

**African journalism. 18 MARCH 2023 | ISSUE 120**

# The Continent

with Mail & Guardian

**Malawi has  
survived  
storms before.**

**But none like this**

# Inside:

■ **African Union:** Rwanda claims impropriety in Congolese appointment (p7)

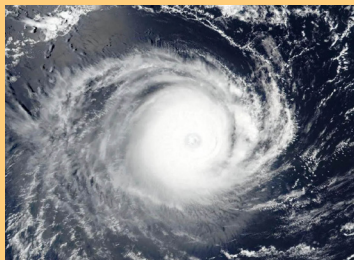
■ **Senegal:** Violence as the opposition dares to exist (p8)

■ **Mozambique:** Farewell Azagaia, the people's rapper (p9)

■ **Review:** Love and migration in *Daughter in Exile* (p17)

■ **DRC:** The secret uranium mine that inspired Wakanda (p20)

■ **East Africa:** At least one country isn't actively hating LGBTQI people (p23)



**Cover:** On Sunday, Malawi was struck by one of the longest and most powerful cyclones in recorded history. It travelled 8,000 kilometres from Australia before getting stuck in the Mozambique channel, gathering energy and repeatedly renewing its assault on the countries around it. Cyclone Freddy is the third storm to hit Malawi in a year. Even as fossil fuel companies celebrate \$400-billion in profits, it is communities like those swept away in Blantyre and surrounds that are paying the price for climate change (p11 and p15).

## *The Continent* journalist released on bail

After spending five days in jail, journalist Andrew Arinaitwe was released on bail on Tuesday. Our Ugandan correspondent was arrested while reporting a story for *The Continent*. We thank Kiiza and Mugisha Advocates, the Human Rights Network for Journalists-Uganda, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Chapter Four Uganda for their support and solidarity. We will have more on Arinaitwe's experiences in next week's edition.

Get the latest edition of *The Continent*, plus every back issue (all 119 of them) by visiting [thecontinent.org](https://thecontinent.org). To subscribe (for free!), save *The Continent's* number to your phone (+27 73 805 6068) and send us a message on WhatsApp/Signal/Telegram.



## FREE SPEECH

### Two jailed in one week for speaking freely in Mali

Mohamed Youssouf Bathily, a radio and television host also known as Ras Bath, was imprisoned on Monday after claiming that former prime minister, Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, who died in prison, was assassinated. News site *lemalien.com* also reports that a social media influencer, Rokia Doumbia, was sent to a prison on Wednesday over a TikTok video in which she lamented the cost of living. The outlet notes that “since the second coup d’état, no dissenting voice has escaped” the “sword” of the transitional government.

## MALI

### Constitutional referendum postponed

Maliens won’t be voting on a new Constitution on Monday after all. The country’s governing military junta postponed the scheduled referendum without naming a new date. The junta has reportedly said that it needs time to staff the electoral body, give citizens biometric voters cards and familiarise them with what is in the draft Constitution, before the referendum can happen. Despite the delay, it promises that it will hand power back to civilians by the March 2024 deadline agreed with Ecowas.

## ZIMBABWE

## Children injured as classroom collapses into illegal gold mine

At least 14 children in the Midlands province of central Zimbabwe have been injured after the classroom block they were in collapsed into an illegal mining shaft dug under Globe and Phoenix primary school. In December 2022, *The Continent* reported that artisanal gold panning activity in the city has threatened the structural integrity of buildings where illegal artisanal mining has taken root in a country



**Class divide: Midlands school caves in.**

Photo: Mining Zimbabwe

plagued by high levels of poverty and unemployment.

## RWANDA

## Kigali stadium renamed to honour legendary footballer

Kigali Stadium has been renamed Kigali Pelé Stadium, in a ceremony attended by Rwanda's President Paul Kagame and Gianni Infantino, the head of Fifa. Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau also renamed stadiums to honour Pelé, the Brazilian football legend who died in December. Infantino made a global call at Pelé's funeral in January, asking every country in the world to name a football venue after him. Colombia is the only country outside Africa to heed the call so far. A campaign to rename Brazil's biggest stadium, Maracanã, after the football legend failed in 2021.

## LIBYA

## Anyone seen 2.5 tons of totally safe, not dangerous uranium?

Ten drums containing 2.5 tons of uranium ore have gone missing from a storage facility in southern Libya. The disappearance was discovered by United Nations inspectors on a routine check-up. Apparently the material is not radioactive, and cannot be used to make nuclear weapons. The facility is somewhere in southern Libya – its exact location is undisclosed – in a very remote area that is controlled by neither the Tripoli-based government nor the main rebels, led by General Khalifa Haftar, who are based in the east of the country.



**Gimme:** Muhoozi Kainerugaba is tired of waiting. Photo: mkainerugaba

## UGANDA

### Knock knock knockin' on M7's door

Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the son of Uganda president Yoweri Museveni, has said that he will run for president in 2026. The 50-year-old general was just 13 when his father seized power in an armed rebellion. “We are tired of waiting forever,” he said in a series of tweets announcing his candidacy. These were later deleted, and should be treated with caution: Kainerugaba has gotten himself in trouble before for reckless comments on social media, including a claim that Uganda’s army could capture the Kenyan capital Nairobi in just two weeks.

