African journalism. 25 NOVEMBER 2023 | ISSUE 143

with Mail&Guardian

The Continent



Aboard the ship that fixes our internet

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi



Cover: When we publish this newspaper, we send it to you via the internet (not subscribed yet? Subscribe via WhatsApp here!). In practice, this means that all the information in this newspaper is converted into light; and that light travels across the world along a network of gossamer-thin fibre-optic cables, many of which are buried under the sea. Sometimes those cables break. When they do, there is no quick fix. A decades-old ship, packed with high-tech equipment, must traipse around Africa to make physical repairs. This week, *The Continent* travels on board that ship (p11).

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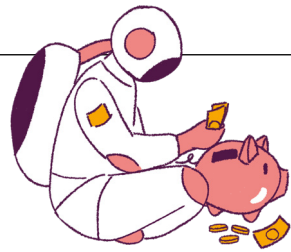

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GUINEA

'Tis the season for treason

Former Guinean president Alpha Condé is being investigated for alleged treason in addition to corruption, murder, torture, kidnapping and rape. Condé, who now lives in Türkiye, was the country's first democratically elected president. In 2021, he tried to extend his presidency to a third term. After violent repression of the protests against his bid, Condé was overthrown by a military unit led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya. Another former president, Moussa Dadis Camar, is also on trial, accused of a massacre of opposition supporters. He recently tried to escape prison but was quickly recaptured.

BURKINA FASO

Junta seeks golden air of refinement

On Thursday, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the leader of the military junta ruling Burkina Faso, launched construction of the country's first gold refinery in the capital Ouagadougou. Burkina Faso is the fourth-largest gold producer in Africa. Traoré said that without a local refinery, some of that gold is exported illegally to fund terrorism. The refinery, expected to start production in a year, is a partnership between Burkina Faso's gems agency and Malian mining company Marena Gold.



Bewildering: The Netherlands is seeing a sharp tilt to the right thanks to Geert Wilders's growing support. Photo: Robin Utrecht/ANP/AFP

NETHERLANDS

Far right getting baked in Dutch oven

Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician often described as Holland's Donald Trump, might become the country's next prime minister. His 'Party for Freedom' won 37 of the 105 seats in parliament, making it the biggest party in government. This means that Wilders is in pole position to form a coalition government, if he can find enough partners to do so. The foundation of Wilders' career was built on extreme Islamophobia – he wants to ban mosques, and has described Moroccans as "scum" – and there are plenty of Dutch people who appear to agree with him.

CLIMATE

Rich countries keep burning the planet

The world is nowhere near delivering on pledges to reduce carbon emissions, according to the new United Nations "Emissions Gap" report. This is largely the fault of the G20, a grouping of wealthy nations, which are collectively responsible for about 80% of emissions. This year is set to become the hottest year on record. "Humanity is breaking all the wrong records," said the UN Environment Programme. In more bad news for the environment, negotiations to reduce plastic pollution have collapsed in Nairobi, with scientists blaming oil-producing countries for sabotaging consensus.



Christmas spirit: Dancers ready themselves for the Takoradi Christmas Carnival in Ghana. Photo: Just Art

GHANA

Have yourself a visa-free Christmas

Visitors to Ghana between 1 December 2023 and 15 January 2023 will get a free 46-day visa on arrival regardless of the passport they hold, the transport ministry says. This is part of Ghana's efforts to encourage people of African descent in the diaspora to visit and reconnect with the history of their ancestors, many of whom were sold into slavery via its coast. Benin, The Gambia, Seychelles and Rwanda already allow visa-free entry to African passport holders, with Kenya pledging to do the same by the year's end.



Braking point: Israeli troops drive past damaged buildings during a military operation in the northern Gaza Strip. Photo: Ahikam Seri/AFP

GAZA

A very brief lull in death, destruction and war crimes

A four-day pause in the Israel-Hamas war started on Friday. In talks mediated by Qatar, both sides agreed to exchange prisoners and allow aid to enter Gaza. Israel will release 150 Palestinian prisoners and Hamas will free 50 hostages. Over 14,000 people, including 53 media workers, have been killed in Gaza by Israeli air and ground attacks, which the African Union warned may lead to "a genocide of unprecedented proportions". Some 1,200 people died in the 7 October attack by Hamas which sparked the latest escalation.

HONDURAS

Thwarted colonisers seek legal revenge

A US company is suing Honduras for $11-billion (about 66% of the South American country's annual budget). The company, Honduras Próspera, wanted to build a private city on Roatán island. But President Xiomara Castro scrapped a law that would have allowed foreign investors to create "special economic zones" with their own courts, security and regulations (aka "colonialism"). The company is pursuing legal action via the World Bank's secretive investor-state dispute settlement mechanism – which has itself been described as a vestige of colonialism.

KENYA

The system failed, and a child paid a grievous price

Terry Ray Krieger, a 68-year-old American man, was arrested and charged this week with sexually assaulting a three-year-old in Nairobi. This is not his first offence: in 2014, he was sentenced to 50 years in jail for raping Kenyan children and sharing images of child sexual abuse online. He was released after just eight years, under unclear circumstances. Krieger was convicted of similar crimes in the US in 1992 and jailed for three years. He has been denied bail.

NIGER

Military junta suddenly believes in the rule of law

When Niger's president was unseated in a coup earlier this year, the regional bloc Ecowas imposed stiff economic sanctions. This had a devastating impact on the economy and made it hard for coup leaders to deliver on the grand promises they made as they seized power. Now, the junta has approached a regional court in Nigeria to demand sanctions be lifted. The same court is also hearing a case from the deposed president Mohamed Bazoum, who is asking to be released from house arrest and returned to power.



