

with Mail & Guardian

The Continent



Photo: AFP

WAR IN EUROPE

and what it means for us

PLUS
America's
Burkina Faso
blowback



COVER: As Russian bullets and missiles murder Ukrainians to further the power and paranoia of Vladimir Putin, everyone is paying the price. For African countries it could mean grain shortages, a higher cost of living, less investment and that's before Nato and Russia move their conflict into other states. The world has seen this before, as superpowers kill in other countries, not caring about the impact on the rest of the world. *The Continent* looks at the conflict (p11) as well as what it means for Africa (p14). And, as that violence unfolds, we have an exclusive investigation into how the United States has brought more violence to places like Burkina Faso, despite spending over \$100-million in just four years in that country (p15).

Inside:

- It's been 125 years since the British stole the **Benin Bronzes** (p8)
- **Mozambique's** former president grilled over the \$2.2-billion debt that ruined the economy (p9)
- **Sport:** Why did basketball's 'Greek Freak' wear Nigeria's dialling code? (p19)
- **Film:** The Al Jazeera documentaries giving an inclusive view of Africa (p20)
- **Two-thirds of Africans** believe diversity makes communities stronger (p23)
- **A Spanish group** helped to destroy ambitious abortion law in Kenya (p24)
- As a further incentive to read this edition, we've got our **quiz** (p27)

Correction: *In Issue 75, we reported that Oriole Resources PR found "bonanza" grades of gold in its Wapouzé project. The discovery was from another of the company's Cameroon projects: Bibemi.*

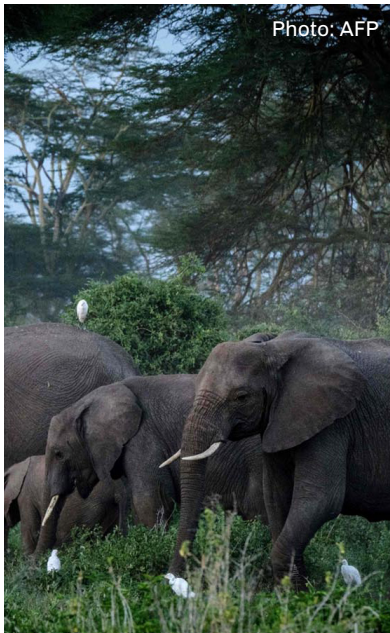
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Photo: AFP



WILDLIFE

DNA saves elephants

A group of conservation scientists and veterinarians are using DNA testing to track how ivory traffickers are operating. This method is enabling them to move endangered species of forest elephants to safer areas where they are less likely to be poached. Africa's elephant population continues to dwindle: a century ago it sat at 5-million, decreasing to 1.3-million in 1979, and now it hovers around 415,000. Around 500 metric tonnes of elephant tusks are shipped from the continent each year despite there being no practical use for them.

NIGERIA

No rituals in films

Nigeria's government has ordered filmmakers to remove content around money rituals from their films. These are rituals where human sacrifice is linked to instant wealth. Regulators say suspected murderers claim that they have learned their ways from social media and film.

CHAD

Generals help each other

Chad's junta leader Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno said that his country will increase the number of soldiers on UN peacekeeping in Mali, after that country kicked out France in the wake of a coup. Chadian soldiers already make up more than 10% of the 13,000 UN peacekeepers in north and central Mali. Idris Déby will reportedly send 1,000 more.

TAIWAN

More Chinese aggression

While refusing to condemn Russia's escalated invasion of Ukraine, Chinese warplanes have continued to fly into Taiwanese airspace — a country that China does not recognise.



Photo: Twitter/
PMEthiopia

ETHIOPIA

Abiy open to 'talks' for 'national interest'

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced that the government would

be open to negotiation talks with rebel groups this week. Federal forces have been at war with rebels from the Tigray People's Liberation Front since the government launched an invasion of Tigray in late 2020. Thousands of people have died since then.

MADAGASCAR

Four extreme storms this year

The fourth storm this year hit Madagascar on Wednesday. No fatalities have yet been reported. Cyclone Emnati follows Batsirai, which killed 121 people. Storm Ana displaced 20,000 people while storm Dumako forced 5,000 people out of their homes. While it is cyclone season, the UN says that the extreme nature and frequency of the latest storms is an effect of climate change.

MOROCCO

Worst drought in 30 years

Morocco's King Mohamed VI has ordered a financial rescue package of \$1.1-billion in an effort to mitigate the harsh drought the country is facing. One in three people are employed by its agriculture industry. Morocco seems to be the hardest-hit country by the North African drought, which is the grain belt's most severe in 30 years. Water supply has already been rationed in all of the kingdom's provinces by authorities.

RWANDA**Ending plastic**

With plastic waste everywhere, next week's fifth United Nations Environment Assembly in Nairobi will kick off formal negotiations on a global treaty to reduce its waste. The move was proposed by Rwanda and Peru and already has 60 countries in support. India wants any move to be voluntary and legally binding. Japan wants a treaty that only focuses on plastic waste in the sea. Meanwhile, the world is drowning in a form of waste that doesn't naturally break down.

UNITED STATES**More legislation backs hate**

In a continued war against anyone who isn't a straight white man, the governor of Texas has ordered officials to report transgender youth to their family and protective services. The parents of any children who have undergone any gender transitioning procedure will also be prosecuted. Some local officials have indicated they'll refuse to take heed of the order. Actions similar to this in other countries would bring condemnation and sanctions. They also follow a wider attack across the United States on people's right to vote and decide what they want to do with their own bodies.