## HEALTH

### UN calls out rich nations for poaching health workers

At least 55 countries, 40 of which are African, have severe shortages of health workers – with fewer than 49 health workers for every 10,000 residents. That is eight more than was the case before the Covid pandemic, says the World Health Organisation, which warned that the situation could be made worse by richer countries which have ramped up recruitment of health workers from abroad. Poor management of the Covid pandemic in rich nations killed some of their own health workers, while leaving their populations with long-term illness.

## TUNISIA

### Saïed tightens grip after racist tirade

African states continue to rescue citizens from violence and discrimination aimed at black Africans in Tunisia – most recently Burkina Faso, which flew 64 citizens home on Wednesday. The violence, sparked by racist comments by President Kaïs Saïed, has left over 1,000 people homeless. He also cracked down on opposition leaders and civil society, and prevented independent media from covering the opening of parliament, following an election with 11% turnout.



## ENVIRONMENT

## How many trees can you see from space?

Using satellite imagery and artificial intelligence, scientists have mapped the locations of nearly 9.9-billion trees across Africa's "dryland" belt between

the equator and the Sahara. This is a significant development as it will allow researchers to accurately track both tree loss – from illegal logging and climate change – and evaluate the impact of tree-planting initiatives such as the Great Green Wall. It may also allow countries in the region to monetise their trees in the form of carbon credits.

Photo: UNCCD



## COCAINE

## Africa is a powder keg waiting for blow

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, cocaine trafficking has made a dramatic comeback after slowing down during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the agency's report, criminal enterprises are diversifying production processes to match a sharp increase in demand. The emergence of new trafficking hubs in West and Central Africa means there is strong potential for a large expansion into Africa and Asia, the report warns.

## ARGENTINA

## Heat goes on and on and on and on and on

Residents of Buenos Aires, the capital city of Argentina, are living through the ninth heatwave of this year alone, and it has run for two weeks. Last week, temperatures in some parts of the city crossed 40°C, report weather services. The Argentinian summer, which typically runs from December to February, is continuing into March, fueling forest fires that have destroyed over 100,000 hectares of trees in the northern province of Corrientes.

# African Union

## **Paul Kagame criticises AU for 'secretive' appointment**

**The new director general of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention was not the best candidate for the job, claims Rwanda's president**

**Mwangi Maina**

**T**he president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, has strongly criticised the African Union's appointment of a new director general of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, claiming that due process was bypassed. The centre is key to the continent's response to health-related threats such as Covid-19, Ebola, cholera, mpox and measles.

In a letter sent earlier this month to Azali Assoumani – the president of Comoros and current AU chair – Kagame said the selection process was secretive and there had been no debate on the

choice. That's despite three countries asking to speak in the AU summit where the decision was made, he claimed.

"Besides yourself, no other African leader took part in the committee meeting, and the delegated officials were mostly below the ministerial level."

Kagame said another candidate, Dr Magda Robalo from Guinea-Bissau, scored higher for the post but was not considered. Diplomatic sources told *The Continent* the former health minister's candidacy was rejected due to "a lack of goodwill" from her country's president.

The new director general, Dr Jean Kaseya, is a Congolese medical doctor. His country has been vocal in recent months about Rwanda's alleged involvement in the ongoing violence in the eastern DRC.

The European Union, the United States, the United Nations Group of Experts, Human Rights Watch and the AU itself have called on Rwanda to stop supporting rebels along its border with the DRC. Rwanda denies supporting the rebels, saying the DRC is home to groups hostile to Rwanda.

Kagame, a former AU chair, was appointed in 2016 to lead the union's institutional reforms. In the letter to Assoumani, he also questioned the manner in which some sessions of the just concluded AU summit in Addis Ababa were handled. ■

# Senegal

## Sall rival Sonko's trial on hold as police crack down on supporters

**Running battles between police and supporters of the president's chief rival leave Dakar on a knife edge**

**Kiri Rupiah**

**O**n Thursday, supporters of Senegalese opposition leader Ousmane Sonko came out in large numbers in the capital Dakar to support the aspiring presidential candidate, who faces charges of libel.

Protesters burned tyres and set fire to buses and a supermarket. Police meanwhile fired tear gas at Sonko supporters who accompanied the convoy taking him to court.

Sonko, 48, is accused of defaming the minister of tourism, whom he allegedly said was involved in embezzlement. In 2021, he was also charged with raping a

beauty salon employee and making death threats against her. If convicted, he would be disqualified from running in next year's presidential election.

It is widely speculated that President Macky Sall is considering a run for a controversial third term, which would require him to first change the country's Constitution. Sall's opponents and critics accuse him of stymying the opposition with false accusations and politically motivated lawfare. The government denies this.

Sonko, who has amassed a loyal following among disillusioned youth, came third in the 2019 elections. "I don't believe in Macky Sall's institutions because he himself doesn't respect them," he said ahead of his court appearance.

