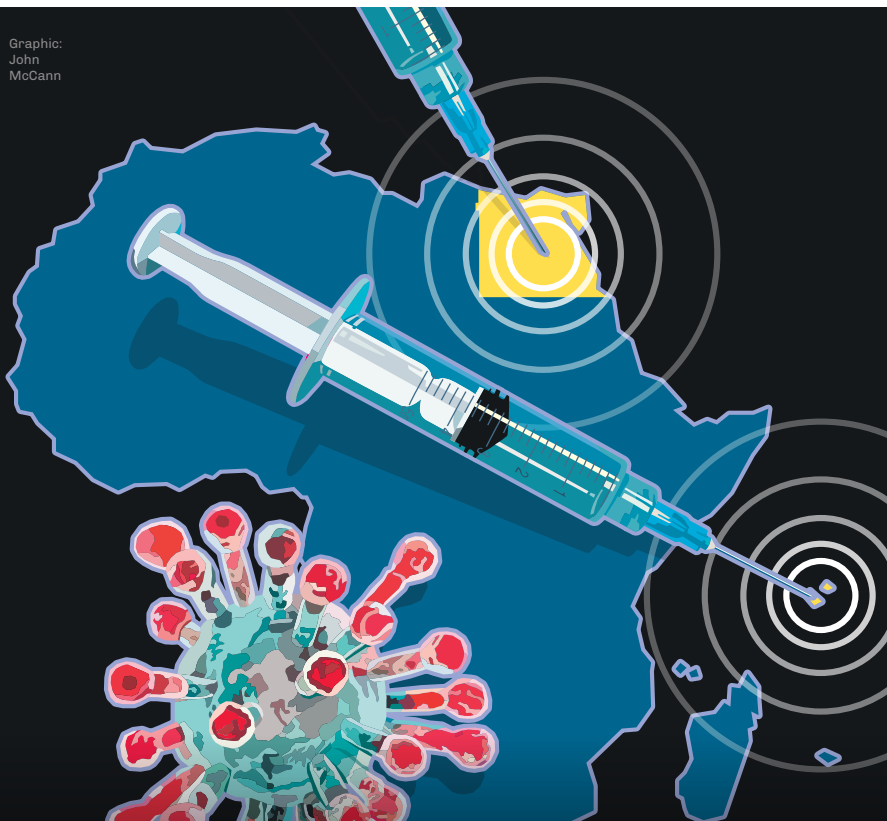


# The Continent

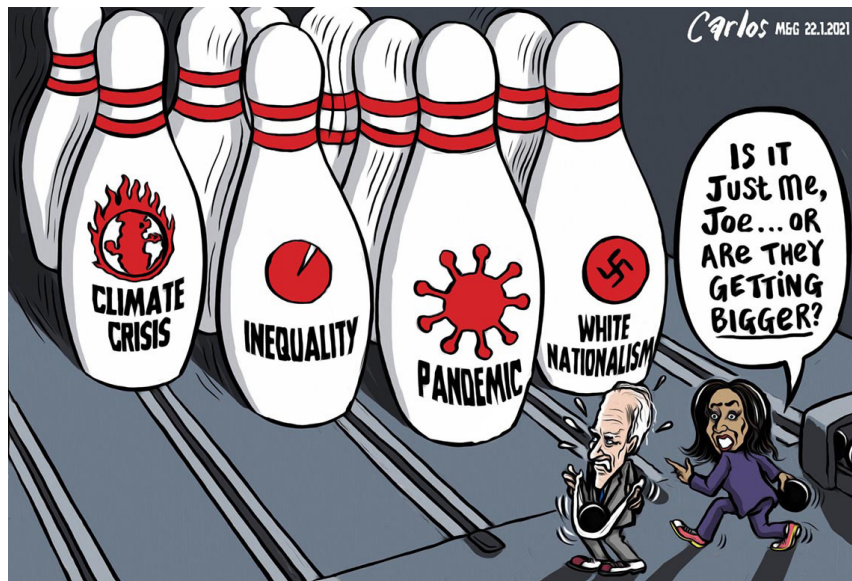
with Mail & Guardian

Graphic:  
John  
McCann



## Vaccines roll out in Egypt and the Seychelles

How did they get there first?



## Inside:

- **Vaccines:** Egypt and the Seychelles got there first, but do the numbers add up? (p12)
- **Photo essay:** Rare images from inside a South African Covid hospital (p15)
- **Books:** Your 2021 reading list (p19)
- **A city under siege:** Dispatch from Bangui, Central African Republic (p22)
- **Sport:** Can Percy Tau prove himself in the Premier League? (p31)
- **The inside story** of Africa's new free trade area (p33)

## WE'RE BACK!

It's a new year, it's a new dawn and it's a new issue of *The Continent* — the first for 2021. We missed you too! We've got plenty of great stories in this edition, and plenty more lined up for the weeks to come. So sit back, relax and let our journalists, writers, photographers and illustrators tell you everything you need to know this week about the continent we call home.

# The Week in Numbers



**The Martyrs' Memorial in Algiers commemorates the lives lost during the war of independence.**

(Photo: Bo Løvschall)

## 0

The number of apologies France will make to Algeria in relation to atrocities and crimes against humanity committed during the colonial era, the office of President Emmanuel Macron said this week. France ruled Algeria from 1830 to 1962, and hundreds of thousands of Algerians are thought to have died during the eight-year armed struggle for independence.

## 2%

The average percentage of annual wheat consumption grown domestically in Nigeria. The rest – 98% – is imported.

## 69%

The reduction in tourist arrivals to Africa last year. Tourist numbers were down globally by 72%.

## 600

The number of young Tunisian protesters – many of whom are as young as 14 and 15 years old – who were arrested in the past week. Authorities have been cracking down on the growing protest movement, which has arisen in response to growing unemployment and economic hardships caused by Covid-19 restrictions.

## 25

The total number of people in low-income countries who have received a Covid-19 vaccine jab so far, according to a report released by the World Health Organisation this week. "It is not right that younger healthier adults in rich countries are vaccinated before health workers and older people in poorer countries," said the WHO's director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

# ALSO AVAILABLE ON SIGNAL.

Many people have changed their preferred messaging platform from WhatsApp to Signal, in response to privacy concerns. If you'd prefer to receive *The Continent* via Signal, just let us know on the app.



Get your copy delivered to your phone or inbox every Saturday. And if you like what you read, forward it to your friends, family and colleagues – not indiscriminately, but only with people who might appreciate it.



## HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

**Email:** [TheContinent@mg.co.za](mailto:TheContinent@mg.co.za) with 'SUBSCRIBE' in the subject box

**WhatsApp/Signal:** Save +27 73 805 6068 on your phone, and send us a message saying 'NEWS'

Share real news.

**The Continent**  
with Mail & Guardian

# Zimbabwe

## The closed border isn't stopping anyone

**Kudzai Mashininga**

**B**eitbridge is eerily quiet. This is usually southern Africa's busiest border post, but authorities in South Africa and Zimbabwe have shut the land border in an effort to stem rising Covid-19 infections in both countries. Only cargo trucks are allowed through.