Photo: Twitter/
Macky_Sall

SENEGAL**Senegal's new stadium**

Africa's best men's national football team has a new home. The 50,000 seater Abdoulaye Wade Stadium will host its first match next month – a world cup qualifier with Egypt as visitors. A repeat of this year's Afcon final. Built for \$270-million by a Turkish company, the opening ceremony included that country's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He's on a tour of the continent, as Türkiye looks to push its diplomatic reach in Africa.

ZANZIBAR**No swabs here**

Zanzibar is going to use non-invasive EDE technology to detect Covid-19, the first semi-autonomous region in Africa to do so. Zanzibar's president says 20,000 people have been tested this way to date.

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The Continent with Mail Guardian

Benin

The Benin Bronzes were stolen 125 years ago

In an expedition that destroyed a 700-year-old kingdom, the British took priceless artefacts that have still not been returned

In 1897 the Kingdom of Benin, or Edo Kingdom, had been around for at least 700 years and was prosperous. Its 16,000km of walls were the largest earthworks built before machines.

Benin had survived the 1880s scramble by European countries to cut up Africa. But British companies wanted its natural resources and trade routes. This was at the height of British power, in a Victorian age that prized imagery of noble gentlemen while celebrating an empire built on theft, slavery and oppression.

So, on the pretext of avenging a previous invasion force that Benin forces had destroyed, the British navy organised a “punitive expedition”. This burned and



Ransacked: The 1897 punitive expedition of Benin in effect ended the kingdom

massacred its way to Benin City. Once it fell, the expedition looted anything it could find and carry, before hanging senior officials and burning down the ancient city.

At least 2,500 items were officially listed as stolen, with the navy selling many of them to pay for the costs of the invasion. These ended up all over Europe but the biggest collection ended up in the British Museum.

Few have been returned. This month marks 125 years since the items were last where they belong. ■

Mozambique

A president takes the stand

Former president Armando Guebuza gave evidence last week in a corruption trial that has transfixed the nation

NEWS ANALYSIS

Bayano Valy and Luis Nhachote in Maputo

For 10 years, from the start of 2005 until the end of 2014, Armando Guebuza was the most powerful man in Mozambique. He controlled the levers of power as president of both the Republic and of the ruling Frelimo party.

But for two days last week, Guebuza was treated like an ordinary citizen and subjected to gruelling questioning in a courtroom in Maputo. He was forced to explain his role in the \$2.2-billion “hidden debt” scandal which plunged the country into a severe financial crisis – and happened under his watch.

Although his appearance may, for some, have dented the former president’s reputation, it was also an opportunity for

him to address the Mozambican public – and to attack his successor Filipe Nyusi.

And as Frelimo gears up for a congress in September to choose Nyusi’s successor, this battle between the party’s two biggest beasts has a significance beyond the corruption trial itself.

A fishy business

Guebuza was the last of 67 witnesses called by the Attorney General’s Office to testify at the televised hearings. For the last six months, the court – sitting in a tent in the courtyard of a maximum security prison outside the capital, Maputo – has heard evidence that has implicated his inner circle in serious financial irregularities.

Although the former president has not himself been prosecuted, the accused include his private secretary and his chief political advisor, as well as his son Ndambi. The defendants have been charged with assorted crimes including money laundering, forgery, embezzlement, blackmail, criminal association and influence peddling.

The accusations centre around \$2.2-billion which was borrowed by companies set up by the Mozambican intelligence service, backed by state guarantees. Infamously, some of this money was used to purchase tuna fishing boats that were allegedly vastly overpriced and unfit for purpose, and are currently rusting – unused – in Maputo’s harbour.

Under Mozambican law, debts of that size should never have been taken on without the approval of parliament and the Administrative Court. But parliament was never consulted, until after the scandal broke when it retroactively approved the loans.

In 2019, under pressure from civil society, the Constitutional Council ended up declaring the debts null and void. Mozambique has refused to honour two of the loans, but is slowly repaying one of them, which was worth \$850-million but will cost the country as much as \$2.4-billion by the time it is paid off.

The man who signed the guarantees, the then finance minister Manuel Chang, has been languishing in a South African prison since December 2018, stuck in an extradition tug-of-war between Mozambique and the United States.

Credit Suisse, the bank that financed part of the fraudulent deal, was fined \$547-million by regulators in the US and United Kingdom.

But no one has yet been brought to justice in Mozambique. And Guebuza, in his testimony, did his best to convince prosecutors – and the Mozambican public – that his hands are clean.

Passing the buck

Although Guebuza accepted responsibility for creating the companies in question, he pointed the finger of blame for the fraudulent activity at none other than President Nyusi, who was his minister of defence at the time, and who chaired a group of senior officials which Guebuza set up and, he says, put in charge



In the dock: Former president Guebuza (centre) faced questions last week about his role in the so-called 'tuna bond' scandal. Photo: Alexandre Nhampossa/Zitamar News

of the project. "I trusted them. I delegated because I trusted the people I was working with," Guebuza told the court.

But Nyusi has denied any involvement. Nyusi's testimony, given to state prosecutors in 2018 and read aloud by the judge in court on Friday, said that he knew nothing about the dodgy companies at the heart of the scandal – and only found out about their existence when the scandal broke in 2016. Video footage currently doing the rounds in Mozambique casts doubt on this account, as it shows Nyusi discussing them in 2014 and 2015.