Sign of the times: Niger's junta enjoyed popular support after its coup this year, but regional sanctions are tempering enthusiasm. Photo: AFP

CARBON CONS

Can't see the forest for the thieves

Blue Carbon, an Emirati company, has been procuring staggering amounts of African land this year. It claims to control an area the size of the United Kingdom across Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, Liberia and Tanzania. The firm is promising to preserve rainforests here, then sell carbon credits to rich states and firms looking to offset carbon emissions. *Climate Home* reports that one of the firm's top advisors is a convicted Italian fraudster called Samuele Landi, who has no experience in forestry, but plenty in dodgy accounting practices.

ZAMBIA

China derails latest debt relief deal

Zambia's bilateral creditors have vetoed a deal to restructure the $3-billion debt it owes in Eurobonds – even though these creditors are owed money from a different pot. China reportedly vetoed the deal because the Eurobond lenders did not seem to be taking the same level of loss as the bilateral creditors, who agreed to a separate restructuring deal in June. "This is extraordinary ... and will have significant adverse consequences," said a committee representing Zambia's private sector bondholders, according to the *Financial Times*.

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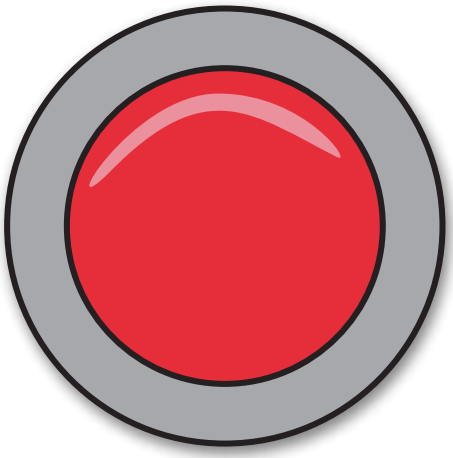

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Finance

Africa leads the rewrite of global tax regulations

Rich nations have ruled over international levies for ages, but now our guys are kicking their taxes

Kiri Rupiah

After decades of activism and diplomacy, the United Nations General Assembly voted to begin reforming the global tax system on Wednesday. The resolution, passed by consensus, would see authority for global tax rules pass from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to the UN.

For over 60 years, the OECD – a powerful collective of 37 rich countries – has decided global tax rules. Its members negotiate amongst themselves to issue tax regulations that affect the world.

OECD members account for only 18% of the world's population. Its dominance over global tax regimes has long frustrated non-members – especially since the collective has failed to close loopholes and tax havens that allow hundreds of billions of dollars to be taken from poorer countries every year.

The Africa group at the UN, which represents the 54-member African Union, spearheaded the proposal to start negotiations on a new more democratic model, to be housed within the UN. The EU bloc, led by France, opposed the Africa Group – in vain, as it turned out.

Developing countries, many of them in Africa, lose at least $483-billion in tax every year as multinational corporations spirit money offshore, according to the Global Alliance for Tax Justice.

Developing countries, many of them in Africa, lose at least $483-billion in tax every year as multinational corporations spirit money offshore

The Tax Justice Network, an advocacy group which monitors global tax practices, ranks the UK territories of British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands and Bermuda as the worst three tax havens for corporations in the world.

Also in the top 10 are the Netherlands, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Hong Kong, Jersey, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates. ■

Nigeria



High cost of living: Drugs that were already pricy are now completely out of reach.

The forex crisis is putting Nigerian lives at risk

The shortage of foreign exchange reserves has made imported drugs even more expensive, while shrinking local production

Ope Adetayo

From Lilongwe to Abuja, foreign exchange shortages are revealing deep vulnerabilities in how African economies operate. In Nigeria, despite President Bola Tinubu's attempted reforms, dollars remain scarce and the prices of imported

goods are skyrocketing. Among them are life-saving drugs.

About 70% of the medicines that Nigerians take are imported, and about 80% of people pay for healthcare out of their own pocket, according to a survey in November last year. Patients now sometimes find that drugs cost as much as six times more than they did last year.

Nicholas Ishadimu was recently prescribed Augmentin, a common antibiotic often used to treat typhoid in Nigeria. At the pharmacy, he was told the price was 24,000 naira ($29.28). He couldn't buy it. He says that for his last prescription, several months earlier, he had bought the same drugs in the same quantity for 4,500 naira ($5.49).

"Being able to pay for healthcare has always been a challenge for a lot of Nigerians. Now this contributes to that barrier to access if people cannot afford drugs," said Chibuike Alagboso of Nigeria Health Watch.

The forex shortage is also shrinking local production. In August, drugs-multinational GlaxoSmithKline closed its Nigeria operation. Its sales had fallen to nearly half of what they had been the year before and the company's half-year report blamed forex shortages, saying they had made it difficult for it to keep a consistent supply of drugs on the market.

"The currency pressures are creating huge forex translation losses for multinationals like GSK that are heavily dependent on raw material imports. With the dollar illiquidity lingering, these issues will persist," said Dumebi Oluwole, an analyst at Stears, a business and economic insights firm in Nigeria.

This then locks anyone with chronic illness or a serious health emergency in poverty. Even before the latest price increases, Babatunde Akeem, a school teacher in Lagos, had switched from the diabetes drugs prescribed by the doctor to a cheaper brand. The cheaper drug turned out to be less effective, and by last February he had lost a lot of his eyesight. Today he spends about 13% of his 120,000-naira ($146.74) salary on less effective medication.

About 70% of the medicines that Nigerians take are imported, and 80% of people pay for healthcare out of their own pocket. Patients are finding that drugs cost as much as six times more than they did last year.

He often has to borrow from family and friends to make ends meet. "The loan I repaid this afternoon was spent on medication," he told *The Continent*.

It also locks Nigeria itself into poverty. "If you have a population of people who are sick and cannot afford healthcare, that is a population that is not productive," Alagboso said.