The current situation is in stark contrast to last month's chaotic scenes. Over the festive season, the queues of people and vehicles waiting to cross were kilometres-long, with many Zimbabweans returning home in December from their jobs in South Africa.

But just because the border is now closed does not mean that people are staying put. With people desperate to return to their homes or employment, there has been a surge in illegal border crossings.

"Border jumping is still rife through the border and other illegal crossing



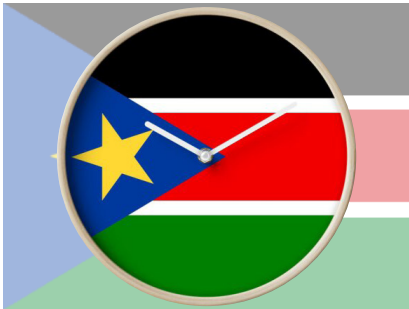
**Risky business: A South African soldier rounds up Zimbabwean nationals suspected of crossing the border illegally.** (Photo: Phill Magakoe/AFP)

points dotted along the Limpopo River," said Jabulani Makhado, a spokesperson for the Beitbridge Progressive Residents and Ratepayers Association. "Authorities on both sides have been trying to stop it but it is difficult. Corrupt elements will always be there and allow people to cross between the two countries for a fee."

That fee ranges from \$50 to \$100.

Smugglers use boats, dug-out canoes and inflated truck and tractor tubes to get people across the Limpopo River, braving the ever-present threat of crocodile attacks as they do so. Another danger comes from Covid-19: people smugglers are not asking for negative Covid tests, raising the risk of cross-border infections — which will potentially keep the official border post closed for even longer. ■

# South Sudan



## Government steps back in time

David Mono Danga in Juba

**A**s of the 1st of February, the sun will rise a little earlier in South Sudan. The government resolved this week to set the nation's clocks back by an hour after realising that it was in the wrong time zone for its location.

"We are in the 30th longitude and as such we are supposed to be two hours ahead of the Greenwich Mean Time," said information minister Michael Makuei.

Currently, South Sudan is three hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, putting it in the East Africa Time zone — the same as neighbours Uganda and Kenya.

This time zone was inherited

from Sudan following South Sudan's independence in 2011.

But Khartoum made the change to GMT +2 in 2017, and now Juba is following suit. This means it will soon be in the Central African Time zone, along with Sudan, Chad, Egypt, South Africa and others.

Some civil society activists have raised concerns about the decision, saying that it risks disrupting trade relations with Kenya and Uganda. But it may also open up new opportunities, suggested Edmund Yakani, the executive director of the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization.

"Partly some trade interests with countries like Sudan and Egypt might have contributed in influencing the government to change the timing, especially coordination of flights between Sudan and South Sudan, and Egypt to South Sudan," Yakani told *The Continent*.

**"We are supposed to be two hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time"**

Yakani said that he does not expect the new time zone to make government officials any more punctual. "This change of timing will never make any difference until the political elites change their attitudes across the country," he said. ■

# Uganda

## ‘I have never seen this much teargas in an election’

Andrew Arinaitwe in Kampala

‘**S**orry transaction cancelled.’ Last Thursday, as Ugandans voted in the much-anticipated presidential election, this message was displayed at ATMs all over Uganda. The government shut down the internet on the morning of the vote, and it did not return for most citizens until the following Monday. This meant that social media – where the government has been subjected to fierce criticism – was inaccessible, as were news sites and mobile money services.

The election pitted incumbent Yoweri Museveni, who has been in office since 1986, against Kyagulanyi Ssentamu Robert, aka Bobi Wine, the pop-star-turned-politician who at 38 is exactly half the president’s age.

The build-up to the vote had been characterised by violence and intimidation, with the ruling National Resistance Movement repeatedly accused of abusing its power to suppress opposition. In the most serious incident,



**Under siege: Ugandan soldiers patrol near the street leading to the house of Bobi Wine, in Magere, Kampala, on Sunday.** (Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP)

at least 54 people were killed in mid-November as security forces broke up protests in support of Wine. The candidate himself was arrested several times during the campaigning period.

On voting day itself, there was a strong military presence in Kampala and surrounds. A Russian-made Mil Mi-24 helicopter gunship circled above the capital city, while armoured personnel

carriers known as Nyokas patrolled the streets. One soldier, who asked not to be named, told *The Continent* that Museveni was securing his future; and that “helicopters are more effective and efficient” at doing so.

“Ebintu sibyangu (Things are not easy),” said Kagimu Mukasa Ishaak, a voter in his 80s. Ishaak has been voting since independence in 1962, and knows Museveni personally from his days working at Entebbe International Airport. He woke up early to avoid queues at the Kabowa Church polling station. “In all my years of voting since 1962, I have never seen this much teargas in an election process,” he said.

## “Ebintu sibyangu [Things are not easy]”

Later on, when counting began, crowds surrounded Kabowa Church to watch out for any irregularities, with most displaying allegiance to Wine. Counting was slow across the country as a result of the internet shutdown, which affected some of the biometric machines used to validate voter registrations.

But as early results trickled in, loud cheers greeted every update that showed the opposition National Unity Platform doing well. These cheers turned to boos, however, when plainclothes security agents turned up at the polling station in a silver Lexus. One woman, who was recording their actions, had her phone temporarily confiscated.

Medard Lubega Ssegona, a lawyer who represents Wine, was among the civilian

observers. He told *The Continent* that he would have preferred to return home after casting his vote, but that “you cannot trust anyone”. Ssegona grew visibly upset as he tried to contact his client, Wine, but could not reach him. “The presidential opponent is in a blackout, his home is cordoned off, his phone is switched off, his television is also off,” he said. “We are in disarray, we cannot trace our own secretary general.”

Wine’s home had indeed been cordoned off, surrounded by hundreds of soldiers and policemen, with the opposition leader and his wife trapped inside. As of the time of publication, he remains in what he describes as “house arrest”. The government says it is for his own protection. Using a clandestine phone line, Wine told the news agency AFP: “We are here, we have run out of food, and nobody is allowed to come in or go out,” he said. “We have not been charged of any crime.”

Museveni, meanwhile, has hailed the “cheating-free” election as being the cleanest in Ugandan history. The final tally gave him 5,851,037 votes (58.64%), with Wine receiving 3,475,298 votes (34.83%). In Parliament, Museveni’s NRM has 316 seats, while the NUP won 61, including some of the ruling party’s former strongholds in Kampala, Luweero, Masaka, Kalungu, Wakiso and Mpigi.

But the opposition has rejected the results, and said that it has documented instances of ballot stuffing. It will be challenging the result in the Supreme Court – and hoping that this transaction will be cancelled too. ■



# Egypt



## Egypt fast-tracks \$23-billion super-railway

**T**he Egyptian government has signed a deal with German engineering firm Siemens to build the country's first-ever high-speed rail transportation system.

