court in Abuja. Emefiele asked to travel to Britain but the judge said he didn't show a medical report to support the claim that he is ill. Earlier this year, Emefiele was charged with fraud and corruption in connection to printing new banknotes and withdrawing billions of naira without presidential approval. His passport was held by court after prosecutors argued he was a flight risk.

## KENYA

## 'Serial killer' confessed under duress – lawyer

Kenyan police say the nine mutilated bodies discovered after a brutal crackdown on protests are victims of civilian Collins Jumaisi Khalusha. Police say that the man confessed to killing 42 women since 2022. But his lawyer, John Maina Ndegwa, says the confession isn't credible as police allegedly tortured him during interrogation. The country's top cop, Japhet Koome, resigned on the day of the discovery, amid public outcry against police brutality during the recent protests.

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**Glimmer of nope:** European countries made more than \$61-million in fees from rejecting visa applications from African citizens. Expect that figure to increase this year, as the non-refundable visa fee has recently been increased

## SPORTS

### Morocco tops Fifa's Africa rankings

According to the latest Fifa rankings, released this week, Africa's top 10 men's football teams are, in order: Morocco, Senegal, Egypt, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Tunisia, Algeria, Cameroon, Mali, and South Africa. If your country is not on that list, it might be time to start practising. Leading the globe are Argentina, France, Spain, England and Brazil.

## WORLD

### No Microsoft jokes, then? Tough cloud

Computers and IT networks around the world were affected by a major bug that affected systems linked to Microsoft's Windows 365 Cloud software. The bug resulted in some airports halting flights, banks suspending transactions and hospitals cancelling operations. Many African companies and institutions were impacted, including Kenya Airways, Capitec and the City of Tshwane.

# West Africa

## Is Facebook promoting homophobic hate speech?

**Meta's oversight board has launched a new probe.**

**S**ocial media giant Meta has a long track record of allowing hate speech to thrive on its most influential platform, Facebook. This week, its own oversight board – an independent committee designed to keep Facebook in check – announced an investigation into a new example of this ugly phenomenon: how Facebook may be contributing to homophobic violence in West Africa.

The specific incident under investigation is a video that was first posted last December. In it, two men – bloodied and beaten, and surrounded by an angry crowd – are forced to “confess” to having sex with each other. They were speaking in Igbo, suggesting the video was filmed somewhere in Nigeria.

The post went viral, attracting millions of views and thousands of comments and reshares. Multiple Facebook users reported the content using Facebook’s

internal mechanisms, and it was reviewed by multiple human content moderators, who said it did not violate guidelines. Eventually, after the video was brought to the attention of Facebook leadership by the oversight board, it was taken down.

Now, the board is investigating whether this incident is a symptom of a much broader problem. It will be assessing whether Facebook properly enforces its own rules around content “which exposes the identity of at-risk people in a region where LGBTQ+ people are particularly vulnerable to harm”. It has asked for public comments to inform its policy recommendations to Meta.

**Facebook was sued for \$2-billion in Nairobi for allegedly amplifying hate speech and incitements to violence that may have exacerbated violence in the recent Ethiopian civil war.**

Facebook has been criticised for failing to enforce its own guidelines against hate speech in African contexts. In 2022, it was sued for \$2-billion in a Nairobi court for allegedly amplifying hate speech that may have exacerbated violence in the recent Ethiopian civil war.

Facebook maintains that it invests heavily “in teams and technology to help us find and remove [hate speech]”. ■

# Guinea

## Lawyers down tools over military repression

### Marché Arends

Lawyers in Guinea began a two-week strike on Tuesday to protest against arbitrary arrests and secret detentions allegedly carried out by the military junta.

The protest comes after the arrest on 9 July of Oumar Sylla and Mamadou Bah, two leading members of the National Front for the Defense of the Constitution, a coalition of civil society groups that spearheaded pro-democracy demonstrations in 2019. It was dissolved in 2022 by the government of Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, who in 2021 overthrew president Alpha Condé.

Last week, Amnesty International accused the junta of waging a “crackdown on peaceful dissent”, which included the killing of 47 protesters in April.

The lawyers’ strike, scheduled to end on 1 August, could interrupt the trial of former military ruler Dadis Camara and 11 others, accused of torture, abduction, sexual violence and murder, including the massacre at Conakry stadium in 2009.