The situation is compounded by the flight of doctors and nurses out of Nigeria and other African countries to the global north, which leaves healthcare systems dangerously understaffed. Last week, a data analysis by *The Continent* found that 15 of the world's richest countries have brought 55,000 African doctors into their own health systems. ■



Down to the wire: The ship fixing our internet

Africa's connection to the World Wide Web depends on cords of hair-thin fibres that rope along the ocean floor. Sometimes they break. Jess Auerbach Jahajeeah joined the crew of the *Leon Thevenin*, one of only a few select ships that are able to fix them.

It is past midnight. A four-person repair team is working a double shift to splice together one of the undersea cables that carries the internet between Africa and the rest of the world. It is delicate, highly skilled and labour-intensive work. The speed of your internet connection depends on them getting it right.

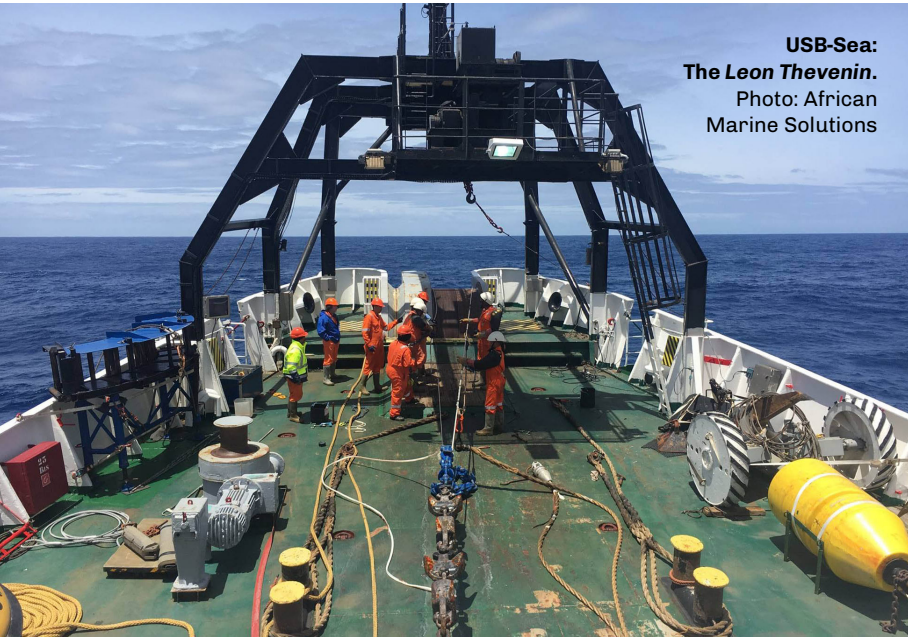
The four are among the nearly 60 crew members on board the *Leon Thevenin*, sub-Saharan Africa's only dedicated fibre-optic repair vessel. This is its longest-ever voyage – close to four months almost continuously out at sea. It will head for Cape Town in the morning – provided the four-person repair team, and the crew supporting them, get the job done.

As they work, they joke and laugh, but they are desperate to get back to their families. Shurro Arendse has never been away this long before, and his children are aching to see their father. Birthdays have been missed, school exams come and gone. Several of the other men on board have infant children. They talk about their children all the time, but it's not the same as holding them.

The repair team were trained, at a specialist institute in France, to handle the hair-thin fibre optic cables that carry the internet itself and to operate the many machines necessary to fix the break.

They work through the night with glass, copper, steel, plastic, and rubber – some of it electrified, some of it fragile and all of it interconnected. When the cable returns to the seabed, each section must be able to withstand multiple tonnes of elemental force in all conditions.

It is along these cables that all your



USB-Sea: The *Leon Thevenin*. Photo: African Marine Solutions

emails, YouTube videos, Google search results and irreverent memes must flow.

Upstairs on the bridge, the ship's chief mate holds the vessel steady in the water so that it does not drift. In the engine room seven storeys below, a team monitors the old but trusted engines that power not only the ship but also the specialist cable-moving equipment.

The crew are mostly African and conversation flows in isiZulu, French, Afrikaans, Malagasy, English and Tagalog. Between them they share critical and rare skills. At one point, the air-conditioning unit breaks, and we sweat until the team sorts it out with new parts manufactured on board the ship.

From the deck, which towers above the sea, a small Ghanaian navy boat is visible. It is protecting the *Leon Thevenin* from pirates, and keeping small fishing vessels far away so that fishing nets don't get tangled in the propellers.

On deck, other crew members are on standby, chatting softly, watching the stars and letting their muscles rest after a day spent hauling cables, ropes, buoys and chains in and out of the ocean. The lights of Accra twinkle in the distance.

Under the sea, not in the cloud

The physical infrastructure of the internet consists mostly of thin tubes that stretch through oceans between continents.

In the open sea, these may be about the size of a garden hosepipe, consisting of little more than a few fibre-optic threads surrounded by a protective layer. Each thread is no thicker than a single human hair, and they are encased in a thin layer of copper and aluminium which is sheathed in plastic. The aluminium is necessary to block the faint electromagnetic signals they emit, which sharks misinterpret as food. In the past, shark-bites were a source of cable breakages, though with new technology this is much more rare.

Light is transmitted through the fibres to a network of landing stations that dot the African coast. This light carries with it the information that powers our contemporary world. When a cable breaks or gets damaged at sea, it is easy to trace where the light stops moving.

Light is transmitted through the fibres to a network of landing stations that dot the African coast. This light carries with it the information that powers our contemporary world.

For repair, the cable is hauled above the water from depths ranging from a few metres to five kilometres or more. For some retrievals, the crew deploys a Land Rover-sized remote-operated submersible . At other times, they use a Deniell, which is a specialised grappling device that has been in use since the first undersea copper cables were laid with the invention of the telegraph.