The first phase of the project will link the country's Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts, with 460km of track between the cities of El Alamein and Ain Sokhna.

It will pass through Egypt's new capital city, which is currently under

construction and has yet to be named.

With an initial 15 stations expected to be built within the next two years, the high-speed rail network will span 1,000km, and cost a reported \$23-billion.

High-speed railways already exist in Morocco and Kenya — although controversy continues to stalk the latter, as the exact terms of the deal made with China to build it have never been made public. ■



## An oasis in the urban desert

Roadside nurseries are more than just a place to buy plants

**Samuel Gebre**

**R**oadside nurseries are a feature of many African capital cities, from Nairobi (the ‘Green City in the Sun’) to Addis Ababa (whose name translates as ‘New Flower’) to Abidjan in Côte d’Ivoire, where I am now.

These green spaces, filled with beautiful plants, serve multiple purposes. They break up the urban sprawl. They offer optimistic millennials the chance to see if they can handle the basic responsibility of keeping a living thing alive. And they form part of local administrations’ plans to keep cities green while providing much-needed employment.

Adelin Bagui, better known as Baggy, is the proprietor of one such roadside nursery in Cocody, a sub-city in Abidjan. Local authorities allocated him and four friends a piece of land with piped water for a fee of \$1,100, and they have been running their business there for about a year. Part of the deal is that they must keep the surrounding area clean (a strategy that certainly works better than the “No Peeing Here” signs).

Baggy learnt how to take care of plants by working on someone else’s garden, along with lots of online research. Each plant, he says, has its own story. He points at an aglaonema, also known as a Chinese evergreen. “It

**Growing up:  
Adelin 'Baggy'  
Bagui would  
like to help us  
become better  
plant 'parents'.  
(Photos: Samuel  
Gebre)**



is believed to bring good luck in Japan,” he says.

Baggy’s passion for plants is obvious. He wants more people to appreciate their beauty – and to become better “parents” to their plants at home.

“There are indoor and outdoor plants, knowing where your plant should be is the first step,” Baggy says. “The second mistake people make is either not watering their plants or drowning them by overwatering. The only way to know how to do it right is by doing simple research online.”

There are no walls or fences to protect Baggy’s plants, which leaves them vulnerable. “Our plants get stolen often and it is usually by people we know trying to make some money without putting in the effort,” he says. But this doesn’t seem to faze him — perhaps because, unlike most of this big city’s residents, he is always surrounded by the freshness and calmness of nature.

“Even outside on a hot sunny day, see how cool and fresh it feels right here,” he says, as we stand under a tree, surrounded by rows of tiny plants. “If you were standing right by the road under the sun, you would be sweating.”

If you haven’t already, go get yourself a plant, a pot and get your hands dirty. And if you are not ready for such weighty responsibilities, then Baggy suggests a cactus or aloe vera, as they more or less take care of themselves. ■

# Vaccine rollout begins in Egypt and the Seychelles

**Despite being the first countries in Africa to roll out a vaccine, there are question marks over the efficacy of the vaccine they are using**

**Laura López González**

**P**resident Wavel Ramkalawan of the Seychelles has become Africa's first head of state to receive a Covid-19 vaccine.

Ramkalawan rolled up his sleeve for the injection of the Sinopharm vaccine in front of the local press last week, kicking off a national immunisation campaign initially aimed at healthcare workers.

The move comes after the United Arab Emirates donated 50 000 doses of Chinese manufacturer Sinopharm's vaccine to the island nation. The UAE has been an early adopter of the Sinopharm jab alongside China, Serbia and Egypt.

Egypt's rollout begins on Sunday, with healthcare workers first in line. Morocco has also ordered jabs from Sinopharm and

will begin distribution at the end of the month.

Not everyone has embraced this particular vaccine so enthusiastically, however.

Concerns about the lack of peer-reviewed vaccine data for Sinopharm, along with other Chinese and Russian jabs, may prevent other African countries from following Egypt and the Seychelles' lead.

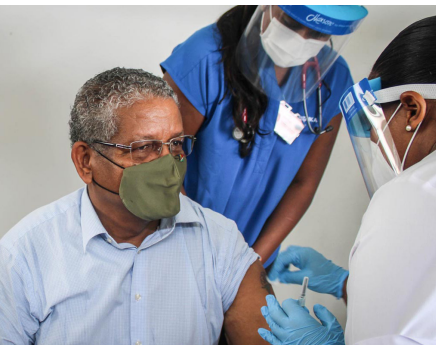
Chinese manufacturers are working on several Covid-19 vaccines, including jabs by the firms Sinovac and Sinopharm. But data on exactly how effective these vaccines are has been difficult to access and, at times, contradictory.

For instance, Sinopharm announced in late December that its vaccine was 79% effective at preventing Covid-19 disease. At this rate, Sinopharm was less effective than Pfizer or Moderna jabs but possibly outperformed AstraZeneca's Covid-19 vaccine.

Research published in *The Lancet* medical journal showed the AstraZeneca jab was between 62 to 90% effective. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are about 95% effective in preventing Covid-19 disease, according to studies published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Seychelles is also expected to receive 100 000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine by the end of January.

But the efficacy rate of 70% that Sinopharm announced publicly in December was almost 10 percentage points lower than the efficacy rate for the



**Jabbed: Seychelles' President Wavel Ramkalawan receives the first dose of the Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine at a hospital in Victoria on January 10.**  
(Photo: Rassin Vannier/AFP)

jab the UAE announced just weeks earlier.

When news agency Reuters asked if Sinopharm could explain the varying results, a spokesperson for the company declined to comment. Similar data discrepancies have also appeared with Sinovac's CoronaVac vaccine.

Meanwhile, Russian scientists from the Gamaleya National Center of Epidemiology and Microbiology announced in November that their Sputnik vaccine was 92% effective in preventing Covid-19 disease. Some 25 doses of this vaccine have been administered in Guinea, including to President Alpha Condé, but it has yet to be rolled out more broadly.

Despite promises by Gamaleya then, neither it — nor Sinopharm and Sinotec — have published peer-reviewed findings from late-stage Covid-19 vaccine trials. Early, published results from Sputnik trials drew sharp criticism from a

consortium of international scientists who, writing in *The Lancet*, alleged there might be discrepancies in the data. Russian researchers denied this and offered to share data with the group.

Still, concerns around missing data for some or all of these vaccines have been cited by health departments or regulators in both South Africa and Brazil.

Until more published data is available from large, late-stage clinical trials on Chinese and Russian vaccines, many more regulators are likely to be unwilling to register the jabs for use in their countries. It may also make it more difficult for the African Union to include these vaccines in its pooled procurement efforts.

South African president and African Union chairperson Cyril Ramaphosa has suggested that China will eventually be part of the AU's efforts to supplement vaccines obtained through the WHO's Covax facility. Covax aims to pool countries' purchasing power to secure affordable vaccines for all participating countries. African countries are likely to see their first deliveries of vaccines from Covax in March, WHO regional director for Africa Matshidiso Moeti told journalists late last week.