**Indefensible: Oumar Sylla (top) and Mamadou Bah have been arrested by Guinea's junta**

On 28 September 2009, Guinea’s security forces killed at least 150 Guineans by shooting into a crowd of opposition supporters. They subsequently arranged a cover-up, burying the bodies in mass graves elsewhere. Prosecutors have asked for life sentences for Camara.

The verdict is expected on 31 July, the last day of the strike. Courts are effectively immobilised until the lawyers’ return.

Last November, Camara nearly evaded accountability when gunmen broke him and three others out of prison in Conakry. He was recaptured hours later. ■



# DRC

## Is anyone paying any attention?

The world is ignoring the conflict in Africa's most resource-rich country.

**Marché Arends**

**C**ongolese activists are calling on African leaders to show more solidarity with the victims of the “forgotten crisis” in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

More than seven million people have been driven from their homes by conflict, including 1.8-million in the past six weeks alone. A humanitarian truce between the Congolese army and the M23 rebel group announced by the United States on 5 July quickly collapsed, with fighting flaring up again last Friday.

“I don’t even have the words to describe the situation. Catastrophic is an understatement,” said Justine Masika Bihamba, the founder of Synergy of Women for Victims of Sexual Violence. She noted that sexual violence and abuse in the conflict had sharply increased.

Speaking at an online media briefing convened by Crisis Action, an

international NGO advocating for the protection of civilians during armed conflict, activists expressed fears the violence could worsen in coming weeks.

Bihamba urged African leaders at the upcoming African Union Executive Council meeting in Accra to acknowledge the suffering of the Congolese people. Addressing the presidents of Rwanda and the DRC specifically, Bihamba said: “I beg you to set your egos aside and see the situation for what it is. Find peace so people can return to their villages.”

The threat of regional destabilisation is growing as tension between Rwanda and Kinshasa mounts. A recent report by United Nations experts on the DRC said that close to 4,000 Rwandan soldiers were fighting on the side of the M23 rebels. In their 293-page report the experts said its army’s de facto control ultimately made Rwanda “liable for the actions of M23”. ■



**Forgotten crisis: Militiamen and DRC soldiers survey Kibirizi, controlled by M23 rebels.** Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP

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**The Continent**

# Macky Sall's controversial parting gift

**One of the former president's last acts in office was to pass an amnesty law that freed his political rivals from prison – and gave himself immunity from prosecution.**

## Borso Tall in Dakar

**A**fter 100 days in power, Senegal's ruling duo, President Bassirou Diomaye Faye and Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko, find themselves with two big legal headaches – both thanks to the legislative actions of their predecessor, Macky Sall.

The first issue is an amnesty law passed by Sall's government last year, after it failed to postpone the presidential election. The law was designed to bring "appeasement to the political space", and ended the prosecution of nearly 2,000 people who had been arrested during political protests – including both Faye and Sonko, who were then opposition politicians. The duo were released from prison on 14 March, and just ten days later would win the presidential election on a joint ticket.

But there was a catch: the law also exonerated Sall and his allies of potential illegal activity committed during his tenure. Victims of political violence during Sall's rule have called for the law to be repealed, so that the former president

can be prosecuted.

Among the loudest are the families and friends of two soldiers, Fulbert Sambou and Didier Badji, who disappeared in late 2022, after they went fishing together. Sambou's body was recovered days later but Badji is still missing.

Their friends and family blame their fate on the former president. "Macky Sall crossed all the rubicons. We are asking the authorities to issue an arrest warrant against Macky Sall," said fellow soldier Alassane Camara at a press conference earlier this month.

**The law was designed to bring 'appeasement to the political space', and ended the prosecution of nearly 2,000 people who had been arrested in political protests – including Faye and Sonko**

Lawmaker and former presidential aspirant Aminata Touré has also called for the law to be repealed. Speaking on local radio station Rfm in late June, Touré – who also served as prime minister

during Sall's first term – called for those responsible for political violence to be held accountable in court, including the former president.

### Mutually assured destruction

Calls to punish Sall should be music to the ears of Faye and Sonko – but for their own massive conflict of interest. Without the amnesty law, they might still be in prison.

Repealing the law would reopen an impossible question on whether or not to reopen old prosecutions, including those targeting Faye and Sonko.