The trial was postponed until 30 March after Sonko's lawyers said he was seeking medical treatment after inhaling a substance that affected his breathing and vision. ■



**Lawfare: Senegalese opposition leader Ousmane Sonko.** Photo: SonkoOfficiel



# The people's rapper's final verse

Edson 'Azagaia' da Luz  
1984-2023

Luis Nhachote in Maputo

**E**dson da Luz, better known by his stage name Azagaia – after the assegai spear used by Bantu warriors – was arguably the best Mozambican rapper of his generation.

He died on 9 March, from an epileptic seizure. He was 38.

Azagaia's hard-hitting lyrics were famed for their irreverence. His fearless criticism of corruption and poor governance, with hits including *Mentiras da Verdade* (The Lies of the Truth) and *ABC do Preconceito* (ABC of Prejudice), led to him becoming known as “the people's rapper”.

Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos said that the enduring impact of colonialism in Mozambique is best expressed by Azagaia's song *Cães de Raça* (Purebred Dogs), which describes how today's ruling elite have adopted the practices of their former colonial rulers.

He was hated by the ruling elite, who threatened, detained and tried to buy him off. This only made him more popular, not just in Mozambique but



**Azagaia: Edson da Luz made powerful enemies who tried to push him down or buy him off. They failed.**

across the Lusophone world, and helped him to transcend the narrow confines of hip-hop – a genre that is stigmatised in Mozambique.

Thousands of people turned out for his funeral in Maputo on Tuesday, in what was perhaps the largest display of public grief since the death of President Samora Machel in 1986. It was broadcast on private television channels. Police fired tear gas on the funeral procession to prevent mourners from demonstrating outside the president's residence.

“The legends never die,” activist and academic Adriano Nuvunga told *The Continent*. ■

# FIGHT FAKE NEWS WITH REAL NEWS.

**Disinformation is often shared on closed networks like WhatsApp. That's why *The Continent* exists. Help us fight fake news by subscribing to high quality journalism, and share that instead.**



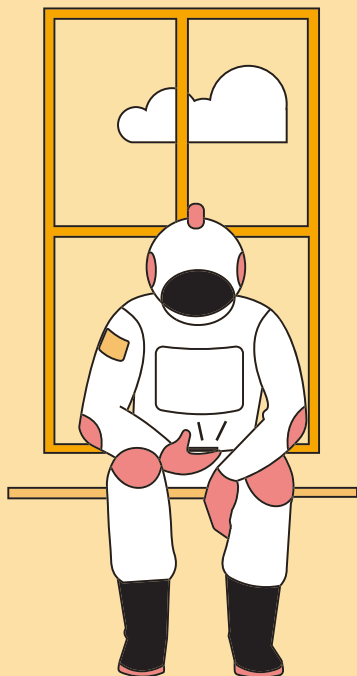
Get your copy delivered to your phone or inbox every Saturday. And if you like what you read, forward it to your friends, family and colleagues – not indiscriminately, but only with people who might appreciate it.



## HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

**Email:** Read@thecontinent.org 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



**MALAWI**

## **Cyclone Freddy's trail of destruction**

**On Sunday, Malawi was struck by one of the most powerful storms in recorded history. We are only beginning to understand the scale of the catastrophe. It is a window into a hotter world, where stronger storms wreak more havoc and destroy more lives.**

Photo: Amos Gumulira / AFP

## Josephine Chinele in Blantyre and Golden Matonga in Lilongwe

Those who experienced it and survived talk about Cyclone Freddy – one of the longest-lived and most powerful storms in history – in apocalyptic terms. They describe mountains that roar, and rivers of mud and stone that destroy everything in their path.

Beginning on Sunday, the storm dumped the equivalent of six months of rain in just six days.

Some were asleep, woken suddenly by the sounds of angry waters sweeping through villages and towns, flooding offices and crop fields, destroying roads and bridges and basic infrastructure. Parts of the country are still cut off from rescue services, electricity and telecommunications.

For the communities in the path of the storm, death and devastation is everywhere, even as they race to save the lives of people trapped in buildings or clinging on to trees.

According to Malawi's department of disaster management affairs, 326 people had been confirmed dead as of Friday morning. Another 796 people have been injured, while 201 are still missing. Over 40,000 households have been affected and some 183,159 people displaced, many of whom are now living in 317 temporary camps.

These figures, the death toll in particular, are expected to rise when it becomes possible to access more remote areas – and when electricity returns to enable better communication.

Grace Kamanga, from Chilobwe, one of the hardest hit townships in Blantyre, the country's commercial hub, told *The Continent* how she woke to her world coming apart around her.

"We were woken up by a loud noise of falling walls on Sunday night. Our house was falling! Things happened so fast. All I remember is getting out as quickly as we could ... then the screaming, everywhere. All we had were the clothes on us."

Kamanga and her family were able to find refuge in a primary school that has been hastily turned into a temporary centre for the displaced.

Others were less fortunate. Jailosi Lemani lost his wife and two children in a mudslide on the nearby Soche Hill. "Mud swallowed me and one of my children. It is by God's grace that I am talking to you," said the grief-stricken Lemani, still in his mud-stained clothes.