When the cable is "caught", it is carefully raised to the surface. It must be cut – without damaging either the repair ship or the greater cable network – and then the problem must be diagnosed and fixed. Ingenious engineering, sheer

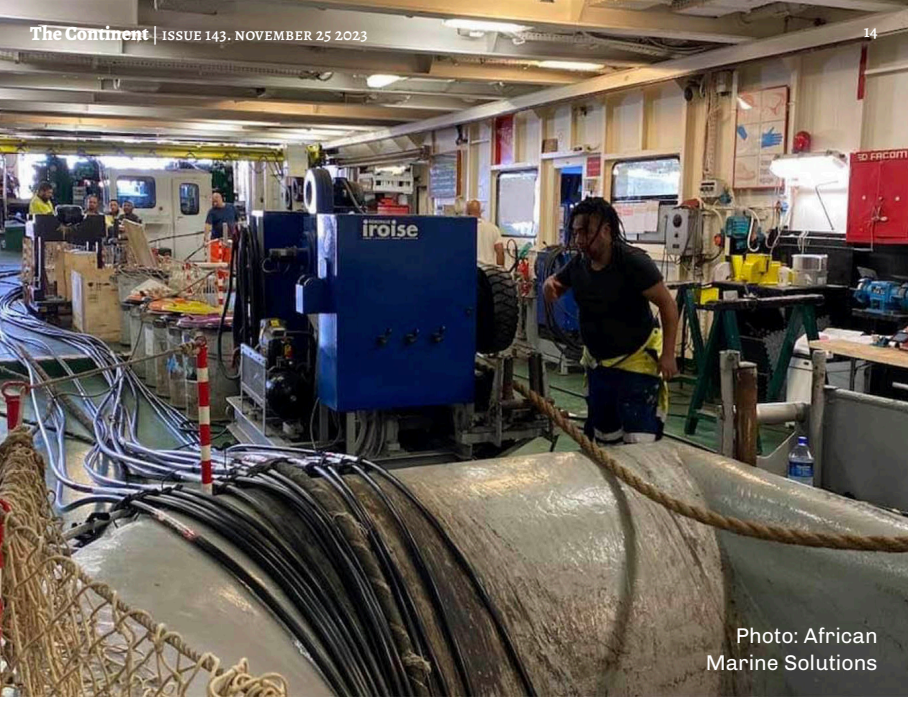


Photo: African Marine Solutions

physical strength and careful coordination are required. Sometimes the cables carry live current, which heightens the danger.

Teams work in shifts through both day and night. Depending on the complexity of the fault, its location, weather conditions, maritime security – pirates are a real threat – and paperwork, repairs can take anything from a few days to weeks.

Near to the shore, cables often break due to human interference (being sliced through by an anchor, for example). Here, the cable is "armoured" with concentric layers of metal to protect it from both people and the ocean itself.

Deep at sea, breaks are more rare – but when they happen they are usually the result of geological change such as undersea rockfall. One of the most recent was caused on 6 August by rockfall in the Congo Canyon – one of the world's largest undersea canyons, located just off Africa's west coast – which snapped three of Africa's most important fibre threads.

The *Leon Thevenin* was in Mombasa at the time. It took the crew a month to sail around the Cape of Good Hope to make the repairs. Shortly after that, they restored another three cables in Angola which brought 750,000 people back online.

The *Leon Thevenin* is part of a fleet of six cable repair ships belonging to Orange Marine and is named after a famous scientist (Leon Thevenin was a French telegraph engineer).

It is the second-oldest such ship, having been at sea for 40 years. Meticulously

maintained and regularly retrofitted with new technology, it is an example of the best of both old world machinery and cutting-edge technology.

This has been its busiest year yet. Flagged in Mauritius but docked in Cape Town, the ship used to do three or four repairs per year. So far in 2023, it has done nine repairs.

This is a sign of progress: more cables have been laid to respond to Africa's increasing digital connectivity, and more cables mean more breakages.

The real remote work

Conditions on board are good: each crew member has a cabin, there is a dining hall and a gym, and plenty of recreational equipment. The crew was even able to watch the rugby World Cup final through a satellite link.

But working in a confined space, in close quarters, for months at a time can be challenging. "You really get to know yourself," says third officer Siphelele Ncube.

"You miss a lot," agrees cable engineer Nigel Murray, who started out on deck 20 years ago and has worked his way up to management. "But you know it's worth it because of what it brings to everyone: all that information, TikTok, Netflix. Sometimes you see beautiful things at sea, but we miss home, of course, all the time."

According to his colleagues, steward Nkosi Gayeka has one of the most important jobs on board: he helps make the food. He wants people to understand that the internet does not just exist in the air somehow. "Without our work, there is no internet. We are working and sacrificing so they can go online."

Speaking of which: after days of hard work, four tiny glass threads are melted together. They are placed into a steel holder, which is used to join up the remainder of the cable. Plastic is moulded around it, and then it is x-rayed and tested multiple times before being encased in an orange covering that looks like something between a traffic cone and a missile.

With tremendous care – and heavy, hot, physical labour – the cable is returned to the ocean.

The crew cheers as the final rope is cut and the cable sinks to the ocean bed. The ship pulls back. Operators at the network's many landing stations test that the pulses of light are travelling as they should be, and give the *Leon Thevenin* a thumbs up.

So far in 2023, it has done nine repairs. This is a sign of progress: more cables have been laid to respond to Africa's increasing digital connectivity, and more cables mean more breakages.

Suddenly, your recipes load quicker. Your Spotify does not buffer. WhatsApp messages deliver without missing a beat. Africa's internet is working as it should – and we have the crew of a single ship to thank for it. ■

Jess Auerbach Jahajeeah is an associate professor at the Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town. She is writing a book about Africa's internet infrastructure.

Cameroon is trapped in a bloody stalemate

There is little prospect of a resolution to the conflict in the Anglophone region: the government hopes to simply wear down and exhaust its enemies.