Despite promising justice and accountability during their run for office, Faye and Sonko have not publicly engaged much with the complication arising from the amnesty law. For survivors of some

of the most gruesome violence, that is unacceptable. Bounama Ndiaye, 24, says he was arrested in June 2023, beaten and raped and then detained at Yeumbeul police station about 20km outside Dakar. He wants to face his abusers one day.

**Despite promising justice and accountability during their run for office, Faye and Sonko have not publicly engaged much with the complication arising from the amnesty law.**

“It's out of the question to ignore this law,” Ndiaye told *The Continent*. “We were tortured in very serious ways. Justice must be pursued.” ■

**The rioting's on the wall:  
Protesters clash with  
gendarmes in Colobane.**  
Photo: Seyllou/ AFP





**Deadly: Fire fighters extinguish a blaze from a tanker laden with fuel and gas. Photo: Pius Utomi Ekpei/AFP**

## Tankers of death

**Vandals forced oil out of Nigeria's vast pipeline network, and into heavy-duty tankers that are causing death and destruction on the roads.**

**Eric Dumo in Lagos**

**P**aul Chette was returning home to his family one night in late April when a tanker carrying 33,000 litres of petrol collided with a truck along the East-West Road and exploded. From where the factory worker stood, everything in the inferno's path seemed instantly reduced to ash. Watching the scene, the 51-year-old man could not hold back tears. In

the final analysis, the explosion had consumed five people, destroyed over 120 vehicles, and torched everything within a 500m radius. Chette was far enough away to emerge unscathed.

Remarkably, the April inferno was not Chette's first experience of fuel tanker fires. In May 2022, a petrol tanker explosion on the same road claimed the lives of his younger brother, Maxwell, and those of several others. "My brother's wife

and children are still too hurt to accept the reality of his demise,” said Chette.

The two incidents form part of a long list of death and destruction on Nigerian roads in recent times. Last August, the Foundation for Investigative Journalism found that more than 800 people have been killed since 2018 in over 200 incidents of petrol-laden tankers catching fire across Nigeria.

On 4 May, just over a week after the Rivers State incident Chette witnessed, another petrol tanker fire killed seven people along the Warri-Sapele Road in Delta State. Nineteen days after that, one exploded along the Mowe-Ibafo axis of the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway.

After each incident, fingers are pointed, factors like bad roads and corruption are listed and investigations are promised. Little talked about is why the tankers are on the roads at all in a country with extensive oil pipelines. The answer to that is unmitigated vandalism on the pipelines.

Nigeria has a 5,001km oil pipeline network running from 22 petroleum storage depots and four refineries across the country. The refineries, different and older than Aliko Dangote’s new one in Lagos, are not functional and so don’t use the attached pipelines. But no one would consider repurposing them for transporting imported petroleum products because of the fear of vandalism.

According to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, from 2017 to 2021, nearly 209-million barrels of crude oil were stolen in 7,143 recorded cases of vandalism on pipelines. The losses from

those incidents amount to \$12.74-billion. The government’s own estimate is even more staggering: \$20-billion lost annually to oil thieves who breach poorly secured pipelines.

There have been more than 9,000 pipeline breaches this year alone, according to the national oil company. “As we remove one illegal connection, another one comes up,” its chief executive, Mele Kyari, told the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. He said that the company had closed 6,409 illegal refineries in the Niger Delta region alone and detached 4,846 illegal pipes connected to its pipelines but estimated that nearly 700 other illegal connection points were still syphoning.

**The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative says that, from 2017 to 2021, nearly 209-million barrels of crude oil were stolen ... The losses from those incidents amount to \$12.74-billion.**

A \$50-million oil pipeline surveillance deal with a company owned by an ex-militant leader, Government Ekpemupolo, popularly known as Tompolo, has not ended the vandalism. Nor has the fact that the crime attracts 21 years to life imprisonment if caught (it is worth noting that only a fraction of the over 5,000 oil thieves arrested since 2020 were prosecuted).

