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The Continent

‘African quality’

Too toxic for Europe. Fine for Africa.



Photo: petekarici



THIS WEEK'S COVER STORY:

TotalEnergies is sponsoring Africa's biggest football competition – presumably hoping that we won't notice how dirty its core business is (p20). And the fuel business is very dirty indeed, according to a new investigation into so-called 'African quality' petrol that is deemed too toxic for Europeans – but perfectly fine for us (p15).

Inside:

- **'My Saturday treat':** *The Continent*, in your words (p3)
- **Horn of Africa:** Ethiopia wants a port and Somaliland wants recognition (p11)
- **Photo essay:** Orthodox Ethiopia celebrates Christmas (p22)
- **Happy 2024:** Just 40% of Africans expect things to improve (p25)
- **Review:** The difficulty of accepting the DRC's history as it was (p26)
- **Analysis:** It's now or never for Zimbabwe's opposition (p31)

WE'RE BACK!

Welcome to Season 13. We hope you're rested and ready for the year ahead, it's going to be a lot. So expect a lot from us! Starting off with some pretty big news: We've moved into our new home, the non-profit All Protocol Observed. We also have a new editor-in-chief! (See page 4) And we're glad to have you along for what promises to be a heck of a ride. It's a wild world out there, so let's all look out for each other in 2024.



The Continent proudly displays the "FAIR" stamp of the Press Council of South Africa, indicating our commitment to adhere to the Code of Ethics for Print and online media which prescribes that our reportage is truthful, accurate and fair. Should you wish to lodge a complaint about our news coverage, please lodge a complaint on the Press Council's website, www.presscouncil.org.za or email the complaint to enquiries@ombudsman.org.za. Contact the Press Council on +2711 4843612.

READER SURVEY

The Continent – in your words

How do you reckon we're doing, we asked in our annual survey, and you answered. "OK coverage of some African matters," gushed one reader.

We'll take it! Thousands of responses were even kinder, many offering honest critiques, thoughtful advice and warm

encouragement – humbling and thrilling us in equal measure.

Your thoughts will help set the tone for the four seasons and 40 editions of *The Continent* that we've got for you in 2024, and your feedback will shape us as we continue to learn and grow.

We asked how you describe *The Continent* to others:

All-African with a big heart, large ambitions and a small budget.

Biting criticism of Africa with love as the engine.

Brief but dense in all the right ways.

It's a dope-ass magazine about the African continent ... packed with knowledge the Western media could NEVER have.

The first independent African media outlet with the potential to go global in a big way!

The Continent is journalism resurrected in the age of misinformation.

Afrocentric. ● Revolutionary. ● Trustworthy. ● Necessary.

Inclusive, informational and entertaining.

It's the thinking person's weekly guide to Africa

It's a well thought-out newspaper that is still tied to the sensibilities of ordinary actual human beings who care about Africa.

Great free source of African news from Africans themselves!

There's been a coup

New season, new home, new editor



Lydia Namubiru in Kampala

When I speak of *The Continent*, my words get almost sickly-sweet. I was not involved in its founding but wrote a story that got into the first issue. When I got my copy, I was astounded by how much high quality journalism could fit into a PDF newspaper that weighed just 10 megabytes. I continue to be astounded.

I also continue to read the paper from start to finish. But to be fair, I now have to, having become one of its senior editors in November 2021.

Speaking of being editor... Last October, in a bloodless coup, I replaced Simon Allison as editor-in-chief. As in all good coups, freedom of movement is qualified for the ousted. Mr Allison will remain in-house as our international editor, taking *The Continent's* biting, irreverent, and humorous yet serious coverage to global stories.

All coup-related protocols observed, let's move on to my grand editorial vision:

I don't have one. This paper will remain an experiment for African journalists covering Africa and its place in the world, for a primarily African audience.

In our reader survey, so many of you said so many wonderful things about what this paper has come to represent to you.

"Biting criticism of Africa with love as the engine," is perhaps my favourite in a very crowded field.