Nalova Akua

On the 41st anniversary of Paul Biya as Cameroon's second Francophone president, three heavily armed men stormed a house in Mamfe, a city in the country's south-west region, at around 3.15am.

The house belonged to Frida*. "They were holding guns, machetes, axes and other dangerous objects. I am sure they didn't kill me because I was holding crutches," said the traumatised woman, who lives with a disability.

It was a co-ordinated attack which left up to 30 people dead, and 10 others wounded. The dead included two of Frida's cousins and six of her neighbours.

According to the Cameroonian government, the attack on Mamfe was the work of separatist fighters. Frida agrees, saying she recognised one of the attackers as a member of a group of separatist fighters in the area. "Some of them were dressed in military attire. They didn't mask their faces," she said.

Since 2017, English-speaking separatists have been fighting against Cameroonian soldiers to establish an independent state called Ambazonia in the country's west. They are opposed not just to Biya's long rule but to the entire colonial project that is Cameroon.

Cameroon was first colonised by Germany, and later split between France and Britain. German was replaced as the official language by English and French.

After independence, Cameroonians remained divided into Anglophone and Francophone regions – but with the state government dominated by French-speakers, English speakers felt othered.

On 6 October 2016, the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, a grouping of lawyer and teacher trade unions, initiated a strike protesting the appointment of French-speaking teachers and judges to Anglophone schools and courts. The initially peaceful demonstrations spread through cities in the English-speaking northwest and southwest regions.

When the Cameroonian government deployed the army to quell them, the protests turned violent. The clashes escalated into a war between the separatists and Cameroon's national army, which has killed at least 6,000 people and displaced nearly a million people.

No good guys here

The week before the 6 November attack in Mamfe, a separatist fighter was killed by a vigilante group during a shootout. The Mamfe attack, according to a local source, was orchestrated by an angry group of Anglophone separatist fighters to avenge the death of one of their own.

Government spokesperson René Emmanuel Sadi affirmed these claims in a press release that blamed the attack on a "secessionist terrorist group known as the Manyu Unity Warriors, affiliated to the so-called Ambazonian Defence Forces".

The Houston-based leader of the Interim Government of Ambazonia, Chris Anu, refuted the claims, telling *The Continent*: "Cameroonian soldiers carried out the attack".

Claiming that eyewitnesses saw government soldiers change into civilian clothes for the attack, he said its aim was "to whip up sentiments against the fighters and the [separatist] struggle".

"If the Cameroon government denies involvement, how do they account for the fact that it has a military camp in Mamfe and a gendarmerie post right in the vicinity of the incident, yet scores of people were killed and they didn't show up?" he asked.

It is difficult to sift through the accusations and counter-accusations.

In the areas they operate in, the separatists are frequently accused of violence, unlawful taxation and capriciousness, hence their clashes with vigilante groups.

On Tuesday, they reportedly burned houses and property, killed nine people, wounded others and kidnapped more, in an attack on a Francophone village in the country's west. Last month, in the Guzang market square, separatist fighters reportedly executed two men accused of spying for the Cameroonian military.



Wheels have come off: A burnt out car in Buea, a mainly Anglophone region, allegedly destroyed in an attack by separatists. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP

On the other hand, the Cameroonian government response has been described as pursuing a "hammer-and-lies" (military force and disinformation) strategy to torpedo the revolt.

Chris Roberts, a political science professor at the University of Calgary, said the government is seeking to exhaust Anglophones rather than submit to political reform. ■

**Name changed due to safety concerns*

Nalova Akua is an award-winning Cameroonian freelance journalist covering conflict, environment and health.

Zimbabwe's railways have run out of track

To qualify for credit from international lenders, the country defunded its railways in the 1990s. The loans failed to prevent Zim's economic meltdown in the 2000s. And slowly but surely its trains ground to a halt.

Jeffrey Moyo in Harare

The many fatalities of the Covid pandemic in Zimbabwe include its once storied passenger rail services. In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, passenger rail services across the country were suspended, and three years on have yet to return. It is doubtful they ever will.

At Harare's main train station, carriages stand idle. Not formally decommissioned, but seemingly abandoned by their erstwhile custodians and ddopted instead by a motley crew: homeless people, sex workers and drug dealers now occupy some of the old passenger trains.

"We find shelter here on the trains when it rains, and warmth in winter," says Bernard Chongwe, who has nowhere else to call home.

A young woman in the sex work industry tells *The Continent* that she has been sneaking clients onto the derelict carriages since there are "no charges for using them". Not that there would be much to pay for: the carriages have no lighting or water. The toilets are filthy. The tracks beneath them are overgrown.

The train station is a far cry from the buzzing travel hub of its heyday, and the abandoned coaches show no sign of their former glory. But make no mistake: glory there was.

Precious Shumba, now 47, recalls the experience of travelling by train as a youngster in the 1990s: "It was a hive of activity, you would meet friends, fellow villagers and even schoolmates. For me, the most exciting train ride was on the Harare to Rusape journeys."

Shumba's rural home of Rusape is 200km to the east of Harare, in Manicaland Province. As a teenager, he would walk 22km to the nearest station to board the Harare-bound train. It embarked at 11pm and arrived in the city the next morning at 6am.

He remembers with great fondness the smartly appointed carriages, the tempting snacks for sale, and the sheer adventure of the experience. "I wonder if our children will have similar experiences," he says. "It would be interesting to have them get on the train and travel to Rusape."

The memories of Lucy Yasini, 57, are similarly rosy, though her best



The beaten track: Zimbabwe's commuter trains were cheap and reliable, until suddenly they weren't there at all. Photo: Zinyange Auntony/AFP

recollections pre-date even the 1990s of Shumba's youth. "It was nice those days. We used the train because it was organised, cheap, safe and timely," she says. "I would leave Harare by train at 9pm and be in Bulawayo by 5.30am the next day, just in time for breakfast with family."