The two presidents' contradictory accounts will make it difficult for prosecutors and judges to get to the bottom of what happened. But they may not be the final arbiters. Instead, all eyes turn now to the Frelimo party congress in September, where Nyusi and Guebuza are vying to have the final say on who will be the candidate to succeed as president. They will each be hoping that their favoured candidate wins the nomination – and can keep them out of jail. ■



Putin's War

The war in Ukraine could have been averted. But Russia's president, looking to forge his own imperial legacy, had other ideas

Photo: Mikhail Klimentyev/
Sputnik/AFP

Aanu Adeoye

In the end, Russian President Vladimir Putin rolled his tanks into Ukraine, ending months of speculation. He claimed it was a “special military operation” to “defend people who have been victims of abuse and genocide” in the separatist region of Donbas. This is a false and easily debunked pretext for war.

Ukrainian public officials are describing this as “a full-scale attack from multiple directions”. With some 190,000 soldiers around Ukraine, Russia is attacking with tanks, troops, aeroplanes, naval vessels and cyber warfare. Its navy and airforce are also on a war footing in other parts of the world, like the

Mediterranean, to threaten and rebuff any outside interference in Ukraine.

That Putin wants Ukraine under Russian control is clear.

In a televised speech-cum-revisionist-history-tirade earlier in the week, he made clear he does not think of Ukraine as a sovereign state.

The collapse of the Soviet Union is a strategic error that he sees as needing fixing. On Monday, he said the various countries that sprang forth from the old regime should not have been allowed to leave “without any terms and conditions”.

Putin's solution is to use violence to topple the democratically elected government of President Volodymyr Zelensky and replace it with a Kremlin-



Frontline: Ukrainian troops on patrol in eastern Ukraine, on 19 February 2022.

Photo: Aris Messinis/AFP

backed puppet. A similar situation in Belarus to the north, where an election was stolen to keep a puppet in power, has allowed Russian troops to invade Ukraine from another front.

Redrawing the map

While Nato – the United States-led military alliance – has moved steadily east after the Cold War ended, Ukraine is not a member. Its possible membership has been a hugely contentious issue in Ukrainian politics for over two decades. In recent years polls have shown a majority of people want to join the European Union, and Nato.

Because it isn't a member of either, this war is showing the limits of Western

power. Putin has the advantage because Nato, as an ostensibly defensive alliance, cannot put troops on the ground, even if its member states have sent weapons and provided intelligence to Ukraine. US President Joe Biden has said things could go “crazy” if Americans and Russians start shooting at each other.

Although Russia might be a middle-sized economy, it has a massive nuclear arsenal. That is a powerful disincentive for anyone to get involved.

Ukraine's appetite to defend itself should not be underestimated. But in the face of an unrelenting and far superior enemy, it's almost an inevitability that at least its major centres will fall to Russia.

What happens then is the great unknown.

As many countries including the US and the Soviet Union found out to their detriment, especially in Afghanistan, invading is relatively easy compared with the hard work of fully occupying another sovereign state.

If, as expected, Ukrainian nationalists arm themselves to fight a drawn-out insurgency, Putin could be bogged down by a long and costly war that Russians do not want. He is already facing unprecedented domestic opposition to the war, with people risking their safety to protest in Moscow.

Lose-lose

The war will be expensive for Russia. Tough economic sanctions have already been imposed with worse supposedly yet to come. The Russian ruble is at record lows against the dollar and euro. The stock



exchange has taken a huge hit.

Putin has prepared for this, using record gas prices to build up reserves of more than \$630-billion.

And European countries seem unwilling to cut off Russia's lucrative gas sales to the continent. About 40% of its gas and a quarter of its oil comes from Russia. The West is also experiencing a surge in inflation, which will only get worse if prices increase due to sanctions. This week Brent crude oil crossed \$100/barrel for the first time since 2014.

And, as ever, people will pay the price. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians have already fled their homes. Many people will die.

But Putin has decided that imperialist control of a sovereign nation will be his legacy, no matter the cost. ■

Human cost: Airstrikes have killed and wounded dozens, and reportedly displaced at least 100,000 people. Photos: Genya Savilov/AFP (above), Wolfgang Schwan/Anadolu Agency via AFP (below)



Aanu Adeoye is the Mo Ibrahim Foundation Academy Fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, and a former news editor of The Continent

Even without picking sides, African people will pay for Putin's war

War will mean more expensive food. It'll also mean windfalls for oil rich countries. But for most people life will cost more and be harder.

The world economy is so interconnected that an upset in one place causes ripples everywhere. This can be good — when El Niño means drought in the southern hemisphere, countries there can rely on imports from those in the northern hemisphere who have an excess to feed people.

It can also mean the opposite.

Ukraine is the world's fifth biggest exporter of wheat, and exports across Africa. These exports will suffer as Ukraine's agriculture and export system suffers through an invasion. With sanctions against Russia, it'll be increasingly difficult to trade with that country. Egypt, for example, gets half of its wheat imports from Russia.

North Africa is facing its worst drought in 30 years.

War also affects the price of oil and gas. Some countries, like Nigeria and Angola, will get a lot more income really fast. Everyone else will pay for this. Gas prices are at record levels. Oil this week passed \$100 a barrel of Brent crude, a level not seen since 2014. Higher oil prices make every part of an economy more expensive, from getting goods to shops to running

tractors in maize fields. That in turn makes things more expensive and drives inflation, so people's money can buy less.

In a statement, South Africa's international relations department said: "The conflict will have a huge impact on the global economy in a moment when we are emerging from the Covid pandemic and so many developing countries need to have space for the recovery."

Higher oil prices make every part of an economy more expensive

In times of extreme uncertainty, most investors avoid things that they consider risky. That includes putting money into developing markets, which then means less money for development and for companies to grow. All of that means fewer jobs and weaker currencies that make imports more expensive. On the flipside, weaker currencies mean exports, such as gold, earn more.