"A journalism of care," is how Siguru Wahutu, a media professor at New York University, recently described us to the Nieman Media Lab.

In this role, more than anything, I want *The Continent* to continue being a paper that deserves such high praise from you.

But in my years working for media beyond Africa, I often resented having to explain Africa's wonderfully complex communities and issues "in such a way that a grandmother in Arkansas would care". So the second thing I most care about building is a good intellectual and professional home for African journalists.

How? By experimenting. And experiments are blind without feedback. So, all I ask of you is to keep engaging with us. Tell us when what we are doing is off. Let us know when we are on track. Share good ideas you see elsewhere.

We'll watch the world together, and build the future as we go.

NAMIBIA**Will the OG genocidaires please sit down**

Israel's war in Gaza, which has killed over 24,100 Palestinians, entered its 100th day this week, even as it defends itself at the International Court of Justice where South Africa has accused it of genocide. Germany has said it will support Israel's defence in the case, prompting Namibia's President Hage Geingob to call out Germany's "inability to draw lessons from its horrific history", pointing out that "on Namibian soil, Germany committed the first genocide of the 20th Century." From 1904 to 1908, imperial Germany killed 34,000 Herero and Nama people in an ethnic cleansing and collective punishment campaign.

BURUNDI-RWANDA**Border closed as accusations fly**

Burundi unilaterally closed its borders with Rwanda after President Évariste Ndayishimiye accused Paul Kagame's government in Kigali of training Red Tabara rebels. Red Tabara claimed responsibility for an attack near Burundi's border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which itself accuses Kigali of supporting the M23 rebel group. The UN has warned these tensions may escalate into regional war.



Congo line: Monusco troops in DRC have been given their demarching orders. Photo: Alexis Huguet/AFP

DRC**UN sets deadline for blue helmet brigade**

The United Nations says its peacekeepers will completely withdraw from the Democratic Republic of the Congo by December 2024. UN troops, on a mission best known by its Monusco acronym, have been in the DRC for 25 years, ostensibly to stabilise it. But the country's eastern region remains extremely unstable, except perhaps for a kilometre radius of the Monusco fortress on the shore of Lake Kivu in Goma. Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi, who was recently re-elected in a widely disputed vote, has been pushing for the withdrawal.

BOXING

Sportswashing has a certain ring to it

Former heavyweight world champ Anthony Joshua will fight Francis Ngannou, the Cameroonian mixed martial arts fighter-turned boxer, on 8 March – in Riyadh, of all places. Saudi Arabia has in recent years invested significantly in hosting top-flight sporting events, including the coming Fifa World Cup. Its critics say the kingdom is using sports to launder an image soiled by its frequent human rights abuses.

KENYA

Pastor to be charged for 191 child deaths

Prosecutors in Kenya plan to charge Paul Mackenzie – the pastor who instructed his followers to starve themselves and their children – with the murders of 191 children who died as a result. Their bodies were exhumed last year from his compound in Shakahola forest in the Malindi coastal province. He will be charged in two weeks, along with 30 of his associates, should a preliminary mental assessment find them fit for trial.



UNITED STATES

Iowa boosts Trump's chances in America's race to the bottom

Despite the 91 criminal charges he is facing, on Monday, Donald Trump came out on top in the first of the 2024

Republican primaries – in which party members choose their candidate for president – in Iowa. If he wins his party's ticket as expected, and isn't barred by the courts, the November presidential election will pit him against incumbent President Joe Biden, whose support for Israel's war in Gaza has sent his approval ratings plummeting to a record low.



Rising tide: Trevor Noah's arc involved raising other Africans' profiles, too.

Photo: Kevin Mazur/Getty Images

CULTURE

Trevor Noah makes history in America

Patricia's son, Trevor Noah, made history in the United States this week. The South African star became the first black host to win the country's top accolade for TV comedians – the Emmy award for outstanding talk series, in recognition of his final year on *The Daily Show*, which he departed at the end of 2023. Among the celebrants on stage with him were two other African comics he works with: Ugandan Joseph Opio and South African David Kibuuka.