Outside Blantyre, districts such as Chiladzulu, Phalombe, Mulanje, Chikwawa and Nsanje all reported tales of destruction.

Whole villages and swathes of farmland swept away, leaving nothing but mud. Many people have yet to be rescued. Or their bodies recovered.

"I have never seen anything like this in my entire life," said village head Mtauchila from Chiladzulu, east of Blantyre. "We grew up only hearing about mudslides. My entire village of over 400 houses has been washed away by mud. Many people have died, many others injured."

He added: "Fields that had maize are not there anymore. I do not know what the surviving people will eat."





**Climate havoc: People struggle across a makeshift bridge in Blantyre, over flood-water caused by heavy rains following Cyclone Freddy's landfall. The cyclone is on track to become the longest-lasting storm on record. Photo: Jack McBrams/AFP**

Blantyre's main hospital, the Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital, said its mortuary was overwhelmed. President Lazarus Chakwera has declared 14 days of national mourning.

### **Anger at an overwhelmed state**

As the death toll rose, so did public anger and frustration. On social media, there were desperate pleas for help from affected villages, while the disaster management agency and the military were criticised for an inadequate response.

The scarcity of rescue helicopters – necessary to reach areas cut off from road travel – came in for particular criticism.

Malawi Defence Force spokesperson Major Emmanuel Mlelemba told *The Continent* that helicopters and other aircraft had been deployed, but that they were overwhelmed by demand.

The military of neighbouring Zambia sent two planes to assist with search and rescue operations.

"The level of devastation we are dealing with is greater than the resources we have," said President Chakwera in a televised speech.

On Thursday, he approved \$1.5-million to be spent on recovery and relief services, and appealed to the international community for more support.

Amid the grief and national trauma, there have been plenty of moving stories too of heroism and kindness.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Malawians – both in the diaspora and at home – swung into action, using social media to organise relief for the affected, donating money, blankets and food.

Schools and churches opened their



doors to accommodate the displaced.

## A new normal

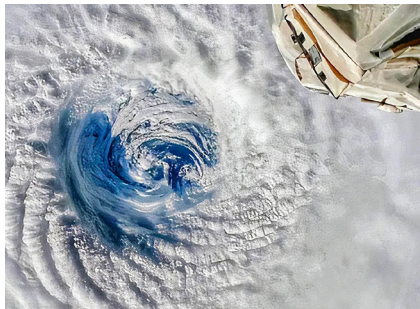
Cyclone Freddy started off the coast of Australia, and swirled across the Indian Ocean for more than a month, before getting stuck and ricocheting between the island of Madagascar and the coastline of Mozambique.

It made landfall twice in each country, killing nearly 50 people. In Mozambique, the United Nations has warned that more than 55,000 people are at risk as heavy rains continue to fall, including in areas – such as the central province of Sofala – that were badly impacted by Cyclone Freddy's first landfall on 24 February.

The World Meteorological Association says Freddy is likely the longest-lasting storm ever recorded. It has also set the record for the number of times it has weakened and then re-intensified (storms pick up energy from heat and a hotter world means more energy to power storms). And it now has the record for the most energy ever recorded in a cyclone, storing up as much as every storm put together in an average hurricane season in the United States.

Cyclone Freddy is the third destructive cyclone to hit Malawi in the last year, after cyclones Ana and Gombe – from which the country had not yet recovered.

“The previous cyclones severely damaged our water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure, along with shelters, all of which exacerbated the current cholera outbreak,” said Titus Divala, an epidemiologist. The cholera outbreak is the worst in a decade, and has



**Death spiral: Cyclone Freddy, seen from the International Space Station. The cyclone killed at least 326 Malawians this week. Photo: Nahel Belherze**

already claimed 1,660 lives.

That storms will become more powerful, and deadlier, has been predicted by scientists for several decades. Industrial-scale carbon emissions trap heat in the atmosphere, warming the world and pushing more energy into things like storms. The Indian Ocean, which fuelled Freddy, is one of the fastest warming bodies of water in the world.

In 2015, countries promised to do what they could to reduce carbon emissions and keep global heating to survivable levels. But last year, global carbon emissions hit record levels. In the past month, fossil fuel companies, from BP to Shell and Aramco, declared record profits, in the tens and hundreds of US billions of dollars.

In the US and Europe, the petrochemical industry has known about the impact it has on the climate crisis for half a century and lobbied aggressively against any action to curb its impact.

This week Malawians paid the price for those profits. ■



**Devastation:**  
Where once was  
road is now a  
river of ruin in  
Chilobwe. Photo:  
Jack McBrams

## Homes broken. Lives shattered.

**Jack McBrams**, a regular contributor to *The Continent*, lives in Blantyre. He returns to some of the townships hardest hit by the record-setting Cyclone Freddy.

**F**or my therapeutic early morning walks, I used to traverse a dirt road that went past the Manje and Soche informal settlements on Soche Mountain, going further up until I could see the city of Blantyre and the townships surrounding it in the valley below.

Malawi's second city is home to about 800,000 people. This week, Cyclone Freddy dropped record levels of rain, setting off landslides and flash floods.