And all this is before Nato and Russia start pushing African countries to start taking sides. Or start fighting proxy wars around the world. ■

US-trained officers keep overthrowing West African governments

In an effort to fight terrorism and promote democracy, the United States has spent \$115-million in Burkina Faso in just the last four years. In that time, the terrorism threat has increased dramatically – and the elected government has just been overthrown in a military coup masterminded by US-trained officers. This is not an isolated example.

Nick Turse

In the days after he seized power in a military coup, Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba addressed the nation in a televised speech. “Friends of Burkina Faso, in these particularly difficult times for our country, Burkina Faso needs its partners more than ever. This is why I call on the international community to support our country so that it can emerge from this crisis as quickly as possible to resume its march towards development.”

Prior to the coup, Damiba had been a lieutenant colonel in the Burkinabe military. Today, he is the putschist-turned-president, having overthrown the democratically elected government.

Damiba has, however, never lacked “support” from the “international community” – specifically the United States.

Damiba took part in at least a half-dozen training events sponsored by the US, according to US Africa Command (AFRICOM), the lead organisation for US military activities on the continent.

In 2010 and 2020, for example, he participated in Flintlock, an annual US Special Operations Command Africa exercise focused on enhancing the counterterrorism capabilities of West African nations. In 2013, Damiba was invited to attend an Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance course. In 2013 and 2014, he attended a US-sponsored Military Intelligence Basic Officer Course-Africa. And in 2018 and 2019, Damiba participated in engagements with a US Civil Military Support Element in Burkina Faso.

Damiba is also the third US-trained

Burkinabe officer to attempt to overthrow his government since 2014, and the ninth American protégé to stage a coup in West Africa (and the eighth to succeed) since 2008.

A self-fulfilling prophecy

Beginning in the 2000s, the US started training Burkinabe soldiers like Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba to counter the terrorist threat that, largely, did not exist. As recently as 2015, there were only three terrorist attacks in the country, according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, a US Defense Department research institution.

But year after year, US tax dollars poured into Burkina Faso in the form of rifles and machine guns, body armour and night vision equipment, armoured personnel carriers and trucks. American advisers were sent to assist, while US commandos were deployed on low-profile combat missions to thwart the rise of militant Islamist groups.

Year after year, US tax dollars poured into Burkina Faso in the form of rifles and machine guns, body armour and night vision equipment

The US provided Burkinabe troops with what it calls “weapons training”, instruction in employing mortars, counterterrorism tactics, detection of Improvised Explosive Devices, and “small unit tactics.” Support came in the form of an alphabet soup of more than 15



Putsch president: Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba has extensive US-backed training

“security co-operation” programmes such as ACOTA, MIBOCA, the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership and the Regional Defense Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program.

During the last four years alone, US assistance topped \$115-million, according to US Defense Department spokespersons Cynthia King and Candice Tresch.

But instead of the terrorist threat diminishing, it expanded exponentially. In 2021, according to Héni Nsaibia of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), there were 2,373 deaths from political violence, a jump of more than 10,000% since 2015.

In a statement last December, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken told the people of Burkina Faso that: “The United States also appreciates your important contributions to regional security, and we stand with the people of Burkina Faso in the fight against violent extremism.”

Despite counterinsurgency failures



Bullseye: An American sergeant directs Senegalese soldiers

from Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s to Afghanistan in the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the US continues to tout its expertise and teach its methods and tactics to allies.

As Stephanie Savell, a counter-terrorism researcher at Brown University who has studied Burkina Faso, told *The Continent*: “Burkina Faso has adopted a US framework and ideology that positions war as the best way to fight terrorism – even though research shows that other government tactics, like policing and conflict resolution tools, are far more effective.”

In fact, the statistics show that Burkina Faso’s military is even more lethal than some of the militant groups it is trying to contain.

L’Observatoire pour la Démocratie

U.S.-TRAINED OFFICERS WHO STAGED COUPS IN WEST AFRICA 2008-2022

Burkina Faso, 2022: Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba

Guinea, 2021: Col. Mamady Doumbouya

Mali, 2021: Col. Assimi Goïta

Mali, 2020: Col. Assimi Goïta

Burkina Faso, 2015: Gen. Gilbert Diendéré

Burkina Faso, 2014: Lt. Col. Isaac Zida

Gambia, 2014: Col. Lamin Sanneh (failed)

Mali, 2011: Capt. Amadou Sanogo

Mauritania, 2008: Gen. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz

et les Droits De l'Homme, a human rights group in Burkina Faso, estimated that 350 people were executed by the security forces in 2019 and warned that the ethnically based violence might turn the country into the “next Rwanda.” Similarly, Human Rights Watch has documented hundreds of suspects killed by Burkinabe security forces in and around the towns of Arbinda, Tanwalbougou, and elsewhere since 2015. Last year, the Burkinabe military killed almost as many people (634) as the local ISIS affiliate (363) and other militant groups associated with the main perpetrator of terrorist violence in the country Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin – Ansaroul Islam (205) and Katiba Macina (88) – combined, according to ACLED's Héni Nsaibia.

The US government has consistently acknowledged Burkinabe abuses, even as it has trained, equipped and armed the security forces there.

Regional blowback

It's been a similar story in neighbouring Mali and Niger, which have also received US military assistance since the 2000s but have seen steep increases in attacks by Islamist militants. “The 2,005 violent events observed in the Sahel (specifically Burkina Faso, Mali and western Niger) in 2021 represent a 70% increase over the previous year,” according to a January report by the Pentagon's Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

This went on to note “an uninterrupted escalation of violence involving militant Islamist groups in the region since 2015”.



Outsourced: Soldiers being trained in refined weapon-reloading techniques.