UGANDA

The Non-Aligned Movement meets in Kampala

It's hard not to get dragged into someone else's geopolitical standoff, in a global order that demands you take a side on things like Russia's war on Ukraine or Israel's war in Gaza. The non-aligned movement has been an attempt to build solidarity for countries that don't want to pick a side – even though in reality its members often do. In Kampala this week, over two dozen countries met to argue about Israel and a host of other issues. One thing participants did seem to agree on was the need for the Global South to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

ANGOLA

Twelve new criminal charges against Isabel dos Santos

Angolan prosecutors brought 12 new charges against Isabel dos Santos, which she has rejected as “politically motivated”. She is accused of embezzlement and fraud when she headed the country's oil company, Sanangol, between 2016 and 2017. This was at the tail end of the 38-year presidency of her father, José Eduardo dos Santos. Then, she was touted as Africa's richest woman with a \$2-billion fortune. Now beleaguered with asset freezes around the world, she says she is struggling to pay rent or her children's tuition fees.

NIGERIA

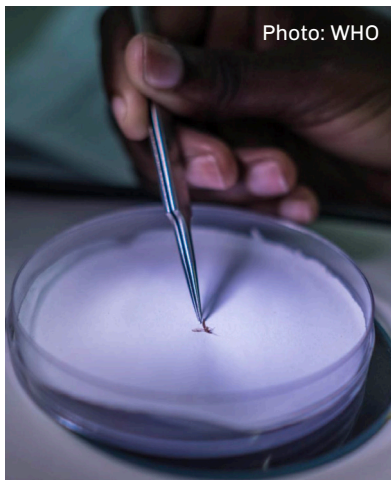
**Deadly explosion
rips through Ibadan**

At least five people died and more than 70 others were injured in a blast that destroyed 20 buildings in Ibadan, Nigeria's second-largest city. Authorities have linked the Tuesday night blast to dynamite that was stored in one of the buildings by miners who are allegedly unlicensed. They added later that some of the owners of the company believed to have stored the explosives are foreigners, raising suspicion that the authorities are going for a scapegoat rather than investigating the incident.

CENTRAL AFRICA

**Strongmen dig in
heels when putsch
comes to shove**

The Central African Economic and Monetary Community (Cemac) maintains sanctions against Gabon, despite local approval of the country's coup. In 2022 coup leader Brice Oligui Nguema ended 56 years of father-son rule, ousting Ali Bongo who ruled for 14 years after succeeding Omar Bongo. Protests by civil society groups opposed to sanctions failed to sway Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang Nguema, Cameroon's Paul Biya and Congo's Denis Sassou Nguesso, who are each nearing half a century in power.



HEALTH

**We are closer to
a malaria-free
continent than ever**

Days after the World Health Organisation declared Cabo Verde the third African country to eradicate malaria, Cameroon will become the first to roll out routine malaria vaccination nationwide. Before Cape Verde's malaria-free certification on 12 January, Mauritius and Algeria were certified – in 1973 and 2019 respectively. Cameroon, which received 300,000 doses of the RTSS malaria vaccine earlier tested and piloted in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi, will include them in its routine childhood vaccination, starting later this month. According to the WHO, 95% of global malaria cases and 96% of related deaths in 2021 were in Africa.

Zimbabwe

Millions need food aid as El Niño conspires with drought to devastate communities

In a heated world, erratic and extreme weather is increasing food insecurity and destroying livelihoods

Kiri Rupiah

On Wednesday, the United Nations World Food Programme said 2.7-million people in Zimbabwe are in need of food aid – thanks in no small part to El Niño aggravating an already severe and ongoing drought in southern Africa.

El Niño is a cyclical climate pattern where the surface waters in the central and eastern Pacific Ocean get unusually warm, driving extreme changes in weather across the world. Some places flood and others dry up. It happens every two to seven years.