When I returned to Manje later in the week, the dirt road I walked was gone. A cavernous river now flowed in its place.

On the opposite end, a muddy,

porridge-like mess was still flowing slowly from the hillside where the mudslide had swept everything downhill, leaving a 30m-wide track in its wake. A river flowed through an area where houses stood before the storm.

Local resident Steve Panganani Materab guided me through knee-deep mud and rivulets, past ruined houses and fleeing residents, to the top of the mountain where the mudslide started.

"You see all this place right here?" he motioned to the open muddy space before us. "Before Sunday afternoon, there were a lot of houses here. They are

all gone. Just like that.”

He said hundreds of residents are still buried beneath the mud. The government says 43 people died in Manje, but residents say the figure is much higher.

According to locals, the mudslide happened at midday on Sunday. “First, we saw a high wall of water from a distance,” said Alfred Mbule, as he helped dig through the mud, looking for bodies. “Then thundering sounds as rocks tumbled from the mountain. Then the mud flowed, swallowing people and houses.”

On Thursday, I accompanied the military on a recovery mission in the township. In one demolished house, I watched as they dug out the remains of a middle-aged man no one seemed able to identify.

Mbule reckoned his was one of the many bodies that had been washed down from the houses uphill.

None of the five people recovered on Thursday morning were identified before they were transported to the mortuary.

As I walked back to my car, I met a group of prisoners heading up the mountain to help a prison warden move his property from his wrecked house.

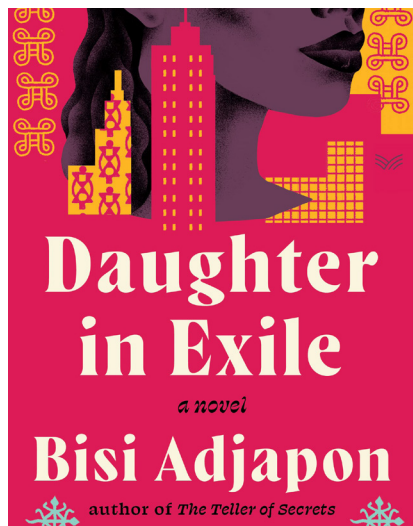
One of them looked up to me, nodded and remarked in the local language: “We have problems, but these problems are worse than ours.”

More than half of the Malawians declared dead in the cyclone died in Chilobwe when a landslide swept away houses and residents as they slept on Saturday night.

Fadila Njolomole, a 19-year-old resident of Chilobwe who lost her best friend in the disaster, said: “You can’t mourn ... everyone is bereaved around this area. There is a lot of devastation. We have no time to mourn. Everyone just has to bury their dead.” ■



Bereft: Manje residents search for bodies as an excavator clears a path on Thursday. Photo: Jack McBrams



## Highs & Lola: How to survive your author

**Friendship and fortitude  
conspire to ward off the  
wearying hardships of  
leaving (and finding) home**

**Jacqueline Nyathi**

**I**n *Daughter in Exile* by Bisi Adjapon, Akua Olivia – Lola, as she calls herself – is young and carefree, and thriving in the expat community of Dakar in the mid-1990s. She has left her mother and sister in Ghana, and isn't looking back.

Unexpectedly, she meets and falls in love with a marine who is stationed at the United States Embassy, and he persuades her to move to the US to be with him.

Naively, she travels to the US without him and winds up in wintry New York, pregnant and alone. What follows is the story of Lola's precarity, exploitation and survival against the worst odds. She is passed from hand to hand, and home to home, even as she refuses to go back to Ghana "empty-handed", as she sees it.

Lola's arc is almost implausible: Adjapon throws everything at her. To Lola's great credit, though, she survives her author.

Beautifully woven through the story, and heading each chapter, are references to Adinkra symbols – at once connecting with Lola's present circumstances and calling back to her background in Ghana. Threaded in, too, are many sly asides meant just for African readers, but let us not spoil those for each other here.

Adjapon's novel of migration and belonging, of friendship and of coming of age, will resonate with so many who will identify with Lola's struggle to remain in her chosen country. Her story is very much the story of the communities we make when we're at the mercy of indifferent bureaucratic processes. People who are good. People who are bad. People who – at different times, in different ways – are both.

*Daughter in Exile* is a great addition to our new African canon. Highly recommended. ■

# Way of water: Do we sink or swim?

**N**ext week's UN 2023 Water Conference, the first since 1977, is billed as "a once-in-a-generation opportunity" to unite the world behind an action agenda for water and sanitation for all.