Shortly before Moeti's announcement, the AU announced it had secured 270-million doses of the Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines for the continent. At least 50-million of these are expected to become available by June 2021.

Johnson & Johnson is expected to release its findings from late-stage clinical trials in the coming days. ■

# Most African countries should get their first vaccine for free

Laura López González

**T**he majority of African countries could get enough Covid-19 vaccine doses to cover at least 20% of their populations for free — marking a major shift in international policy.

Countries in the Global North secured billions of doses in 2020, long before any Covid-19 jab had even been shown to work. To ensure poorer countries had a chance of accessing vaccines, the international vaccine public-private partnership Gavi spearheaded the creation of the Covax initiative. The programme is designed to pool participating countries' purchasing power to negotiate vaccine stocks at better prices, especially the world's poorest nations.

Covax initially promised that vaccines would be free for poor countries, but in September Gavi's board introduced required co-payments of up to US\$2 per dose for poor countries. Exemptions to the policy would be on a case-by-case basis.

Now, Covax has committed to providing initial doses for free if funding pans out.

Late Thursday, the World Health Organisation — a Covax partner — announced that all 54 countries on the continent have expressed interest in joining Covax; and, notably, that lower and middle-income countries will access Covax vaccines at no cost.

Speaking to *The Continent*, a Gavi spokesperson confirmed that the organisation is fundraising to provide 1.3-billion vaccine doses free to poor countries. The deal would apply to all African countries except for eight upper-middle-income nations that must pay for Covax jabs in full: Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Libya, Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles and South Africa.

“These fully subsidised donor-funded doses will jumpstart new Covid-19 vaccine introductions in ... eligible economies, allowing early doses to be reserved to ensure that lower-income countries are not left behind,” Gavi told *The Continent*.

“Whilst mindful of uncertainties on vaccine pricing, resource availability and manufacturing supply, Gavi aspires to cover at least 20% of the population of eligible economies with these donor-funded doses – thereby making a very real impact towards stopping the spread of the pandemic by end 2021.”

Once donor funding for Covid-19 vaccines doses is exhausted, poor countries will have the chance to purchase further quantities at a subsidised price.

So far, Covax has secured two-billion vaccine doses and raised \$6-billion in donor funding.

“We are not yet where we want to be, but I'm happy to say we are on track,” a Gavi spokesperson told journalists on Thursday. ■

## PHOTO ESSAY

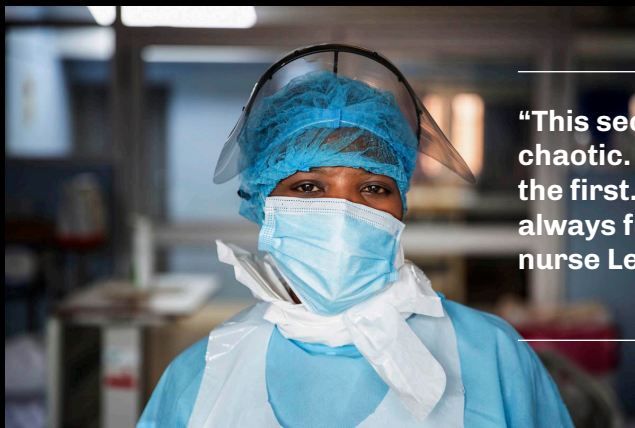
# Inside a Covid ward

The Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism and photographer **James Oatway** visited the George Mukhari academic hospital to capture rare images of the second-wave realities experienced by doctors and nurses. The hospital is in Tshwane, the administrative district which also includes South Africa's capital Pretoria. It is currently a Covid-19 hot spot.



A patient in an isolation chamber is given oxygen to help him to breathe. Scientists say the new Covid-19 variant identified in South Africa – called 501V.2 – appears to be about

50% more transmissible than the previous form of the virus. This is why there have been so many more infections during the second wave of the pandemic.



---

**“This second wave is chaotic. It’s worse than the first. Our wards are always full.” — Staff nurse Lenah Lefifi**

---



The burns unit at George Mukhari has been converted to a Covid-19 intensive care unit. It’s practical because most of the rooms are isolated behind glass. In one of the rooms, two doctors, Siboniso Dlamini

and Hannah Bussio, are intubating a patient to put him on a ventilator. Sisters Ipeleng Nonyane and Sinah Motaung are helping. There’s a lot of beeping, and the health workers keep a close eye on the patient’s vital signs.





A patient with Covid-19 symptoms waits for treatment. The new variant spreads faster than the original virus, so there have been more hospitalisations during the second wave. But the 501V.2 variant doesn't

make people sicker; we're seeing more deaths and hospitalisations in the second wave because there are so many more cases. However, the proportion of deaths in relation to the total number of cases is not higher.

---

**The new variant spreads faster than the original virus so there have been more hospitalisations during the second wave**

---



A porter emerges from the porter room in the reception area of George Mukhari. Porters, cleaners and hospital security guards will be part of the 1.25-million health workers who the government plans to vaccinate first. The health department expects one million doses of pharmaceutical manufacturer AstraZeneca's jab to arrive in January, and another half a million doses in February. Each health worker will need two doses, so the 1.5-million doses will cover just more than half of the workers.



## The government plans to vaccinate 1.25-million health workers



A porter wheels a gurney with a body tightly wrapped in plastic and covered in a blue sheet out of the back. He will take it to the mortuary

which currently has plenty of space. The body will be placed in a special section cordoned off and marked "infectious bodies".

# The African authors writing us into 2021

While we all hope that things will settle down soon so we can get out and about again, the luxury of taking some time out and getting stuck in to a new book will never lose its charm, writes **Samira Sawlani**. Once again African writers are giving us much to look forward to.

## ***The Fortune Men* by Nadifa Mohamed**

The true story of Mahmood Mattan, a Somali sailor who was wrongfully charged with murder in Wales in the 1950s. This is a must read by a truly spectacular writer.

## ***Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir* by Akwaeke Emezi**

The first non-fiction offering from one of the greatest writers of our time, a memoir, an insight into their life, a book that promises to be as extraordinary as Emezi themselves.

## ***In the Palace of Flowers* by Victoria Princewill**

Transporting us flawlessly to another time and world, this tells the story of two Abyssinian slaves as they navigate the politics, mysteries and drama of the royal court in Iran in the 1890s.

## ***The Fugitives* by Jamal Mahjoub**

A disbanded jazz band from Khartoum, an invitation to perform in Washington and a mix of hopes, dreams, personality and politics. We can't wait for this one.



### **How I Accidentally Became a Global Stock Photo and Other Strange and Wonderful Stories by Shubnum Khan**

She stole our hearts on Twitter and now South African writer Shubnum Khan is about to bring us a collection of laugh-out-loud, heartfelt and exciting tales from her many adventures.

### **The Actual True Story of Ahmed and Zarga by Mohamedou Ould Slahi**

The highly anticipated book by this Mauritanian writer recounts the tale of camel herder Ahmed as he navigates the Sahara in search of a lost camel, encountering some things that threaten his people, and others that enrich.