This is happening on top of a planet that is already heated from the impact of industrialisation and its greenhouse gas emissions. Last year was the hottest year ever recorded and scientists expect 2024 to be even hotter.

In Zimbabwe, climate change is fuelling a drought that has already diminished food reserves. Now El Niño is making rainfall erratic in the

rural areas where 60% of the country's 15-million people live and grow the food that feeds the nation. Subsistence farmers are especially hard hit. But so too are urban food buyers for whom food prices have risen steeply even as the economy continues its seemingly ceaseless freefall.

The consequences of this confluence have been devastating. According to the UN Children's Fund, the El Niño of 2015 and 2016 significantly reduced rainfall and caused extreme dry spells in Zimbabwe, leading to the country's worst malnutrition rates in 15 years. Nearly 33,000 children urgently needed treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

And it's not just the country's people at risk. Last month, aerial footage from the International Fund for Animal Welfare showed that at least 100 elephants had died in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe's largest national park.

Authorities and conservation groups attributed the die-off to the impact of climate change and El Niño. ■

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The Continent



Photo: Ed Ram/AFP

Abiy's port in a storm

Landlocked Ethiopia wants a port, any port. Somaliland has a coastline and wants someone to recognise the self-governing territory as a fully-fledged country. So a deal was made that could redraw the map. But everyone else objects.

Samuel Getachew in Addis Ababa, Hussein Mohamed in Mogadishu and Simon Allison

In the last week of 2023, Somaliland's president Muse Bihi took a short flight to neighbouring Djibouti. After a long and difficult year, he needed a win.

He did not get one there.

Bihi leads one of the most politically unique – and diplomatically sensitive – places in the world. Somaliland declared

its independence in 1991, and has governed itself ever since. It has its own flag, its own currency, and its own national anthem. But no one else recognises its sovereignty, and its territory is claimed by the federal government of Somalia.

In Djibouti, Bihi met with that country's president, Ismail Guelleh, and Somalia's president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. He was hoping to advance negotiations on Somaliland's status. Instead, he was told in no uncertain

terms that recognition of Somaliland's independence was off the table.

Frustrated, Bihi visited Addis Ababa, where, on New Year's Day, he made a dramatic deal with Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed – one that could redraw the map of the Horn of Africa.

The text of the deal – which at this stage is just a memorandum of understanding, with details to be hammered out later – has not been made public. It was signed in such haste that even members of Bihi's cabinet were not consulted beforehand.

According to official sources, the deal will give landlocked Ethiopia access to a 20km strip of Somaliland's coastline for the next 50 years. In return, Ethiopia will recognise Somaliland as an independent state – or so Bihi's administration claims. Ethiopia has not confirmed this detail, but it has not denied it, either.

The quest for international recognition has been the driving force in Somaliland's politics for more than three decades, and to be the president that delivered Ethiopia's support would secure Bihi's legacy – and potentially his re-election later this year.

“Recognition by any state, but particularly Ethiopia – which is the seat of the African Union, a regional power with considerable clout – would potentially create some momentum behind Somaliland's quest for recognition,” said Matt Bryden, co-founder of Sahan Research, a Nairobi-based think tank.

The deal with Ethiopia also helps to distract from some of Bihi's other, more immediate problems. He is facing enormous political opposition to his



Bihi sells seashore: Somaliland's leader is trading a port for recognition of its sovereignty. Photo: Mustafa Saeed/AFP

decision to delay presidential elections, which were originally scheduled for 2022. They are now planned for late 2024.

And his military engagement last year in the contested Las Anod region backfired spectacularly: not only was Somaliland defeated by local militias, losing a significant chunk of its military capacity in the process; but the human rights violations committed in the process totally undermined Somaliland's reputation as a regional bastion of democracy and the rule of law.

Against this backdrop, the deal with Ethiopia is a political lifeline for Bihi – and should help him shore up his power base in Somaliland's heartlands. If, that is, Ethiopia upholds its side of the bargain.