Even the country's political elite travelled by train. "I remember the wife of former president Canaan Banana used the train, riding in first class," says Yasini. "It was *real* first class – a bed with fresh linen and blankets and nice food that was prepared by the railway staff."

This was before the World Bank and International Monetary Fund forced Zimbabwe's government to drastically reduce spending in the 1990s, in the so-called Economic Structural Adjustment Programme, in order to qualify for the hefty loans the country sought.

Back then, Zimbabwe's trains moved 14-million tonnes of cargo a year. But once the state stopped subsidising rail, services plummeted.

By the height of Zimbabwe's economic meltdown in 2007, hundreds of railway workers had left, their wages rendered worthless by hyperinflation.

"When trains were fully functional, I did business easily and cheaply," says Rati Chihota, who imports second-hand clothes to Harare via Mozambique's Beira port. "Now I have to pay more for road transport and for police, who require all sorts of non-existent paperwork."

Cargo does still move on the tracks, but only barely. Just 2.3-million tonnes a year these days, according to National Railways of Zimbabwe figures.

As for train travel?

By 2020 passenger rail in Zimbabwe was already near the end of the line. Covid was merely the final stop. ■

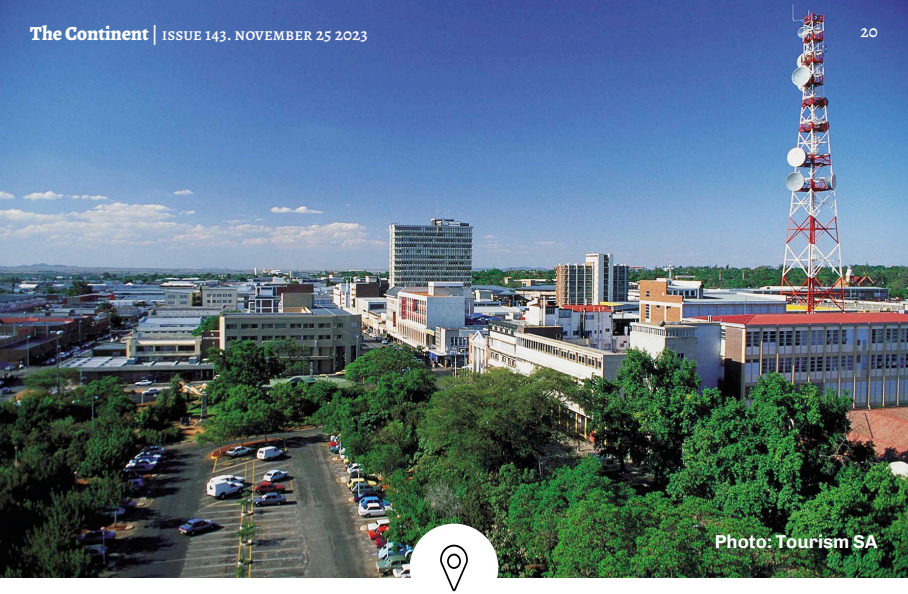


Photo: Tourism SA

TRAVEL

Welcome to Polokwane

Don't sleep on small towns – sleep in them! This one is a uniquely charming place to spend a few days, writes **Molebatsi Masedi**

Nestled in South Africa's Limpopo province, Polokwane is a bustling city steeped in cultural richness and culinary delights. From eclectic eateries to captivating sights, Polokwane is just waiting to be explored.

City vibe check

Polokwane has a vibrant and welcoming atmosphere. There is a palpable sense of community. The people here are warm-hearted and proud of their heritage, often seen sharing stories and embracing visitors with open arms. Bustling markets, colourful street art, and lively music contribute to the town's lively charm.

Getting around

Public transportation in Polokwane is primarily facilitated by taxis and buses, which offer reliable and affordable travel options. Additionally, car rentals are widely available for those who prefer the convenience of exploring at their own pace. The city's layout is well-defined, making navigation straightforward for both locals and tourists.

Eating around

For a culinary adventure, Grounded Container Bar & Cafe is an absolute gem. Set in a repurposed shipping container, the must-try dish here is the "Braai


Photo: Stuart Franklin/Getty Images



Big bucks: The Peter Mokaba Stadium (top) was built for the 2010 World Cup. Impala (bottom), roam the city's sprawling game reserve.

Platter", a succulent ensemble of grilled meats accompanied by chakalaka and pap. This indulgence costs around $16 per person.

And for a dose of local vibes and exceptional coffee, Co.fi steals the spotlight. This trendy spot infuses modern design with a homely feel, offering artisanal brews and delectable pastries.

Sightseeing/activities

The iconic Peter Mokaba Stadium stands tall as a beacon of Polokwane's sports culture. Hosting a variety of events, including soccer matches and concerts, it's not just a sports arena but a cultural hub. Visitors can take a guided tour to explore the inner workings of this architectural marvel. Tickets for a stadium tour typically range from $2 to $5 per person.

For the nature lovers, Polokwane Game Reserve, sprawling across 3,200 hectares, is paradise. The reserve offers diverse wildlife – including rare white rhino, sable antelope and giraffe – and is budget-friendly.

Song that represents the feel of the city

The popular song *Jerusalema* by Master KG perfectly captures the vibrant and joyous spirit of the city. Its infectious beats and uplifting lyrics have become an anthem that resonates with both locals and visitors alike, symbolising the unity and energy that pervades Polokwane.

Favourite time of year

Spring is undoubtedly the best time to visit Polokwane. As the winter chill subsides, the city bursts into a kaleidoscope of colours with blooming flowers and pleasant weather.

This season also coincides with various festivals and events, such as the Polokwane Art Market and the Polokwane Food Festival. ■

Do you want to show us around your town or city?

Send an email to read@thecontinent.org and we'll be in touch!