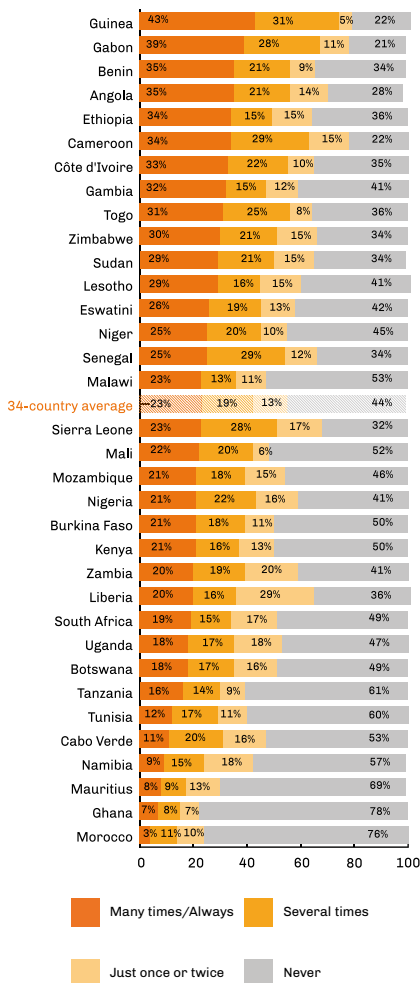
It's a high-stakes moment for Africa, where a majority of people still suffer shortages of safe water.

Afrobarometer surveys in 34 African countries found that, on average, 56% of citizens say they went without enough clean water for household use at least once in the previous year. Almost a quarter (23%) suffered this form of deprivation "many times" or "always."

Frequent water shortages affected about four in 10 households in Guinea (43%) and Gabon (39%). In contrast, fewer than one in 10 Moroccans (3%), Ghanaians (7%), Mauritians (8%), and Namibians (9%) reported frequently going without enough water.

"Accelerating change," the theme of World Water Day (22 March), is critical for a continent where clean water deprivation persists. On average across 30 countries included in each of the last four survey rounds, the proportion of respondents who went without enough water actually increased by four percentage points over the past decade. ■

## Going without enough clean water | 34 African countries | 2019/2021



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



# 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

"And the Oscar for worst take goes to the afrobeat-seat whineathon!"



- 1\_** Gulu, Jinja and Mbarara are cities in which country?
- 2\_** Hwange National Park is which country's largest nature reserve?
- 3\_** What colour is the star in the middle of Senegal's flag?
- 4\_** Mohammed VI is which country's king?
- 5\_** Which Nigerian singer-songwriter was nominated in the best original song category at this year's Academy Awards?
- 6\_** What is the name of the cyclone that ripped through Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe beginning in February?
- 7\_** In which year did Ellen Johnson Sirleaf become Liberia's president?
- 8\_** What is Mauritania's official language?
- 9\_** Name the Libyan archaeological site pictured above.
- 10\_** Of which country is Patrice Talon president?

## HOW DID I DO?

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



# **The secret Congolese mine that ended the second world war – and inspired Wakanda**

**The Shinkolobwe mine in the DRC produced the uranium that made America's nuclear weapons programme possible. Why do so few know its name?**

**Roger Peet**

**I**n the high desert plains of eastern Washington in the United States, there is a big blue bend in the vast and winding Columbia River that surrounds a site known as the Hanford Reservation. Spaced along the banks of the river at regular

intervals are huge windowless concrete structures: decommissioned nuclear reactors built in the early 1940s to produce enriched uranium and plutonium for America's nuclear weapons programme. The reactors surround one of the most highly contaminated landscapes on the planet, with vast fields of underground

tanks and hectares of polluted soil that contain the radioactive legacy of the rush to build the first nuclear bombs.

That contamination isn't unique, however. It shares a certain quality with several other sites found around the United States, where America's atomic weapons programme (called the Manhattan Project) processed the uranium ore that its scientists and military authorities needed to design those bombs, construct them, and finally use them over two cities in Japan – and then to build thousands more. These sites, from Hanford to the poisoned suburbs of St Louis and Cincinnati, to crumbling industrial structures in Buffalo and Middlesex, New York, all show the residue of what is known as K-65 contamination.

This is the name given to waste left behind from the processing of a very specific body of highly concentrated uranium ore; in fact, the most highly concentrated uranium that has ever been found on the planet.

The source of that uranium was a mine in the Katanga region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, known by the name Shinkolobwe. First developed under Belgian colonial administration in the 1920s, the Shinkolobwe mine's incredibly potent uranium ore (some of it at 65% concentration, when most mines struggle to produce ore at .03%) was ignored at first in favour of mining radium to supply the craze for radiation cures sweeping Europe. European scientists had just started to imagine the explosive power found in the nucleus of the uranium atom when the second world war broke out,

and Shinkolobwe's special rocks suddenly became subjects of an international struggle for control of a power that seemed likely to reshape the world.

## Dirty secrets

America's wartime military authorities worked hard to ensure that the otherworldly potency of Shinkolobwe ore was kept from their enemies. Ultimately, this ore helped to win the war for the Americans – nuclear bombs were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945, forcing Japan to surrender – and was subsequently used to develop America's vast arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Wartime spy networks that had denied the use of Shinkolobwe ore to the Nazis turned their attention towards concealment of the mine's location, and even its name, with the word "Shinkolobwe" stricken from maps for decades.

When Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba rose to prominence in the late 1950s, with a promise to liberate the nation of Congo from long years of colonial and post-colonial exploitation, the intelligence machines of both the US and Belgium moved frantically to prevent his victorious nationalist movement from seizing control of territories of the nation's southeast. This is where most of the country's mines, and Shinkolobwe itself, were located.