Given the risk of pipeline transport, oil marketers are playing it safe by trucking petrol on the road. Safe, until it’s not. ■

# Remembering the past to feed the present

**Individually and through collectives, young Nigerians are bringing their DIY energy to the food-price crisis.**

## Damilola Adeyera

**S**ome young Nigerians are returning to farming even as they pursue their education in other fields.

One of these is Adeyemi Aderinola. At the back of his university hostel is a small plot of land the university allows him to farm. Each day, the engineering student at Obafemi Awolowo University rises before dawn to weed around his yam heaps before heading to class. He negotiated for the plot through an association of 143 student farmers which he leads.

Funmilayo Bakare, a microbiology student, is a member of the same collective and was also allocated a plot, on which she grows cassava, potatoes, maize and other crops.

The collective, United Small Scale Farmers Association of Nigeria, was founded by the late academic Makanjuola Arigbede, who wanted to see more Nigerian youth take up agriculture. He often argued that, before the discovery of oil, farming was the backbone of Nigeria's economy – but petro-dollars led authorities to neglect other sectors, including agriculture.

That neglect is biting now.

Nigeria is experiencing its worst-ever bout of food inflation and, globally, is the country with the largest number of food insecure people, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

In its May report, the national statistics office put food price inflation at a record high of nearly 41%. “We are just reaping what we’ve sown in the past few years,” said Idris Badiru, a lecturer at the University of Ibadan. He sees the current food crisis as the cumulative effect of too little attention being paid to agriculture over the years.

Badiru said Nigerian policy had long been indecisive on whether or not to protect the agricultural sector and that climate change, insecurity in the food-producing areas, and higher import costs had exacerbated the situation, driving food inflation to the current record highs.

Young people who are taking up farming are hoping they are part of the solution. Bakare, the microbiology student by day and farmer by spare time, said she got into it partly because of how much food prices have been rising. “It was just me wanting to make it easier for people to get farm produce.”

More collectives like theirs are cropping up: Ekiti Youth in Urban Farming was established last August and gives young people plots to farm, in addition to training on vegetable growing, hydroponics, organic farming and aquaponics.

“Our experience has been remarkable, with over 60 members and still growing. Nigerian youths are increasingly showing interest in farming,” Adetunji Ifeoluwa, who heads the Ekiti collective, told *The Continent*.

The collective receives support from the local Ekiti state government, the Mastercard Foundation, and Soilless Farm Lab, a social enterprise that says it has trained 13,700 people on smart ways to farm.

Other young people are taking up farming without necessarily joining collectives.

Ishola Joseph, a student at the University of Ilorin, said he started growing rice when it became too expensive to buy in the market.

Deborah Oke, another student there, said she is doing it for extra-curricular knowledge and to earn some money. She grows maize and sorghum and believes every household should grow something “especially fruits and vegetables”.

She urged the Nigerian state to expand these individual attempts at solving the food crisis by emulating the collectives through “allocation of free land, giving out free seeds and fertilisers. If not free, then at reduced prices”.



**Crop top: Some Nigerian youth are returning to the country's agricultural roots.**

Photo: Luis Tato/AFP





Mettle to the pedal: Biniam Girmay crosses the finish line on Stage Three of the Tour de France on 1 July. Photo: Marco Bertorello/AFP

## Biniam Girmay's amazing race

As far as we are concerned, the history-making Eritrean cyclist has already won this year's Tour de France.

**Erwin Ayota**

**A** split second before he crossed the finish line in Turin, Biniam Girmay sat up on his bicycle. He let go of his handlebars, smiled to himself, and then punched the air in defiance. Behind him, heads bowed, still pedalling hard for the line, were 175 of the world's best bicycle riders.

There were no bicycles ahead of him.

The Tour de France is the world's oldest and most prestigious cycling race. Over 21

gruelling stages that span 3,500 kilometres, cyclists race each other through streets and up mountains and along winding, picturesque country roads.

It is one of the most brutal competitions in world sport, and also one of the most elite. Never before in its 121-year history had a stage been won by an Eritrean. Never before had a stage been won by a black African. Until Biniam.

The 24-year-old was not much fancied heading into the race, but that win in Stage 3 was no fluke. He also won Stage 8 and

Stage 12, and is currently wearing the iconic *maillot vert*, the green jersey that is typically awarded to the fastest sprinter (the polka-dot jersey goes to the fastest climber, while the yellow jersey is for the fastest cyclist overall).