### **An Unusual Grief by Yewande Omotoso**

Following the death of her estranged daughter Yinka, Mojisola moves into her apartment, and bit by bit gets to know the woman that Yinka became — and herself.

### **Chronicles of the Happiest People on Earth by Wole Soyinka**

Long awaited novel by the literary giant, it's been described as "a savagely witty whodunit and a corrosively satirical examination of corruption".

### **Lightseekers by Femi Kayode**

Three students murdered, their killers arrested, yet no motive can be found. Investigative psychologist Philip Taiwo delves into exactly what happened, and finds more than he bargained for in this gritty thriller.

### **Ace of Spades by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé**

The 21-year-old novelist landed a million-dollar book deal for this young-adult gossip girl-esque thriller that delves into institutionalised racism. At the centre are teenagers Devon and



Chiamaka who find themselves targeted by an anonymous bully threatening to ruin their futures.

**Unbury Our Dead with Song by Mükoma wa Ngũgĩ**

Described as “a love letter to African music, beauty and imagination” it chronicles Kenyan journalist John Thandi Manfredi’s journey following four musicians as he learns more about Ethiopia’s Tizita music.

**How Beautiful We Were by Imbolo Mbue**

Following the success of *Behold the Dreamers*, Mbue brings us the story of a village in Africa determined to fight back against destruction being caused by an American oil company.

**A Long Way from Douala by Max Lobe**

A timely story about Jean who goes in search of his brother who has decided to leave Cameroon and cross over to Europe — an insight into life in Cameroon through a different and much-needed perspective.

**A Man Who Is Not a Man by Thando Mgqolozana**

A circumcision gone wrong, a rite of passage unmet, told through the eyes of one Xhosa initiate who grapples with tradition, culture and what it means to be labelled “a failed man”. An oldie but a goodie.

**The Library of the Dead by TL Huchu**

A “Ghostalker”, a sinister plot with a wealth of secrets, and some Zimbabwean magic thrown in!

**Sea Loves Me by Mia Couto**

A collection of 64 short stories by the award winning Portuguese-Mozambican writer. ■



# Dispatch from a city under siege

**Rebels have surrounded Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, and cut off vital supply lines to neighbouring Cameroon. Residents are fleeing in their tens of thousands, and a desperate government has just imposed a state of emergency. Journalist **Moussa Abdoulaye** is there, and describes a situation that threatens to spiral further out of control.**

**I**t is Friday evening, and the atmosphere in Bangui is one of panic and terror.

Bangui is no stranger to soldiers on the streets, but the numbers have sharply increased. Some from the government, some from the contingent of United Nations peacekeepers, and some from the armed militias that the government has mobilised to fight on its behalf. There's also a good chance that armed rebels are inside the city already.

Supplies are running low. The city depends on the highway to Cameroon for almost all of its food. But the rebels have taken control of the road and no traffic can pass. Basic goods like fruit, vegetables, oil and sugar are getting harder to find, and prices are rising. Another month of this and the city will actually run out of food.

Many people have already fled the city, seeking safety in Cameroon (on p24, *The Continent's* Daniel Ekonde reports on the situation in Garoua-Boulai, a border town). Unicef estimates that 100,000

people across the country are currently displaced.

On Thursday evening, the government declared a state of emergency which lasts for 15 days. In theory it applies to the whole country, but in reality the government is only in control of Bangui — and even that is looking uncertain. There have even been reports of government troops in other parts of the country joining forces with the rebels.

There is a curfew from 6pm to 5am, so the streets are empty at night. Except for the soldiers.

The Central African Republic has been through a lot over the past eight years, ever since then-president Francois Bozizé was overthrown by rebels (the scenes then were all too similar to what we are witnessing today). There has been almost constant conflict since then, but things started looking slightly more stable after elections in 2016, won by the current president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra.

The present tensions began after his reelection at the end of 2020. The opposition coalition wanted to bring François Bozizé back from exile in France to stand as the opposition candidate, but the Constitutional Court said no. The judges disqualified him on the basis of failing the “good character” test, because he is wanted by Central African prosecutors on charges of murder, arrest, arbitrary detention and torture, kidnapping, and judicial and extrajudicial executions.

Somehow, Bozizé came back into the country anyway. No one is quite sure how. Instead of defending himself in court, he decided to organise an armed rebellion in the bush. Many of his fighters are from Sudan and Chad, and he has allegedly promised them citizenship and government positions if they help him seize power. He has partnered with several existing armed groups to form an armed coalition called the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), and has a large following among the Gbaya, the country’s largest ethnic group.

President Touadéra won the election, but turnout was less than a third — most people were too scared or unable to vote. But even before he began his second term, the CPC launched their rebellion.

The rebels have seized control of several other major cities in the country. In Bangassou, the country’s fifth-largest city, they were only displaced when a contingent of United Nations peacekeepers were dispatched to secure it (but not before tens of thousands of civilians had already fled). They have made several attempts already to seize

Bangui. The most serious effort was on 13 January, when around 200 rebels tried to storm the capital and were repulsed by peacekeepers. Thirty rebels and one peacekeeper from Rwanda were killed.

There are more than 12,000 United Nations peacekeepers in the country. The mission has been here since 2014. A total of seven peacekeepers have been killed around the country in the current outbreak of conflict, and mission chief Mankeur Ndiaye has made an urgent appeal for reinforcements: “Troops are currently deployed over extremely large areas and, as a result, the force only has limited response ability, and we cannot cover the entire territory because of the size of the country.”

The government is also protected by a contingent of armed men from the Wagner Group, a Russian mercenary outfit. Their official role is murky, but they always seem to be around when government troops go to battle.

It is hard to predict what will happen next. The government does not have the firepower to win this war militarily. It will have to negotiate. And the rebels have made their position clear: they want to scrap the results of the election, be part of a transitional government, initiate a national dialogue and create a new constitution leading to new elections.

But the Central African Republic has spent the last few years going through this exact process. We’ve already had an interim government, a new constitution, a national dialogue and elections.

Few Central Africans want to do it all over again. ■

# Refugees flee to Cameroonian border town

Daniel Ekonde in Garoua-Boulai

Libanga Yawe Nissi is one of an estimated 4,400 Central Africans who escaped their country to the small Cameroonian border town of Garoua-Boulai, in the thick of post-election violence.

“Rebels came at night in Bouar and started shooting everywhere, so I ran away with my husband, leaving behind my children and parents. I don’t know where they are because they ran too,” the 27-year-old Nissi told *The Continent*.

She is now among many queuing to get shelter in nearby Gado, the largest refugee camp for Central Africans in Cameroon, which has been set up when civil war broke out in 2012.

The United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR, has erected 300 new tents to cope with the influx. For Nissi, who worked in a hotel in Bouar, it will be a huge adjustment. “Now we are just living anyhow,” she said.

Bouar, 153km from the Cameroonian border, is one of the towns that was attacked and ransacked by the rebel group led by former president François Bozizé. It is on the vital road that links the capital Bangui to Cameroon. The road has been blockaded by the rebels.