Just months after taking power in June 1960, Lumumba was ousted with the collusion of American intelligence. He was renditioned to the province of Katanga, where he was later assassinated



### Real-life Wakanda: Shinkolobwe inspired *Black Panther* creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby

just 80km from Shinkolobwe under the supervision of agents of the Belgian mining consortium Union Minière.

In 1960, the mine was closed and the entrance filled with concrete.

### Radioactive legacy

The story of a secret mine possessing ores of immense power inspired American comic artists Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1977 to invent the character of Black Panther, an African king who rules a technologically advanced secret kingdom powered by a magical metal, zealously guarding it against a rapacious outside world that would exploit it.

Today the mine is abandoned, after the extraction of all of the usable uranium and the ensuing six decades of artisanal and informal mining for cobalt and other minerals. There has been speculation that Russian enterprises have expressed interest in reopening the mine, even

though the uranium is long gone.

Congo's mineral wealth continues to power much of the world's rapid technological development, although very little of that wealth returns to improve the lives of the people, including children, who work the ore. The rare metals that power our smartphones (themselves employing technologies developed in the service of the American defence industry) are dug by miners working in conditions that are worse than those of Shinkolobwe's uranium miners in the 1940s.

The mine's legacy is still felt in communities of the descendants of expatriate Congolese mineworkers in South Africa, where a group, the Congolese Civil Society of South Africa, has for the past six years organised an annual conference called the Missing Link. This event has the goal of bringing awareness of the history of Shinkolobwe to a world audience, and linking the histories of people around the world affected by what was done with Shinkolobwe's ore.

Isaiah Mombilo and Yves Salankang Sa Ngol, directors of the group, speak passionately about the effects that decades of labour in the Shinkolobwe mine had on people who are now elders in their community, as well as their descendants.

Cancers, in-utero deformations, and other health consequences are reminders of a history of brutal manual labour performed to bring to light some of the rarest and most potent ores on the planet.

The stories of the people who did this work, and who survived the history of the Shinkolobwe mine, are only beginning to be told. ■

# East Africa

## Rwanda sails against region's tidal wave of homophobia

**Uganda and Kenya want new laws to make it harder for people to love and live. A similar wave of LGBTQI hate swept the region in 2009. As then, Rwanda is the outlier.**

**Samuel Baker Byansi**

**A**nti-gay hysteria is once again sweeping across East Africa – except in Rwanda. In Uganda, legislators are considering a new law that seeks to criminalise even identifying as LGBTQI. Same-sex relations are already illegal and punishable with life in jail under a colonial-era law. In Burundi, 24 people were charged and imprisoned last week on homosexuality charges. The law allows people to be jailed for up to two years for having a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender.

There was a severe backlash in Kenya to a supreme court ruling affirming that groups advocating for LGBTQI rights have freedom of association – and therefore can register as NGOs. The country's education authorities launched an anti-gay surveillance programme for schools, and a member of Parliament took leave to prepare a law that further criminalises LGBTQI people. Same-sex relations are already punishable with 14

years in prison. Things appear quieter in Tanzania but same-sex relations are punishable with life in prison.

Rwanda is the only country in the region that does not criminalise homosexuality, having resisted campaigns to do that in 2009. Deputy government spokesperson Alain Mukurarinda told *The Continent* that: "Everyone is equal before the law; no one can be punished for what the law does not define as a crime."

He added that Rwandan law also explicitly "prohibits anyone from intruding into people's private lives when no crime has been committed."

However, Rwandan activists say the absence of criminalising laws is not enough. Hassna Murenzi, director of Feminist Action Development Ambition, said churches spread homophobic messages, people lose their jobs due to their sexuality, and families abuse or ostracise LGBTQI children.

"We appreciate there are no laws that criminalise homosexuality – but there is also a need for protective laws," she said. ■



# Red carpet at night, Big Man's delight



**Continental  
Drift**

**Samira Sawlani**

Many religions encourage us not to judge others, lest we be judged ourselves. Many religions however failed to anticipate Hollywood's Academy Awards. A night not just for others to judge movies, but for the entire world and their mother's uncle to judge absolutely everyone in sight, with precisely zero lest-ing to worry about.

Good thing, too. There we were sat on the sofa in mismatched leggings and hoodie, unwashed hair, chip crumbs everywhere, weighing in on everyone's red carpet outfits. Too much? Too little! Too messy. Too snappy? Too slappy! (Too soon? Too bad. Hypocrisy for whomst.)

Oscar and friends did make us wonder though: What would it be like if there were red carpet events ahead of African Union summits, and what our favourite leaders would dress like.

Obviously the Coupdashians from Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso would bring us their signature military chic (or *camo-plage* as they call it on the French Riviera), Presidents Museveni and Kiir would of course engage in the battle of the hats, while President Sassou-Nguesso,



**Bin or Benin? President Patrice Talon simply blue fashion critics away.** Photo: Présidence de la République du Bénin

who is apparently known to be partial to shirts from luxury Parisian boutiques, would no doubt compete with Benin's Patrice Talon for best suit.