“It was unbelievably crazy, people everywhere celebrating,” Biniam told *The Continent*. Those celebrations were especially pronounced in the streets and bars of Asmara, Eritrea’s capital, where cycling is a religion and Biniam is already a national hero.

**For riders able to keep ahead of all this, they must enter the cut-throat, expensive and at times racist world of international cycling, where opportunities for African riders are scarce.**

“The plan was to build up for the Olympic Games but now I think I’m almost in my top shape,” said Biniam. “First, the goal is to finish the tour safely.”

He may have tempted fate.

Just a few days later, in the last few hundred metres of stage 16 – on a flattish course ideal for the kind of sprint finish in which he excels – Biniam crashed as he navigated through a roundabout at high speed.

His teammates helped him up, and he gingerly pedalled to the finish line – but the stage was lost to his closest rival, the Belgian rider Jasper “Disaster” Philipsen, and his hold on the green jersey suddenly felt a lot more precarious.

Biniam was undeterred. He dusted

himself off, got a good night’s rest, and the next day he smashed Philipsen in an intermediate sprint on a mountain stage, increasing his lead once again. Given the obstacles that he has overcome to get here, a few bruises and scratches were never going to hold him back.

### **Taking the long road**

The first bicycle in Eritrea was imported by the Italian military – then an occupying power – in the late 1800s. The sport caught on quickly. At first, bike races were strictly segregated, and Eritreans were not allowed to compete with their colonial rulers. In 1939, Italian authorities organised a special race with both Italian and Eritrean riders – ostensibly to prove Italian superiority. It backfired: the race was run by Ghebremariam Ghebru in a victory that is still celebrated today. In the words of Eritrea’s information ministry, “that victory shattered colonial Italian myths about Eritrean inferiority”.

Since then, Eritrean cyclists have continued to prove their excellence in the face of considerable obstacles. At home, riders have had to contend with civil war, diplomatic isolation and one of the world’s most authoritarian governments.

These conditions can also provide a perverse incentive, as *African Arguments* reports, as professional cycling is one of the few ways to escape mandatory, indefinite national military service – as long as athletes can keep riding fast enough. Meanwhile the country’s high-altitude and relatively quiet roads – a consequence of its economic stagnation – provide ideal training conditions.



**Roadside insistence:** Biniam Girmay supporters cheer near the podium area after the 6th stage of the 111th edition of the Tour de France. Photo: Marco Bertorello/AFP

For riders able to keep ahead of all this, they must enter the cut-throat, expensive and at times racist world of international cycling, where opportunities for African riders are scarce. Biniam hopes his success will change this. After his first stage win, he posted a picture to social media with the caption: “Let me open the door.”

It is “a huge opportunity for African cycling, especially for my country,” he said, and urged the big international cycling teams to start investing more in talent from the continent. “They need to invest for this because my team invests a lot on me and now it’s time to pay them off. The other teams need to do the same and believe in [African cyclists] also.”

This is a familiar refrain within Africa’s growing cycling community. Despite the huge potential in young talent, cycling clubs in Africa mostly survive thanks to the self-sacrifice and collective support of members who are driven by their goodwill and passion for cycling. They often survive

in spite of national cycling federations, who struggle with leadership issues and fundraising.

Cameroon’s most-renowned cyclist, Kamzong Abesselo Clovis, is one of the few Africans who can make a living from the sport. He counts himself as lucky that he is in a team that pays him a salary and training bonuses. He said that African athletes need more opportunities to compete. “A sportsman’s food is competition,” he said. “Training can’t make you progress like competing.”

Biniam’s dominance in this year’s Tour de France is proof of what happens when African cyclists do receive the necessary support: his exceptional early promise earned him a rare spot at the International cycling body’s World Cycling College in Switzerland, which brought him to the attention of his current Intermarché-Wanty team.

He then pedalled into the global spotlight. And he is still pedalling. ■

# The race to ride Girmay's coattails

**Biniam Girmay's recent success is challenging perceptions and exposing athlete dynamics in society.**

**Yohannes Woldemariam**

**E**ritrean cyclist Biniam Girmay's breakthroughs in the 2024 Tour de France challenges assumptions about African sportspeople. His success is also being manipulated back home.