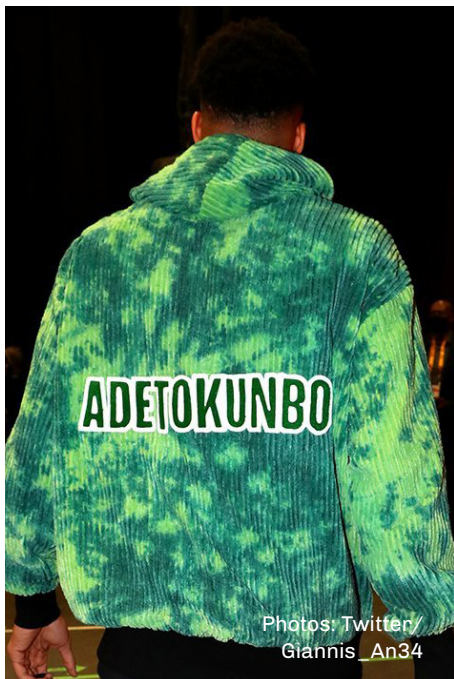
Photo: Sgt. Steven Lew

Although it started in Mali, this violence had now shifted to Burkina Faso, it said.

The toll of these attacks extends far beyond death and injury, affecting a significant proportion of the country's 20-million citizens. Some 3.5-million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance, while more than 1.5-million are internally displaced.

In a conference call with reporters earlier this month, Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, the head of the US military's Africa Command, said ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates were expanding into Ghana, Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire.

Townsend also decried “an emerging trend of unconstitutional military-led changes of government” without making mention of the eight US-trained officers who have staged nine coups in West Africa since 2008 – the same year AFRICOM began operations. He added that “it's important, we believe, that our military partners stay out of politics.” ■



Photos: Twitter/
Giannis_An34

The Greek-Nigerian freak

Last week the National Basketball Association (NBA) held its All-Star Weekend, its annual marquee exhibition event. Finally getting back to pre-pandemic in-arena fanfare, it featured all of the NBA's top-rated stars including Greece's own Giannis Antetokounmpo, who is still riding on the championship wave of last season, and is hoping to win back-to-back rings. Known for donning the Milwaukee Bucks' green and white uniform, this time he went with a different

green-white sentiment: the colours of the country of his lineage, Nigeria. Antetokounmpo arrived wearing a custom Niyi Okunboyejo hoodie with Nigeria's calling code on the front and the original spelling of his Yoruba surname on the back (it was misspelt on his passport and his family have adapted the new spelling in solidarity). Known widely as the "Greek Freak", Antetokounmpo – or should that be Adetokunbo – said he felt proud to represent his heritage. ■



On the White Nile:
by Akuol de Mabior
(South Sudan)

Reimagining Africa

Al Jazeera's Africa Direct documentary films show an inclusive, immersive view of the continent.

Wilfred Okiche

A fisherwoman making her living on the White Nile. A charismatic mayor in Yaounde officiating the most joyful of wedding ceremonies. A parchment bookmaker in the mountains of Ethiopia holding on to the vestiges of a profession fast going into extinction. A farmer in Burkina Faso nurturing tiny baobab seeds as they grow into expansive forests.

What do all these people have in common? On the surface, it would seem like not a lot. Take a closer look and observe that they represent a snapshot of Africans at work; ordinary citizens

and unsung heroes solving problems in their respective communities. They are also the subjects of some of the short documentaries in Al Jazeera's Africa Direct project which was launched in November last year and continues its second phase in April.

Africa Direct is a series of 30 compelling and immersive short films commissioned by Al Jazeera's documentary program to deploy African narratives and talent – away from news reporting – in service of painting a more multifaceted portrait of the continent.

To make the project a reality, the Al Jazeera team sought the endorsement



**Beïrey-Hou:
Desert
Libraries:
Directed
Andrey S.
Diarra (Mali)**

of heavyweight South African producer Steve Markovitz who joined the team in the executive producer capacity. A diverse group of filmmakers from the continent were marshalled by the series producers Angèle Diabang from Senegal and South African Brian Tilly to craft a variety of stories that speak to what it means to be African in contemporary times.

Al Jazeera's manager of documentary programs and commissioning editor for the Africa Direct series, industry veteran Ingrid Falck tells *The Continent* that for a long while, she had been nursing the idea of an ambitious project looking to counter prevailing tropes that have characterised much of African media coverage. It also helped that in-house audience research data suggested that viewers on the continent are hungry for a different kind of narrative on-screen. In Falck's words: "Documentaries are hugely powerful in the way they shape perceptions of places and people, of power and agency. With this series I wanted to upend the prevailing western approach in

global media where Africa is more talked about than listened to, where this diverse continent is often homogenised, and where outsider lenses tend to dominate."

For a long while, Falck had been nursing the idea of a project looking to counter prevailing tropes that have characterised much of African media coverage

The execution involved stakeholder engagement with documentary festivals and communities and a public call out for pitches. A briefing call on Zoom in February last year had about 120 filmmakers from across the continent in attendance. The Africa Direct team received around 300 pitches from 31 countries and was able to distil it down to the projected number. Beyond the strength of individual pitches or story ideas, the project also had to consider factors such as gender and geography in

order to come up with an inclusive slate.

Ousmane Samassékou, the Malian director of last year's feature, *The Last Shelter*, a huge hit on the festival circuit, was a producer on two of the Africa Direct shorts. The first, *Desert Libraries*, directed by Andrey S. Diarra follows Boubacar Saddeck Najim, one of the last remaining copyists of ancient manuscripts in Timbuktu. The other, *Kalanda: A Wrestler's Dream* directed by Oumar Ba profiles the titular character, a young wrestler as he trains in the Dakar underground scene.