Stigma fuels the cycle of violence against women

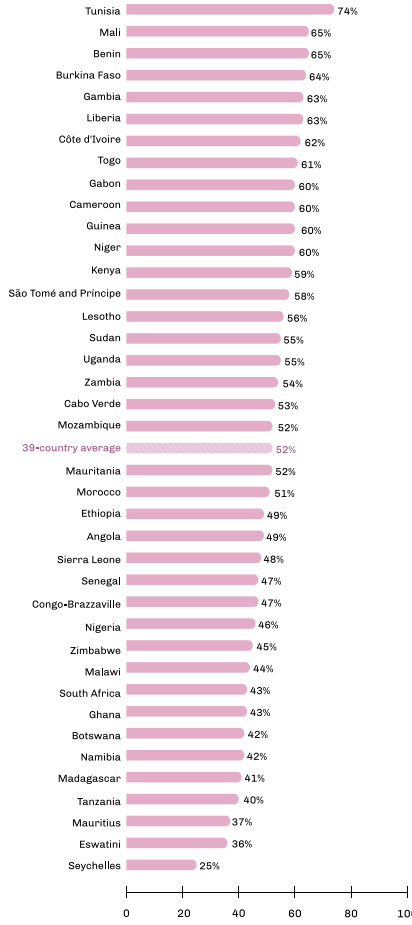
The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which falls on 25 November, is a reminder of the plague that victimises one in every three women. Few get help and support. In fact, many never speak out about the violence they suffer at all.

Researchers think one reason so many violent crimes against women and girls go unreported is fear of being stigmatised, and Afrobarometer's interviews with more than 54,000 Africans suggest that they're right: More than half (52%) of respondents across 39 countries say it is "somewhat likely" (28%) or "very likely" (24%) that a woman who reports gender-based violence to the authorities will be criticised, harassed, or shamed by others in the community. Only 26% consider such a backlash "very unlikely".

Majorities in 22 countries share the expectation of a punitive community response, ranging up to 74% in Tunisia and 65% in Mali and Benin.

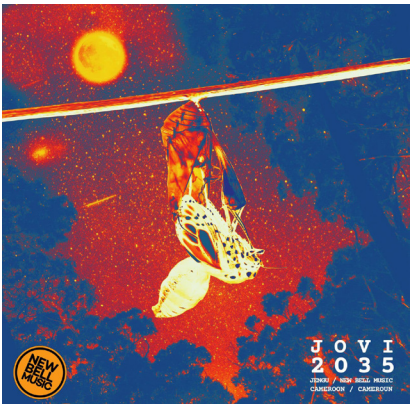
Until these perceptions – and the fears they both reflect and fuel – change significantly, we won't even know the extent of the cycle of violence against women, much less eliminate it. ■

Percentage of respondents who say it's likely that a woman who reports gender-based violence will be criticised, harassed, or shamed | 39 African countries | 2021/23



Source: *Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.*

AFRO BAROMETER
Let the people have a say



The 'Mboko God' reigns supreme

On his first album in four years, Jovi Le Monstre hasn't missed a beat.

Erwin Ayota

The Cameroon government's "vision 2035" promises radical improvement in the country's socioeconomic affairs by the middle of the coming decade. With its name and cover art that depicts a butterfly leaving its cocoon, Jovi Le Monstre's fifth studio album, *2035*, nods to the dream.

It's not the only way the 13-track project is proudly Cameroonian. It also pays respect to music icons such as André-Marie Tala, Nkodo Sitony and Koppo, and features Jovi's protégé Reniss.

On *Kobra Since 1998*, introduced by torrential rain, Jovi opens with a clarion call for peace in Cameroon: *"Mendem hala peace fo quarter they no want no more war …"*

He has been addressing the ongoing war in Cameroon's anglophone regions since 2019 with *No Peace* and *Man Pass Man 4* on his *God Don Kam* album. On *2035*, Jovi re-emphasises his wishes on this topic in *Tchakounté,* which samples a speech by Thomas Sankara that influenced his creative process.

But *2035* also looks beyond Cameroon with *Mon Anniversaire* – an exceptional Rex OTB-produced song – and with *Nouvel Homme,* a collaboration with his favourite French rapper Youssoupha. Peppered with hardcore quotable raps, the finesse of this self-produced, -mixed and -mastered album reminds us Jovi remains a force to be reckoned with.

Flexing his versatility, he incorporates Bikutsi-like percussion on *Sitony*, invokes Congolese rumba on *Nouvelle Homme*, and instruments and vocals embracing Muslim cultures on *Up Nord*. He delivers in English, French, Cameroon pidgin English and a bit of Lingala.

In case that's too subtle, he raps on *Les Mattas*: *"Give you this, give you that. I can pumba, I can trap. I run like I never cap. Change the rhythm I adapt"*.

Jovi has nothing left to prove musically. He's incomparable even if he says so himself: "*En Afrique il y a moi et le reste*." ■

THE QUIZ

0-3
"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7
"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10
"The Mauretania the merry-tania, as my granny used to say."



1_Who is Liberia's new president-elect?
2_Which country's name is derived from the ancient Mauretania kingdom?
3_Who was DRC President Félix Tshisekedi preceded by?
4_In which country is the city of Mamfe in?
5_Artist Julie Mehretu was born in which African country?
6_"République du Tchad" is this country's name in French. What is it in English?
7_Which country are Togolese people from?
8_True or false: Yamoussoukro is Côte d'Ivoire's largest city.
9_Which modern-day country was named after the king of Urundi?
10_Which country is home to the Avenue of the Baobabs or Alley of the Baobabs (pictured)?

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

New kid on the bloc



CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Samira Sawlani

Big news dear reader: there will be a new face joining us at the African Union Christmas Party, as well as at all our regularly scheduled Catch-The-Human-Rights-Activist game nights and group therapy sessions.