The success of Africans in sports such as athletics is so common that people from countries like Kenya and Ethiopia are expected to dominate. But other sports – especially those that require expensive equipment – have proved harder to break into. This is not just true of Africa, but also of people of minority backgrounds around the world. Golf had seen few successful black players before Tiger Woods, and the same was true of tennis before Arthur Ashe and the Williams sisters.

Breakthroughs in these sports are notable because they take African athletes into the clubhouses that have historically been the hardest to access, with exclusion occurring along both class and racial lines. Girmay, for example, was denied a visa for a competition in Scotland last August.

That exclusion perpetuates the racist myth that athletes of African descent are better at sports that require physical strength rather than strategy. By winning

on one of the least diverse sports on Earth, Girmay has broken down another wall, and challenged some of the assumptions of cycling fans and commentators who have expressed amazement at his achievements.

The power of that symbolism has not been overlooked back home. Eritrea's long-time dictator, Isaias Afwerki, never misses a chance to take credit for the performance of his country's sportspeople. An Eritrean defeating Europeans at a sport brought to the country by Italian colonisers has proved to be just as tempting to gloat about.

Afwerki's claims of credit for the success of Eritrean athletes have been regularly punctured by a steady stream of Eritreans who use their involvement in international sport to claim asylum and escape his grasp. The sad reality for Girmay is that he is poorly placed to decide how his own success will be used because he has a wife, child and parents who remain in Eritrea. ■



*Yohannes Woldemariam is a US-based academic who writes about the Horn of Africa. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa*

## Economic realities are worsening

If economic growth in Africa is rebounding, many households apparently didn't get the memo.

Listening to ordinary Africans, Afrobarometer surveys find a striking worsening of economic realities. On average across 31 countries surveyed consistently between 2014 and 2023, 66% of respondents describe their country's economy as "fairly bad" or "very bad", up by 15 percentage points over the past decade. And 53% say the same about their personal living conditions, a 7-point rise.

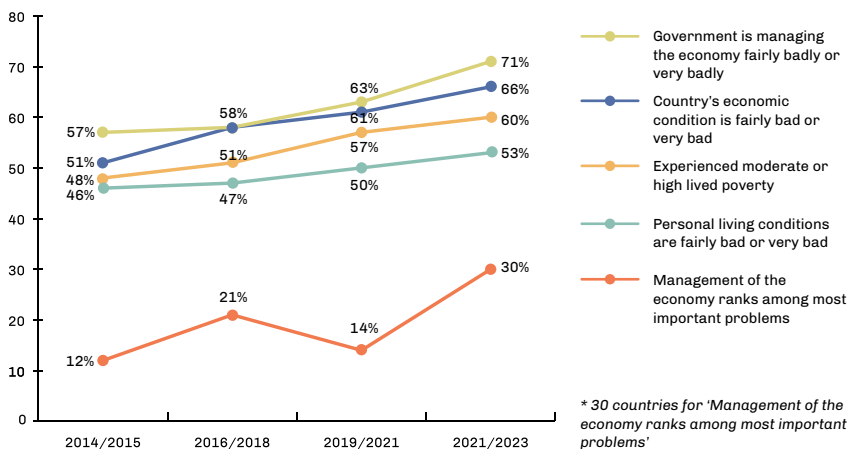
The proportion of households experiencing moderate or high "lived

poverty" – a measure of how often families go without basic necessities such as food, water and medical care – has increased steadily, from 48% to 60%.

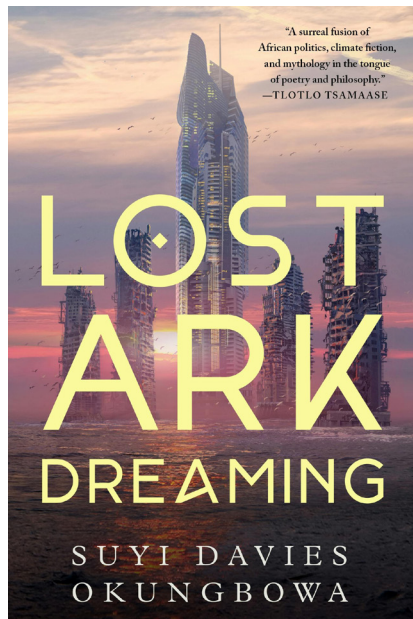
In growing numbers, survey respondents fault their government's management of the economy. Seven in 10 (71%) say their government is doing a poor job on the economy, up by 14 percentage points, and the share who cite economic management as one of their country's most important problems has more than doubled, from 12% to 30%.