**Sanctuary: Residents of Garoua-Boulai, a small Cameroonian town on the border with the Central African Republic, are providing shelter to refugees.** (Photo: Daniel Ekonde)

Abba Barthelemy is a father of three children, with whom he barely escaped a road block manned by a rebel group.

“They blocked the road and prevented us from going to the farm in order to feed our families, so after seven days on the road I found my way to Cameroon,” he said.

For now, the refugees — 60% of whom are children, according to UNHCR, and 35% are women — have found a safe haven in Garoua-Boulai. “We have been living with Central Africans for a long time now. They are part of us now,” said Abdoul Mohamed, a 20-year-old commercial motorbike rider and a resident of the town.

An estimated 60,000 Central Africans have fled the country into neighbouring Cameroon and Democratic Republic of Congo over the past few weeks. ■





## How did I do?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we will send you the answers immediately.

# SO, YOU THINK YOU'RE A REAL PAN-AFRICAN?

Take this quiz to find out how much you really know about our continent

**0-4**

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

**5-8**

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

**9-12**

"I'm the Vitruvian wo/man of the African renaissance"

1. Where is the 2021 CAF Africa Cup of Nations championship being held?
2. Which African leader has been in power since 1986?
3. Which Nigerian artist's song was featured in the United States's inauguration playlist this week?
4. In which country would one visit the Jemaa el-Fna square? (Bonus point for the city; pictured)
5. Which French West Indian philosopher was a member of the Algerian National Liberation Front?
6. Chokwe and Kikongo are national languages of which country?
7. True or false: Malawi's currency is the kwanza.
8. What was the name of the failed proposed road that would stretch the length of Africa?
9. What flightless bird is native to Africa?
10. Which pan-ethnic term generally refers to people from Eritrea and Ethiopia?
11. What is Lesotho's national symbol?
12. The continent's largest volcano is the Nyamuragira. Where is it located?

# Talkin' about a resolution

Samira Sawlani

We made it. It's 2021. A new year, a new me, a new you – and yes, a new raft of challenges. But if 2020 showed us anything, it's how to endure. We are resolute.

Mostly. We are mostly resolute. It depends? We're still in a pandemic after all. The economy has switched itself into standby mode. It's rough out there. Sticking to resolutions is a big ask. But fear not! Because our favourite leaders are ready to step into the gap to “help” enforce not just our own resolutions, but theirs too.

## Detox and anti-social distancing

Mostly theirs. For example, ahead of Uganda's January 14 elections, authorities decided to help people reduce their screen time by switching off the entire internet, ensuring that everyone got a chance to unglue their noses from their phones.

How thoughtful. Sure, it also meant that journalists, observers and the opposition were unable to report what was going on during the election, and businesses and health services were crippled and ordinary people couldn't contact loved ones. But hey, a free digital detox is nothing to sniff at: celebrities pay a fortune for that luxury in rehab.

Acutely aware of the continuing

dangers of the pandemic, Uganda also instituted a unique strategy of pinpoint-precision micro-lockdowns, starting with presidential candidate Bobi Wine and his wife Barbie Kyagulanyi. Their residence is surrounded by security officers – even after the elections – presumably there to keep the outside world and all its counter-revolutionary germs from getting in.

For an update on the latest new year's diet fad, we now cross live to Zimbabwe's first lady Auxillia Mnangagwa who, as “Mother of the Nation” is currently leading the women of the country in three days of fasting and prayer to fortify the nation's soul against Covid-19 and for “divine intervention” to save the country.

Hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans are joining her saintly diet/fast – though perhaps not by choice. Last month the World Food Programme called for urgent funds to support over four million Zimbabweans who are food insecure, adding that this could rise to 6.9-million people pushed into hunger by March.

Meanwhile it seems authorities in Zimbabwe have their own resolution they're trying to stick to, namely to be better at keeping journalist Hopewell Chin'ono in jail. For some reason the



**No safety at home: Bobi Wine and his family while under house arrest.**

(Photo: Bobi Wine/Twitter)

courts kept letting him go last year. They are clearly determined to do better in 2021 and have already arrested him at least once this year already on charges related to “publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state”.

### **Work, work, work**

A new year provides opportunity for those of us fortunate enough to enjoy meaningful employment to reflect on the paths we have chosen.

Sadly, ruminating on career options is not a luxury many Tunisians can enjoy. Frustrated with high rates of unemployment and economic hardship, thousands have stepped out into the streets, calling on the state to move the levers of the economy to open up opportunities for work and better standards of living, and also to release hundreds of protesters who have been arrested over the past few days.

Elsewhere, employment offers different challenges. President Faustin-Archange

Touadéra of the Central African Republic must be breathing a sigh of relief after the country’s Constitutional Court upheld his December 27 election victory.

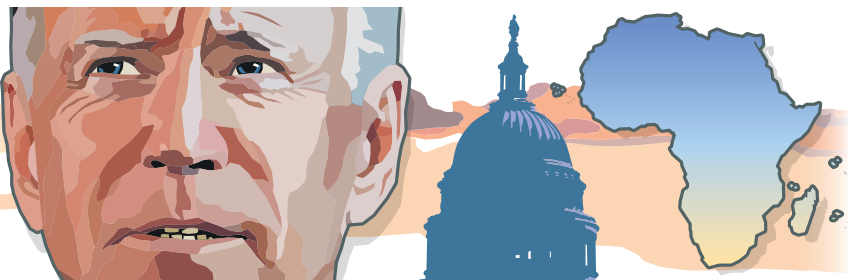
The opposition there have rejected the decision, however, and refuse to recognise him as president. Awkward. And dangerous. The political situation is not so much tense as it is violent and deadly, and as many as 60,000 refugees have fled the country.

Violence and insecurity have uprooted hundreds of thousands of people in Mozambique’s Cabo Delgado region, too. The United Nations has described the situation there as a “complex emergency” in which more than 565,000 have fled their homes, and its agencies are struggling to reach families dependent on their aid.

So, while our leaders try to impose their new year’s resolutions on us, let’s hope that this year they have resolved to choose peace, if only because they have taken that choice out of everyone else’s hands. ■

# It's time for a US-Africa policy reset

**A lack of nuanced, in-depth analysis has in the past led to policy blunders – with disastrous consequences. New US President Joe Biden can change this.**



**Amini Kajunju & Mohamed Keita**

**S**ince American agricultural commodities' demand for slave labour brought the United States and Africa together four centuries ago, the US-Africa relationship has been mainly defined by economics and the shifting strategic value of the continent to America.

As President Joe Biden takes office, it is time to consider how to elevate US-Africa relations through policies that can bring more prosperity to ordinary Africans and Americans.

The Biden campaign's stated objectives for Africa policy were vague and lofty: promoting and expanding democracy, diplomatic relations, diversity and

inclusion and youth leadership development. But the new administration would do better to start by addressing the problematic aspects of how the US engages with Africa.