Both films are visually appealing and are among the strongest of the slate as they are made in a style that privileges character-led narrative over traditional documentary talking head figures. "Africa Direct is an initiative that should exist in perpetuity because it brings out talent from Africa and allows productions to go ahead without waiting for a long funding schedule," said Samassékou talking about the importance of the project to the ecosystem.

Each project came with peculiar challenges, though. For *Desert Libraries* for instance, the security situation in Timbuktu was an obstacle to overcome. With *Kalanda: A Wrestler's Dream*, in order to fit the narrative within the television format, Samassékou had to rein in the excesses of his talented director. "Oumar is a director with a lot of creative ideas," he tells *The Continent*.

Elsewhere in South Sudan, filmmaker Akuol de Mabior while following fisherwoman Rebecca Lith Chol, the subject of her short *On the White Nile*, was



The Bookmaker: Directed by Girum Berehanetsehay (Ethiopia)

struck by the lack of trust her compatriots had in the camera. It is a mistrust that has its roots in the basis of historic negative or stereotypical portrayals of the country and its people.

With her film, De Mabior envisaged a chance to tell a different, yet realistic story of her country. She explains: "When I got the opportunity to pitch a short film for the program, I knew I wanted to focus on South Sudanese women breadwinners." De Mabior is hoping that audiences will relate not just with the familiarity of her subject's story but also the force of her personality. "All anyone has to do is take one look at Rebecca, as I did that day at the port, to know that her story needs to travel," she adds.

Falck is excited about the agency that the films in the Africa Direct series afford their subjects. "When we hear and see people directly, authoritatively and at the centre of their own story, it prompts us to reimagine notions of authority and of power. And in this very unequal world, that's not a bad thing," she says.

The second phase of the Africa Direct series launches on YouTube in April. ■

Diversity makes us stronger

In celebration of Zero Discrimination Day (1 March), let's take a moment to congratulate ourselves on Africa's tolerant attitudes toward cultural differences.

In Afrobarometer surveys in 34 countries, overwhelming majorities say they would have no problem living next door to people of different religions (87%), different ethnicities (91%) or different nationalities (82%).

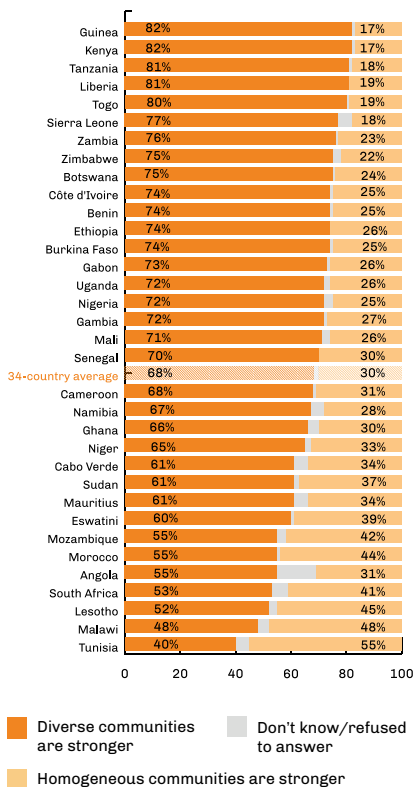
And by more than 2-to-1 (68% vs. 30%), they believe that communities are stronger if they are diverse rather than homogeneous when it comes to ethnicity, race and religion.

More than eight in 10 citizens favour diversity in Guinea (82%), Kenya (82%), Tanzania (81%) and Liberia (81%). The only country where a majority (55%) prefer homogeneous communities is Tunisia.

But there's always a "but" ...

Many Africans still report experiences of discrimination, especially based on their economic status: Half (49%) say their government treats them unfairly based on how much money they have (vs. 32% based on ethnicity and 16% based on religion).

Does diversity strengthen or weaken communities? | 34 African countries | 2019/2021



And then there's the major blind spot of intolerance for people of different sexual orientations. More on that soon.

Source: Afrobarometer, 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.

How a Spanish right-wing group incited a moral storm in Kenya

It looked like a grassroots movement against reproductive rights – one that helped destroy crucial new legislation to protect women’s rights. But new research suggests that the movement was being orchestrated from 6,000 kilometres away.



Amy Fallon and Andrew Arinaitwe

In July 2020, Kenya’s upper house of Parliament was debating the Reproductive Health Bill. The bill, introduced by two women MPs – Sarah Kihika and Esther Passaris – sought to expand access to safe medical abortion and other reproductive health services.

It would have been a milestone for women’s rights in the country.

The bill was controversial. A petition against it was delivered to the Parliament building in Nairobi, while online it was met

with fury, vitriol and trending hashtags such as #StopKihikaAbortionBill.

What was not evident at that time was that this supposed grassroots campaign was apparently being initiated and funded by CitizenGO, a conservative right-wing group based in Spain.

From 6,000 kilometres away, this group allegedly waged a disinformation campaign designed to create a moral storm in Kenya. That’s according to new research by Nairobi-based Odanga Madung of the Mozilla Foundation.

Madung found that about 15 people,

thought to be Kenyans, were being paid to operate multiple “sock puppet” accounts on Twitter – designed to hide the identity of their owner – to manipulate the online conversation. They received just \$10-\$15 per campaign. These campaigns included denigrating Kihika and Passaris, and spreading disinformation about the contents of the proposed Reproductive Bill and its ramifications.

Madung saw WhatsApp groups with CitizenGO branding where these 15 individuals were given instructions and “media packs” which showed them how to in-effect shut down factual conversations about the bill.