Running dry

Abiy Ahmed was supposed to visit Hargeisa this week. At least that's what sources in Somaliland's presidency hinted to the local press corps, who spent the



**One-star review:
Somali students
in Mogadishu
protest against
Somaliland's deal
with Ethiopia.**

Photo: Abdishukri
Haybe/AFP

week anxiously tracking flights online. He would have been the first-ever foreign head of government to visit Somaliland's capital city – but he never arrived.

Abiy has been under immense pressures of his own. Tensions still simmer in Ethiopia's Tigray region, after the conclusion of a brutal civil war in 2021 – won by Abiy's federal forces, with a lot of help from Turkish drones. A new conflict is brewing in the Amhara region, where the Fano militias – originally empowered by Abiy to fight in Tigray – feel abandoned by his government. The relationship with neighbouring Eritrea has frayed badly in the wake of the Tigray conflict.

Domestically, a sluggish economy, hit hard by the Tigray war, has led to a sharp rise in the cost of living.

So Abiy, too, needs a win – and for an Ethiopian leader, wins don't come much

bigger than access to a port. Ethiopia is the world's most populous landlocked country. Its port access disappeared when, after a bitter civil war, Eritrea declared its independence in 1991, leaving 120-million people without a direct route to the sea.

This has had enormous political and economic repercussions. The United Nations estimates that landlocked developing countries are on average 20% less developed than they would be if they had access to the sea.

"Effectively, as a country you are crippled," said Timothy Walker, who researches African maritime issues at the Institute for Security Studies. "Without it, you are always at a disadvantage."

Currently, most of Ethiopia's trade goes through the port of Djibouti, which costs Ethiopia an estimated \$1.5-billion every

year in fees – and leaves it vulnerable to any policy changes by Djibouti’s government.

In recent years Abiy, who wants to turn Ethiopia into a continental superpower, has made sea access into a nationalist rallying cry. “Ethiopia has a natural, historical, political and legitimate right for access to the Red Sea,” he said in a speech last year, saying that the rapidly-growing population cannot continue to live in “a geographic prison”.

The proposed deal with Somaliland would undoubtedly help Ethiopia break free from this prison – but not everyone thinks it is a good idea.

Choppy waters

International support for the deal has been non-existent. The African Union, the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation have all reaffirmed their support for Somalia’s territorial integrity. So too have the United States and the European Union.

Unsurprisingly, the reaction has been strongest in Somalia itself, with a furious President Mohamud declaring the deal “null and void” on national television. “We will defend our territory and we will die for it,” he said, later warning that the deal could strengthen Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab.

The bombastic rhetoric disguises several fundamental weaknesses, however. “Somalia doesn’t have an army capable of projecting influence beyond its borders. It barely controls parts of southern Somalia,” said Sahar Research’s Bryden.

More significant still is the presence

of large numbers of Ethiopian troops within Somalia itself – there to secure vast swathes of territory against Al-Shabaab. Were they to withdraw, there would be a serious security vacuum across southern Somalia which the federal government does not have the capacity to fill.

The UN estimates landlocked developing countries are on average 20% less developed than they would be if they had access to the sea.

“The federal government in Mogadishu is in a difficult position,” said Dr Peter Chonka, a senior lecturer in global digital cultures at King’s College London. “The irony here is that for all of the protests about Somalia’s sovereignty, the federal government and the federal member states still need Ethiopia to be an active security partner within the country against Al-Shabaab.”

That leaves Ethiopia, for now, in the driver’s seat. But pushing ahead with the controversial deal is not without risks for Abiy: neighbours Djibouti, Egypt and Eritrea have both signalled their unhappiness with his plan, further raising regional tensions.

Relations with Egypt are already poor after Ethiopia opened a giant hydroelectric dam on the Nile River.