First, a lack of nuanced, in-depth analysis can lead to policy blunders, with disastrous consequences. Often, US policy ignores local complexities, leading to protagonists being cast in simplistic terms. Although perhaps serving US interests in the short run, this approach has led to lasting and devastating consequences (in Libya, Rwanda, DRC and Somalia, to cite a few).

Second, most US administrations tend to leave African policy in the hands of the same small number of bureaucrats, who recycle the same old thinking about

the continent. Fresh faces would bring greater diversity in perspectives, more competition of ideas and innovation.

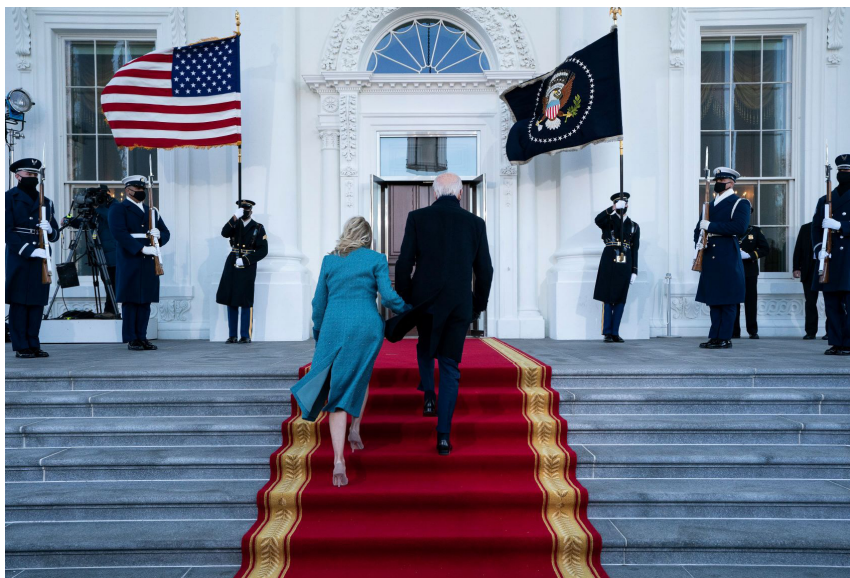
Third, the US government claims it wants to increase private sector engagement with Africa. However, these business engagements typically look more like aid. We know that, in addition to human capital development, no country has increased its wealth without a large and thriving private sector. Yet, whenever the US arrives in Africa to perform a patchwork of well-intentioned activities, they do not eradicate poverty but instead increase dependency on aid.

Frankly, it has never mattered who is in charge in Washington DC; the commitment of African leaders to serve

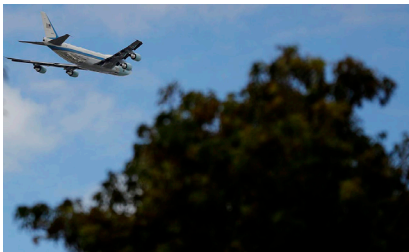
their citizens' interests is more pertinent. In turn, it is up to Africans to demand accountability from their leaders and take charge of their development.

Consequently, the US can be a partner to Africans already creating meaningful change. The Biden administration should consider a number of policy options to address critical areas of mutual interest:

- In the wake of Covid-19, encourage African governments to prioritise budgetary spending in public health; reverse President Trump's Global Gag rule which imposes anti-abortion rules on family planning programmes; forge a global coalition on pandemics that would leverage African countries' expertise with HIV, Cholera and Ebola – for instance



**New dawn: President Joe Biden and first lady Dr Jill Biden arrive at the White House on Wednesday.** (Photo: Alex Brandon-Pool/Getty Images/AFP)



**Last call: Air Force One descends into Palm Beach International Airport at the end of Donald Trump's final flight as US president.** (Photo: Michael Reaves/Getty Images/AFP)

by highlighting the critical use of community health workers.

- Improve existing trade agreements such as African Growth and Opportunity Act, negotiate free trade agreements and support the ratification and implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement.

- Strengthen existing educational exchange programmes such as the Mandela Washington Fellowship and support African higher education institutions through accreditations and technical assistance. Encourage partnerships between US universities and their African counterparts by funding the University Partnership Initiative (UPI) in the US state department.

- In compliance with the Leahy Law, suspend security assistance to repressive governments that commit human rights violations; use the global Magnitsky Act to impose sanctions on human rights abusers; lift the Trump administration's sanctions against International Criminal Court officials.

- Reinstate the "Publish What You Pay" rules repealed by the Trump administration in 2017, which required US oil, gas and mining companies to disclose payments for rights of exploration and extraction of natural resources; and collaborate with African governments to curb illicit financial flows and recover stolen assets.

- Demilitarise US security co-operation with Africa, as the past two decades have proven that military action alone cannot end terrorism and extremism. Instead, re-pivot resources that promote democratic governance across the continent, applying the same standards to all governments.

- Increase investment in agricultural programmes to adapt to climate change; support US international agencies' monitoring of corporate and governmental compliance with environment protection agreements.

- Restore the Obama-era target number for refugee resettlement in the US and support US-based refugee resettlement agencies. ■

*Amini Kajuju is the executive director of the International University of Grand-Bassam Foundation and the former president and chief executive of the Africa-America Institute. Mohamed Keita is an African affairs analyst and writer. This article was published in collaboration with the University of the Witwatersrand's African Centre for the Study of the United States.*





## The fairytale of Percy Tau

Through much hard work and a bit of good fortune, the South African attacker has converted a potential horror story into magic

**Luke Feltham**

**I**t wasn't long after arriving in England that Percy Tau had to cough up the tax all footballers must pay to live out their dreams: dealing with the media.

Speaking to Brighton & Hove Albion's official channel, he was asked the lessons he had learned while playing on a Belgian football pitch for two and a half years.

"Personality," he said through his endearing, bashful, smile. "Simple as that."

Taken aback by not receiving a regular platitude, the interviewer pressed him on what personality his new fans may see.

"Being confident, believing in the talent that God gave me," came the response. "And also working in and

around the team – most teams that I've been to had a personality, a way into how they play, and a way into how they behave."

It's understandable that Tau might count mental attributes as his key take-away from his three loan spells in the country. As successful as it has been, his time in Europe has also been darkened by uncertainty, so often the bane of a footballing career.

Until now he has had to dribble on an uncertain path, keeping his head down in the hope that factors out of his control play out in ways that help, not hinder.

### Knuckling down

In South Africa, and perhaps across the

continent, it will inevitably be his role as a flag bearer in the English Premier League that will capture the most attention.

But it is his fightback from the brink of remoteness that provides the far more intriguing narrative. He is an exemplar of bucking the system and succeeding regardless – an inspiration, certainly, but even now still an outlier.

It threatened to be very different, of course. Following a stellar 2017/2018 season in South Africa's Premier Soccer League, in which he reduced the player of the year vote to a formality, Tau earned a ticket to England's South Coast to play for a team in the world's most-watched league, with Brighton paying £2.8-million for the privilege of putting him on the roster.

The problem was that it was immediately clear he would not be slipping into a blue-and-white shirt thanks to issues with securing a work permit.