Last week Liberia held its presidential election run-off, which saw former AC Milan and Man City striker George Weah go up against former vice-president Joseph Boakai. Most scandalously, our research suggests Boakai has hardly played for *any* top-tier football sides at all. Despite this liability, Boakai has nevertheless prevailed.

What's more, Weah has conceded graciously, and congratulated the president-elect, saying that even though his party had lost the election, "Liberia has won".

So, welcome to the gang Mr Boakai! Your welcome hamper is no doubt already on its way to you, including the complete series of *Keeping Up With The Coupdashions,* copies of *High Heels and Low Lives: A Guide to Becoming President* and *How to Kill Friends and Disappear People*, and of course a complementary discount coupon for TearGas'R'Us.

Unlikely to be joining George Weah on the bench is Andry Rajoelina, who appears to have Madagascar's presidential election in the bag.

The former DJ has taken an early lead in the polls, partly because most of the opposition chose to boycott the match. They have complained that the playing field isn't level, and that DJ Andry shouldn't even be playing after he signed to the French national side, going so far as to acquire French nationality.

You'll no doubt be shocked to hear that Andry rejected these claims with great vehemence and tear gas, which didn't quite stop demonstrators taking to the streets in the lead-up to the polls. To no avail, however: at the time of writing the final tally is not yet in, but it seems like a Rajoelina win is what we geopolitical sports fans like to refer to as a four-gun conclusion.

So, we have a new president coming in and an old president sticking around. But what about those who were red-carded (or red beret-ed) by rogue refs and forced to leave the pitch?

This week we saw our old friend Alpha Condé's name pop up in the media!



Bye George: Incumbent non-footballer Joseph Boakai will be Liberia's next president. Photo: Guy Peterson/AFP

Guinea's deposed president is currently based in Turkey where we're sure he is having a lovely time. A lovelier time than he'd be having in Guinea, anyway, which has carefully curated for Condé a charcuterie of criminal charges, ranging from treason to "complicity in the illegal possession of weapons".

This comes a year after they served up some lesser *hors d'oeuvres* – which as we all know is French for horse duvets – including corruption, embezzlement, torture and a murder or two.

Responding to the treason charges, he dismissed the allegations as "buffoonery" telling *Jeune Afrique* that "no one will be distracted by such antics".

We're not entirely convinced, though, having just spent the past 10 minutes googling horse duvets. Are the duvets with horses on them or are they duvets FOR horses?

Talking of distractions, this week Israel announced that it was recalling its ambassador to South Africa "for consultations", due to "recent comments".

This could be a reference to the "recent comments" by President Cyril Ramaphosa that South Africa had, alongside Djibouti, Comoros, Bolivia and Bangladesh, referred Israel to the International Criminal Court, adding that Gaza had been "turned into a concentration camp" where "genocide is taking place".

Or it could be the "recent comments" of South Africa's parliament, which voted in favour of a motion to close Israel's embassy and suspend diplomatic relations with the country. Though this vote is not binding – diplomacy is an executive prerogative not a function of the legislature – it clearly gave Israel pause, which is more than it has itself been willing to give until yesterday.

Which, however overdue, is still more than Sudan is getting.

The latest numbers from the United Nations show that the number of people inside and outside the country who have been displaced by the Sudanese conflict has now reached 6.3-million, and the country now has the ignoble honour of being at the epicentre of the largest child displacement crisis in the world.

Meanwhile after speaking to witnesses, Amnesty International has raised the alarm saying civilians are suffering "unimaginable horror amid ethnically-motivated violence in Darfur."

And yet the leaders on this continent seem to have focused their attention elsewhere. They certainly appear to be getting on with their colleagues overseas like a house on fire these days.

Unfortunately for them, the burning house in question is their own. ■

The rise and fall of South Africa's tax collector

Zenobia Ismail
and Robin Richards

After 1999, the South African Revenue Service (SARS) became internationally recognised as a leading revenue collection agency – but this did not last long. According to the Zondo Commission of Inquiry, SARS was one of several state institutions that were "captured" by allies of former president Jacob Zuma, who was forced to step down in 2018 because of allegations of grand corruption. The experience of SARS therefore provides fascinating insights into the methods and processes through which state capture occurred, and how government institutions were manipulated for private gain.

State capture occurs when a small group of influential figures in the public and private sectors collude to change rules, regulations, and institutions to further their own narrow interests at the expense of the public interest.

In the case of SARS, this happened in three ways. First, through the infiltration of the organisation by new employees who deliberately weakened the institution. Second, through allegations in the media that cast doubt on the integrity of leaders who tried to resist capture. And third, as a result of organisational change and staff purges that removed critical individuals.

In September 2014, for example, Zuma appointed Tom Moyane as the new commissioner of SARS, bypassing the required approvals process. False allegations were then made about a "rogue unit" within SARS that supposedly carried out illegal surveillance at Zuma's home.

These allegations were then manipulated to empower Moyane to suspend senior managers, and to dismantle and disrupt units within SARS that were responsible for critical functions such as collecting revenue and detecting tax crime, under the guise of restructuring led by Bain International.

Through this Machiavellian process of institutional subversion, SARS lost capacity and credibility, while new opportunities for corruption and tax avoidance were created.

All South Africans suffered the consequences, with an estimated shortfall of tax revenue in 2016/2017 of R24-billion ($1.28-billion) undermining government services. ■

Zenobia Ismail is a research fellow at the University of Birmingham. Robin Richards is an independent researcher in Johannesburg.
This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa.

THE BIG PICTURE

High way to hello: A runner leaps into the air to fist-bump a man on stilts during the annual Great Ethiopian Run in Addis Ababa. Tens of thousands of athletes hit the road last Sunday in the 23rd edition of the vibrant event, cementing its place as the biggest road race in Africa.

Photo: Michele Spatari/AFP



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