On the ground, economic recovery is clearly still a work in progress. ■

### Negative assessments of the economy | 31 African countries\* | 2014-2023



**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.



## Mami Wata and the surge of a risen tide

***Lost Ark Dreaming* takes us into a world undreamt by Western philosophies.**

**Jacqueline Nyathi**

**O**ne of my favourite things about non-Western speculative fiction is how the cosmology of each story primes the reader

to see a world wholly different from what our Eurocentricised imaginations allow. This is not the world of the Enlightenment philosophers; rules of cause and effect instead obey ancient laws and beings.

In Suyi Davies Okungbowa's novella, a catastrophe has led sea levels to rise, causing Lagos to flood. A far-sighted businessman set up five offshore towers called The Fingers, with upper levels reserved for those who can afford to move there. Lower levels are for a few refugees and the grunts who keep things running. When there's a tower breach below ocean level, is it a mechanical failure – or have the monsters of the brine broken in?

Well, monsters are not usually what we think, and we are so often more monstrous than those we fear. This is a novella about class, revolution, loss and memory, set in West African cosmology: it is wonderful but gut-wrenching how Okungbowa links the spirit of the deep, Mami Wata, with the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved people.

Additionally, the forays into a different form for messages from outside of time are beautifully poetic. This novella has warmth and humour all the way through, setting it apart from lots of other speculative fiction that Takes Itself Seriously Because It Has Things To Say. Okungbowa makes his points without being didactic.

It's a fun and thoughtful read. Come for the speculative elements of the story, stay for the Afro in AfroSF. *Lost Ark Dreaming* feels like the introduction to a whole story universe, so perhaps readers can look forward to more. ■

# THE QUIZ

0-3

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

4-7

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

8-10

"The independence of Libya represented a dramatic break from the pasta."



Photo: Nhial Deng/X

- 1\_** The UAE lifted its 21-month ban on visitors from which African country?
- 2\_** In which year did Libya gain independence?
- 3\_** From which country did it gain independence?
- 4\_** Yamoussoukro is Côte d'Ivoire's largest city. True or false?
- 5\_** Which president won 99% of the presidential vote on Monday?
- 6\_** How many colours are on the Gambian flag?
- 7\_** Mogadiscio was the capital of which protectorate from 1889 to 1936?
- 8\_** The former province of Équateur would be located in which present-day country today?
- 9\_** In which African country is the World War I Memorial (pictured) found?
- 10\_** French and Sango are which African country's official languages?

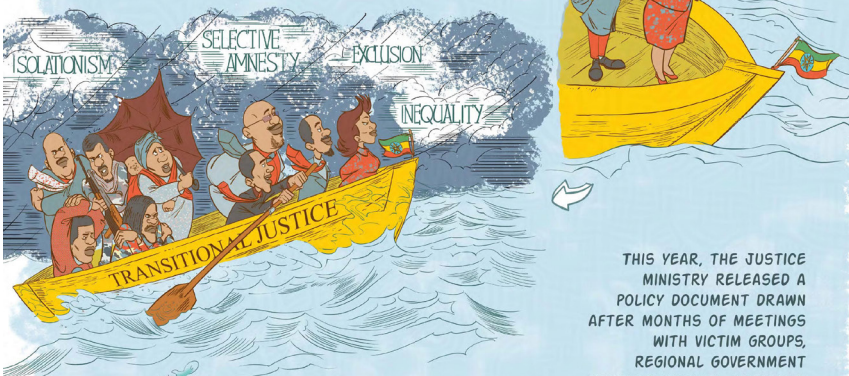
**HOW DID I DO?** WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

## TOUGH CROWD *on* ROUGH SEAS

IN THE 2022 PRETORIA AGREEMENT TO END THE BRUTAL TIGRAY WAR, ETHIOPIA'S GOVERNMENT AGREED TO LEAD AN INTERNAL "TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE" PROCESS.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

A BIG QUESTION MARK



THIS YEAR, THE JUSTICE MINISTRY RELEASED A POLICY DOCUMENT DRAWN AFTER MONTHS OF MEETINGS WITH VICTIM GROUPS, REGIONAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES, ACTIVISTS, OPPOSITION POLITICIANS AND LEGAL EXPERTS.