And so Tau went on loan to Royale Union Saint-Gilloise in Belgium's second division. For a player who had sparkled in front of packed, mesmerised stadiums, it felt criminal to exile him to the lower echelon of mediocre Flemish football.

It was made all the more conspicuous because Brighton's owner had recently acquired Union, too, and was evidently shuffling around his assets at will.

To his immense credit, Tau knuckled down and got to work; first in his stodgy initial assignment and later in his well-earned moves to Club Brugge and Anderlecht.

The latter two took him far closer to the

level we all believe he should be playing at and even onto the master stage that is the Champions League.

And, then, Brexit.

What has become a bureaucratic nightmare for most in Europe became instead an open door for one diminutive South African.

Brighton had had the foresight to predict that the eventuality would erode the barriers to Tau's work permit and inserted a recall option into his latest loan agreement. They exercised that option at the first available opportunity.

After a cameo off the FA Cup bench, Tau was trusted from the start in an arduous visit to possession-hoarding Manchester City. There's arguably no game more frustrating for an opposition forward, but Tau still managed to produce a couple of his trademark feint-and-burst runs that news channels back home could play on repeat.

It's unclear what role manager Graham Potter envisions for his re-recruit, but almost certainly he will dish out further chances. Entering into his prime and with a new club desperate for a saviour (with just two league wins all season), there is every chance the 26-year-old will become a cult figure at Brighton.

He's the type of player an English crowd adores: a hardworking introvert whose humble nature belies his audacious skill on the pitch.

Amid the potential adulation, which will also only continue back home, is a success story; one that must inspire clubs to look differently at their expansive rosters of talent. ■



# Africa's make-or-break moment

**The African Continental Free Trade Area could transform the continent's economic prospects, explains one of the architects of the deal. But the clock is ticking.**

**Simon Allison**

**I**n September 2012, Carlos Lopes flew to Johannesburg to meet with Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the veteran South African cabinet minister who was about to start her new job in Addis Ababa as chair of the African Union Commission. Lopes, an economist from Guinea-Bissau, was also based in Addis – he had just been appointed director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

At the time, the African Union was divided and demoralised, at perhaps its lowest ebb since its founding in 2002. South Africa's aggressive push to install Dlamini-Zuma in the top job had exacerbated internal tensions. To prove that she was not just a political appointee, there to do South Africa's bidding, Dlamini-Zuma needed a win – and Lopes had a suggestion.

“She asked me what was the most important thing she could achieve. I told her, in my book, it's the continental free trade area,” Lopes, now an honorary



(Photo: Mahmud Turkia/AFP/Getty Images)

professor at the University of Cape Town, told *The Continent* in an interview.

The dream of an African continent-wide free trade area is decades old. It was mentioned in the Organisation of African Unity's Lagos Plan of Action in 1980, and again in the 1991 Abuja Declaration, along with plans to create a continental currency and reserve bank. But, political grandstanding aside, there was little effort to turn that dream into a reality.

That changed under Dlamini-Zuma, who made the African Continental Free Trade Area the foundation of



**Diplomatic push: Carlos Lopes (left) and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (right) campaigned strongly for the creation of the continental free trade area**

Agenda 2063, a flagship 50-year strategy to transform Africa's fortunes. One detail that illustrates the scale of this commitment: In the five years preceding Dlamini-Zuma's appointment, there was just one ministerial meeting dedicated to the subject of a free trade area. In the five years subsequent to it, there were 10.

In this she was supported by Lopes, whose team provided much of the technical support; and Donald Kaberuka, the then-head of the African Development Bank. Within the African Union, the process was driven by Mahamadou Issoufou, the president of Niger, who enthusiastically embraced his role as "champion" of the idea; trade commissioner Fatima Acyl; and trade

director Treasure Maphanga.

**In the five years preceding Dlamini-Zuma's appointment there was one ministerial meeting dedicated to the subject of a free trade area. In the five years subsequent to it, there were 10**

In 2018 – after many hours of torturous negotiations on cross-border tariffs, rules of origin, customs procedures, legal redress mechanisms and regulatory harmonisation — the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement was signed

by heads of state at a special ceremony in Rwanda. By then, Dlamini-Zuma's term was over and her successor, Moussa Faki Mahamat, oversaw the proceedings.

There would be late drama: at the very last minute — apparently he had already begun his journey to Kigali before turning around — Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari decided not to commit Africa's largest economy to the deal, in the face of stiff resistance from trade unions. One of his predecessors, President Olusegun Obasanjo, was not impressed, telling the *Mail & Guardian* at the time that anyone who did not support the deal was “criminal”.

Eventually Nigeria was persuaded to sign on the dotted line, joining with 54 of the 55 countries recognised by the African Union (Eritrea, a historically closed economy, is the only holdout), and the agreement entered into force on the first day of this year. Countries were persuaded by the sheer scale of the economic opportunities on offer: if successful, the single market of 1.3-billion people would be one of the world's biggest; and could boost continental income by \$450-billion, according to the World Bank.

Even more significantly, the removal of tariffs within Africa is projected to sharply increase trade between African countries, which currently hovers at less than 15% of the continent's total trade.

On the first day of this year — just hours after the United Kingdom exited the European Union — trading officially began under the terms of the free trade deal. In theory, at least: There are still several bureaucratic and administrative

hurdles to overcome before businesses and countries start seeing any real benefits (there is plenty of legislative alignment that still needs to happen, and some domestic financial institutions need to change their mandates).

Lopes expects that it will be another two to three years before countries and businesses really start to see any real benefits. And then the continent will only have a couple of decades in which to really take advantage of the deal. “It's a window of 20 years max, maybe less. By that time we are going to be much more dependent on what kind of agreements we do on services and intellectual property than what we do on goods.”

## **The removal of tariffs is projected to sharply increase trade between African countries**

But those 20 years could be — should be — transformational for Africa's economic prospects.

“For me this is the most important regional integration project ever,” said Lopes. “There is a lot of talk that one can find in literature about regional integration, but this is the one that really touches reality and can transform the fortunes of the continent. At its core it's a project to take Africa out of commodities dependency. And commodities dependency is the colonial model. So if we succeed in having a different economic structure, that's when we really get into the crux of the matter.” ■



## The Big Picture

**What's the catch:** Fish, mainly tuna, constitute 85% of Cape Verde's exports but make up only 10% of its primary economic sector. And small-scale fishers' incomes are decreasing. The government has approached the Fisheries Transparency Initiative to ensure that fishing will 'contribute to trade and the income, employment and nutrition of our people, while maintaining marine biodiversity for generations'. (Photo: John Wessels/AFP)

*The Continent is produced with the Mail & Guardian, Africa's leading independent newspaper, and upholds the M&G's strict editorial standards. It is published by the Adamela Trust, a not-for-profit organisation founded by M&G journalists that is dedicated to fostering quality journalism. For queries and complaints, or to make a donation, please contact [TheContinent@mg.co.za](mailto:TheContinent@mg.co.za).*