Amid this manufactured outcry, the Reproductive Bill was withdrawn.

CitizenGo did not respond to *The Continent’s* request for comment. On its website, the Madrid-based group says that it uses “online petitions and action alerts” to “defend and promote life, family, and liberty.”

Madung said that Kenyan social media is especially vulnerable to these kinds of disinformation campaigns. “Groups like CitizenGO have an easier time manipulating discourse in Kenya because platforms like Twitter lack the context, the resources, and the will to adequately address disinformation campaigns there.” He said that Twitter concentrates on addressing disinformation in the US, where regulators hold more sway.

A Twitter spokesperson told *The Continent*: “We are investigating the information shared with us by Mozilla Foundation and have permanently suspended more than 240 accounts under

our platform manipulation and spam policy.”

The hashtag wars

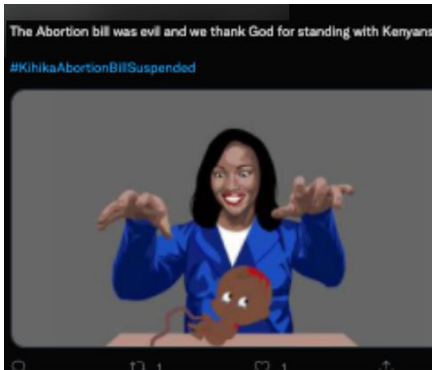
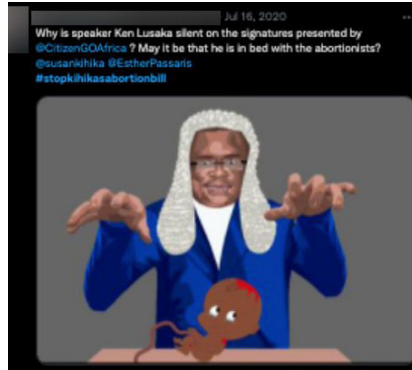
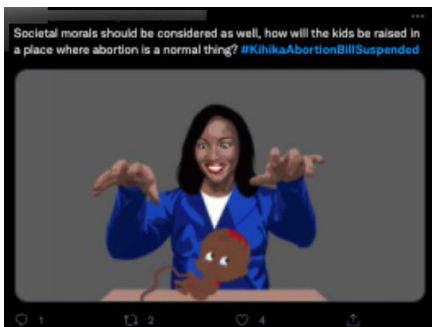
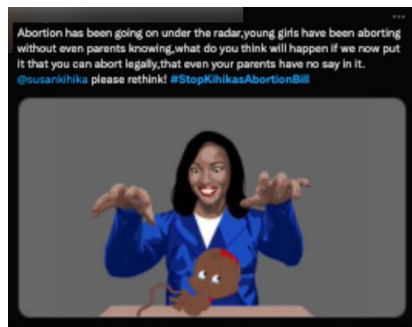
With a bitter election just a few months away, activists and analysts are already concerned about the impact of similar disinformation campaigns. Madung expects them to “increase significantly” in the run-up to the August vote.

Kenneth Juma, a researcher at the African Population and Health Research Centre, told *The Continent* that disinformation campaigns by groups like CitizenGO are “very common”.

Groups like CitizenGO have an easier time manipulating discourse in Kenya because platforms like Twitter lack the context, the resources, and the will to adequately address disinformation.

He said that similar campaigns targeting the East African Community’s Sexual and Reproductive Health Bill are already happening. “They create hashtags around it, create disinformation on social media and troll members of the East African Legislative Assembly.”

Dr Angela Akol, the director of the Ipas Africa Alliance – which aims to end preventable deaths and disabilities from unsafe abortion – said the Mozilla Foundation’s report “demonstrates how quickly misinformation on important public health issues spreads, and confirms that the anti-abortion movement in Kenya



is fuelled by overseas organizations. These are dangerous tactics and only serve to harm women.”

The report “demonstrates how quickly misinformation on important public health issues spreads”

Sophie Hodder, the Kenya Director of MSI Reproductive Choices, told *The Continent* that girls and young women were “particularly dependent on digital sites for information about sex and contraception, which may not be freely discussed at home”. In this context, she

said, they are seeing the “sometimes even fatal” impact of disinformation.

Meanwhile, CitizenGO appears to still be at it, with a new hashtag campaign against the East African Community’s Bill, which would permit abortions when the health of the mother is in danger. “The hashtag has all the previous symptoms we’ve mentioned in the report: CitizenGo branded media assets, targeting a specific piece of legislation; and a spike and then fizzle in conversation volume. We have also obtained some WhatsApp evidence on this latest campaign as well which indicates coordinated activity,” said the Mozilla Foundation. ■

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

"Africa is definitely the most important continent."



Photo: John Wessels/AFP

- 1_** What is the other name for Unguja Island? (It is the main island of the Tanzanian archipelago.)
- 2_** Which country is often shortened to "CAR"?
- 3_** Cyril Ramaphosa is the president of which country?
- 4_** The Tigray People's Liberation Front is a rebel party of which country?
- 5_** Abdoulaye Wade served as the president of which country from 2000 to 2012?
- 6_** What is the demonym for people from Togo?
- 7_** What is the capital city of Mauritania?
- 8_** Mount Nyiragongo is located in Goma in which country?
- 9_** *Black Panther* actor Daniel Kaluuya was born to parents from which country?
- 10_** True or false: Africa is the largest continent in the world.

HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

Would you like to send us some quiz questions or even curate your own quiz? Let us know at TheContinent@mg.co.za

The end of the affairs



Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

Here at Continental Drift we would like to believe in happily-ever-after and fairytale endings, but as this month of love draws to a close we are instead starting to feel the Valentine's Day blues. The seductive strains of Barry White have been replaced by the beating of the drums of war. These are unprecedented times, they say – at this, point we'd rather take un-presidented (although who would we write about then?).

While most of us are desperate to move on from the grief and hardship of the past two years, apparently some leaders are desperate to inflict more pain and heartache.

But before we dive headfirst into the Third World War (why is it that only European conflicts get to be World Wars?), let's rewind to happier, more innocent times. Last week, some of our favourite leaders were hanging out at the African Union-European Union Summit in Belgium. Apparently they put Africa first in the title so that they can put themselves first everywhere else.

We hope our African heads of state managed to get some healthcare checks

in alongside all that high-end shopping – you just can't trust your local healthcare system these days, especially if it is your job to maintain it.

The European Union was in a generous mood – it needs all the friends it can get right now – and arrived with the best gifts of all: cold, hard cash. It promised €100-million to support the African Medicines Agency over a span of five years; €500-million to strengthen health systems on the African Continent; and that it will not only “donate” vaccines, but also throw money at aiding the vaccination process in Africa.

Oh, how we swoon! Heart-eyes emojis everywhere! Europe, giving Africa so much – except for what the continent actually asked for: a waiver on vaccine patents. As author Nanjala Nyabola once tweeted: “We are asking for justice. They are giving us charity.”

Je ne regrette rien

Although February has taught us a lot about the perils of loving, it has also been a lesson in leaving, courtesy of President Macron of France. He announced that France and its allies would be withdrawing their forces from Mali “due to multiple obstructions” by the ruling military junta. If you thought this was about to go into rom-com territory which would see Mali ask the French to stay, you were wrong. Bamako issued a statement saying that it



Thick as thieves:
After years of
deadly animosity
– deadly to other
people, that is –
Uhuru Kenyatta and
Raila Odinga have
apparently resolved
their differences.

Photo: PSCU

invites the French to withdraw its forces “without delay”. A classic “you didn’t dump me, I asked you to leave” scenario if we ever saw one. And we hear that Mali’s junta leaders have already found a suitable rebound, in the form of some mysterious Russian mercenaries.

Meanwhile, Mali’s self-appointed authorities in the country voted to adopt a transitional charter which gives the military government the opportunity to remain in power for up to five years. The plan also states that the individual serving as interim president during the time of the next elections cannot vie for the presidency, meaning that current president Colonel Assimi Goita will not be able to run. But what if he resigns first? Find out in the next episode of *Keeping up With the Coupdashions*.

Burkina Faso’s coup leaders have adopted a similar approach – imitation being the sincerest form of flattery and all that – calling for a 30-month transitional period to take the country towards elections. That’s nearly three years! We’re not sure if anyone believes that their relationship will last that long.

This month also saw the end of one “bromance” and the strengthening of another one after President Kenyatta of Kenya endorsed former prime minister Raila Odinga as the man to succeed him, leaving his deputy William Ruto out in the cold. As romance stories go this was one for the ages. “Well, it all began at the International Criminal Court ...”

While all eyes are on Ukraine, there is conflict and violence on this continent too. The United Nations issued an alarming statement saying that militia groups in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo are continuing to target displaced civilians, with reports of eight attacks in Ituri in the first 10 days of February. In one massacre, on 15 February, at least 17 people were killed by militia fighters, including eight children.

Over in Niger, the government said that 18 civilians were killed in Tillaberi following an attack by “armed bandits on motorcycles”.

As we end the month of February, the world feels like it is a lot scarier than when it began. All we can do is send you all the love we have, from our hearts to yours. ■

Trust deficit in electoral body as Kenya prepares for elections

Oscar Otele

With five months until Kenya's general election, there is a worrying lack of public trust in the electoral body. According to the latest Afrobarometer survey, more than half of respondents (54%) said they trust the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) "just a little" or "not at all".

This is not surprising. In addition to continued controversy around past election results, there are three reasons Kenyans may be concerned about the ability of the Commission to deliver. First, the IEBC requested Ksh. 40.9-billion (\$352-million) to run the polls, but was allocated just Ksh. 26.6-billion (\$237-million). Similarly, it had requested Ksh. 4-billion (\$35-million) to carry out mass voter registration exercise but instead received Ksh. 1.2-billion (\$9-million). Operating so far under budget means the commission will be put under great strain.

Second, the IEBC has been unable to deter leading presidential candidates

from engaging in early campaigning – the official campaign starts on 10 May, but candidates have been crossing the country in the hunt for votes for months.

Third, the National Assembly failed to approve Election Campaign Financing Regulations drafted by the IEBC, and so Kenya will go into another election with no spending limits. The Commission presented the Election Campaign Financing Regulations – needed to bring to life pre-existing electoral legislation – to the National Assembly for approval on 27 July. However, the National Assembly Select Committee on Delegated Legislation raised concerns regarding conformity with the Constitution, the Statutory Instruments Act and Statutory timelines, claiming that there appeared to have been an "unjustifiable delay in publication or laying before Parliament".

This move signalled the reluctance of Kenya's politicians to have their campaigns monitored and constrained by the IEBC, and helps to explain why a majority of Kenyans believe that the IEBC will not be able to execute all of its responsibilities. Unfortunately, this trust deficit is likely to have a spillover effect on the legitimacy of the electoral outcome if, as many suspect, the election is close and controversial. ■

Oscar Otele is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Nairobi. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa



THE BIG PICTURE

Strength test: Young men are seen practising their wrestling along the popular Tergit beach in Nouakchott, Mauritania. Photo: John Wessels/AFP



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