IN THEORY THE STAGE IS SET FOR JUSTICE, BUT IN REALITY, DOUBT STILL RIPPLES THROUGH THE NATION'S DIVERSE VOICES.





# Chatbots can't save broken health systems

**Digital health technologies could revolutionise healthcare on the continent – but only if governments get the fundamentals right.**

**Charles Ebikeme**

**C**hatbots now deliver healthcare across the continent. The coronavirus pandemic, when a surge in people's need for health information coincided with mandated isolation, was a particular driver of chatbots using large language models and artificial intelligence to provide health education. WhatsApp chatbots in South Africa, Rwanda and Senegal provided reliable information and support for rapid Covid-19 testing. In Ghana, a free Covid-19 Telegram app chatbot tackled misinformation on the coronavirus.

In some cases, chatbots were already in use. In others, they have expanded beyond Covid-19 information. NurseBot in South Africa advises pregnant women and new mothers through WhatsApp. Mum's Companion in Zimbabwe does the same through Facebook Messenger. In Kenya and Ghana the Nuru Facebook Messenger combines classified ads with information on agriculture, finances and health. Medbit in Nigeria provides medical consultations and referrals through WhatsApp.

Many other digital health initiatives

are happening across the continent. African healthtech startups have attracted \$550-million in the past three years, according to Salient Advisory, a healthcare consulting firm. Online pharmacies, electronic medical records and telehealth services are just some of the innovations garnering interest from investors.

But it's important to assess digital health innovations beyond investor interest. After all, many debuted to large fanfare in glowing press releases and then quickly subsided. Babylon in Rwanda, ConnectMed in Kenya (2016-2019) and HelloDoctor in South Africa are some of the most notable failures.

When digital health technologies are heralded as potential game changers for a continent with stark health burdens and outcomes, the optimism often ignores the fact that stable public health infrastructure is a prerequisite for any success in health innovations. "We have to get the basics in place before we can work on the fancy stuff," says Marlien Herselman, a chief researcher at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in South Africa.

The optimism "also misses the fact that

healthcare is very conservative,” explains Ayomide Owoyemi, a researcher who has built several digital products for Nigeria and other African countries, and whose code for an AI-based health insurance recommendation system in Nigeria is freely available on GitHub. “Healthcare is expensive and does not follow the expected timeline for return on investment.”

The low chances for that “expected timeline for return on investment” makes rolling out investor-led innovations a precarious choice. In 2018, Babylon announced “the first-ever fully digital healthcare service in east Africa using artificial intelligence”. The service would include a chatbot “to take the power of a doctor’s brain and put it on a mobile phone for medical advice and triage”.

In 2022, Babylon reported an operating loss of \$369.8-million, despite generating \$1.1-billion in revenue. Months later, the company ceased operations in Rwanda, ending what was initially billed as a 10-year partnership with the government.

In countries such as Finland and Estonia, success has come from local collaboration between stakeholders including patients, user communities, technology providers, payers, regulators and policymakers. This sort of configuration is rare in African countries.

Health programming has instead historically revolved around time-bound projects that deliver a set of agreed-upon activities. Donors define a project and time frame, identify an implementer to build and deploy a digital solution, and then expect the solution to live on. Yet, few digital tools are sustained without support



**Failing health: A Babylon worker helps a patient access the now-defunct health service in Rwanda.** Photo: Babylon app

from the public system.

The African Development Bank estimates that African governments need \$26-billion in annual capital expenditure to meet evolving health needs over the next decade. They currently spend \$4.5-billion a year. More investment would help build the shared infrastructure on which digital health innovations can interoperate.

Like car makers need governments to build roads, digital health innovators need governments to build electronic health information systems, internet connectivity networks and so on. Yet, in Africa, only Mali scores highly in public sector investment for digital health, according to the Global Health Digital Monitor.

“When you want to solve a problem, you shouldn’t think of the tech solution first. Think about the fundamentals first,” says Owoyemi. ■

# THE BIG PICTURE

Pitcher perfect: A Tunisian man examines a pot at an 800-year-old workshop on the island of Djerba, where ancient Aegeans pottered around even before the arrival of the Phoenicians in the 12th century BC.

Photo: Fethi Belaid/AFP



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