Alas, Cameroon's President Paul Biya, who has also been known to favour European couture, is unlikely to be there as he may be at home in Geneva.

Of course, when the gang are asked, "Who are you wearing", they will give an Oscar-worthy performance and reply, "I dug this out of the back of my wardrobe" – instead of, you know, "the blood, tears and sweat of taxpayers back home."

We don't think teargas counts as aftershave but should common scents not

prevail, then Senegal would be the place for them to stock up.

This week supporters of Senegalese opposition leader Ousmane Sonko held protests in Dakar ahead of his appearance in court, where he is being sued for supposedly defaming the country's minister for tourism. He says the charges are politically motivated: if found guilty it could mean that he would be unable to vie for the presidency in next year's elections.

As his motorcade headed to court, his supporters joined the convoy – and teargas ensued. Police and protesters clashed in a violent face-off, with video footage also showing Sonko himself being forcibly removed from his vehicle.

Later, his lawyers secured a delay in proceedings, saying Sonko required urgent medical treatment.

## Delayed reaction

Mali was supposed to be getting ready for its own democratic premiere in the week ahead, with Colonel Assimi Goïta set to present the new draft Constitution to the country.

Instead, the ruling junta has decided to postpone Monday's constitutional referendum – seen as a key part of getting the country back to civilian rule. They promised they'd get around to it eventually but we're sure veins throbbed violently on Ecowas foreheads when they heard. Much judging all round, no doubt.

Over in Gabon a rare performance was delivered by the country's minister for transport, Brice Paillat, who ... resigned? We weren't sure what that meant. It's been a while. Had to look it up.

Appropriate. His resignation came after a ferry carrying 161 passengers from Libreville to Port-Gentil sank, leading to the deaths of 21 people, while 16 others are still missing. An investigation has been launched into the matter and whether justice will be served remains to be seen – but a government minister actually resigning? It'll never catch on.

## More than 40,000 households were destroyed when Cyclone Freddy hit Malawi

While we were pondering the relative chicness of our leaders, questioning why Angela Bassett or Stephanie Hsu did not win best supporting actress, or calling out the ignorati on social media who had the *audacity* to cast aspersions on Tems's sartorial choices, it's been a different kind of week for many of our friends in Malawi and Mozambique, who are reeling from the fallout of Cyclone Freddy's comeback tour this week. It caused chaos and destruction, claiming the lives of more than 326 people, with the death toll likely to rise considerably.

More than 40,000 households have been destroyed in Malawi, and in Mozambique tens of thousands people have been left homeless. Such disasters are hitting harder and more frequently, and they are *not* limited to southern Africa.

The whole world needs to wake up and accelerate plans to mitigate the violent threat of climate change.

Lest. ■

# If we must reap the whirlwind, let us first sow some safety

**Lazarus Chakwera's government needs to do more to protect its people from the effects of natural disasters**

**Kelly Napolo**

**M**alawi's southern region has again been hit by a cyclone, before it even had a chance to recover from cyclones Ana and Gome last year. Tropical Cyclone Freddy has killed nearly 330 people since landing on 10 March. As climate disaster scenarios play out with ever-increasing frequency, there is a pressing need for Malawi to develop the capacity and infrastructure to protect its people and their livelihoods.

President Lazarus Chakwera has declared a state of disaster in the affected districts. According to the department of disaster management, the cyclone "induced flooding, strong winds and mudslides. These have displaced 40,000 households, injured over 700 people and more deaths are expected.

Schools are being used as camps for people who have lost their homes and roads have been washed away. Airplanes could not land at Chileka Airport, leading to cascading delays in flights in and out of Malawi. Significantly, parts of the country had no electricity for five days, as the cyclone forced the country's power utility to shut down its hydropower stations.

The government has set aside \$1.5-million to help victims, and is appealing for international help. But the extent and frequency of such disasters are prompting calls for the state to do more to protect Malawians in the longer term by accelerating climate resilience measures.

Some such projects are already underway with international partners like the World Bank, but analysts from the Institute for Security Studies have flagged concerns that Malawi needs to work much harder to "protect itself from climate-related threats".

An important starting point would be to ensure that the power utility is able to continue functioning during a disaster, and to embark on infrastructural projects to mitigate the destruction caused by devastating cyclone-induced flooding.

Until this work is done, every climate event will threaten not just more destruction, but Malawi's capacity to even begin recovering from disaster. ■



*Kelly Napolo is a fourth year journalism student at Malawi University of Business and Applied Science. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa.*

# The Big Picture

Photo: John Wessels/AFP/  
Getty Images

**Shine:** In Dakar, people wave flags and phones at a rally before the trial of Ousmane Sonko, which was postponed on Thursday after police cracked down on protesters in the capital. The opposition leader is being sued by the minister of tourism for defamation, but critics say it is a sidelining tactic by President Macky Sall ahead of a bid to change the Constitution so that he can run for a third term in next year's election.



The Continent is published by the Adamela Trust, a not-for-profit organisation that is dedicated to fostering quality journalism. It upholds strict editorial standards. For queries and complaints, or to make a donation, please contact [read@thecontinent.org](mailto:read@thecontinent.org)