The vociferous diplomatic resistance may explain why Abiy has not yet travelled to Somaliland to seal the deal – and why the proposed port will remain in the centre of a diplomatic storm for some time to come. ■

Inside the ‘African quality’ fuel scandal

European ports are being used as trading hubs for fuel that is too dirty – and dangerous – to be sold in the EU. No prizes for guessing where it ends up instead.

Photo: Delali Adogla-Bessa



Marian Ansah in Accra, Steven Vanden Bussche in Antwerp and Bram Logger in Amsterdam

In the energy industry, the cheapest, dirtiest petrol is referred to as “African quality”.

This type of petrol, laced with high levels of toxic substances, is banned

in Europe. But major international oil traders, including Trafigura and Vitol, continue to sell this dirty fuel to West African countries, despite the proven risks to people’s health and the environment.

In doing so, they are bypassing efforts designed to improve the air quality of West African cities, according to a months-long investigation by *The*

Continent, conducted in partnership with investigative journalism platforms *Apache* and *Spit* (in Belgium and the Netherlands respectively).

A dirty business

Low-quality petrol and diesel are a major problem for air quality in West Africa. These dirty fuels contain sulphur and benzene, which can cause cancer, as well as manganese, which damages engine parts, particulate filters and catalytic converters. The potential health hazard is severe: in 2016, the Swiss NGO Public Eye estimated that a ban on high-sulphur fuels could prevent tens of thousands of premature deaths. The problem is so common that car mechanics in Accra, for example, regularly text warnings to their customers: “Be careful people! There is bad fuel in the pump again.”

The European Union has tightened its standards for sulphur in petrol in recent decades, allowing just 10 parts per million. But the regulations in most of Africa are much less stringent. The Economic Community of West African States allows

up to five times as much sulphur, although not all member states abide by this rule. Nigeria still allows up to 15 times as much.

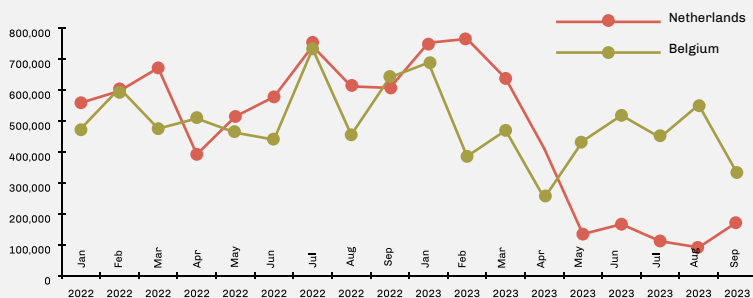
Large oil traders, often based in Switzerland, but operating worldwide – such as Trafigura and Vitol – have turned this into a revenue model. They mix fuels with much more sulphur, benzene and manganese than is permitted in Europe, and sell it on to African customers. These fuels are much cheaper, because it is expensive to remove sulphur from petrol.

The Netherlands and Belgium form an important hub in that trade. Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Antwerp are a hotspot for blending petrol. In the past five years, more than half of all petrol imported by West African countries came from the Netherlands and Belgium – and much of this would have been illegal in Europe.

Supply and demands

This changed last year, when the Netherlands introduced tough new restrictions on exporting dirty fuel. This measure was designed to protect air quality in African cities. Since April, companies

Gasoline exports from Netherlands and Belgium to West Africa



have not been allowed to export fuels with more than 50ppm sulphur or too much benzene or manganese from the Netherlands to West Africa.

“You as a producer are responsible for better standards, and therefore no longer allowed to export products you know – or should suspect – are harmful,” said Mariëtta Harjono, a fuel specialist at the Dutch government agency responsible for implementing the new law. “That is new for the major oil traders. But trading as they were used to is no longer possible.”

Harjono said the major Swiss traders attempted to evade the new rule by relying on an anti-espionage clause in Swiss law, which prohibits them from sharing fuel composition with foreign state agencies.

“Some big oil traders needed some pressure,” said Harjono, with a smile. “We have had administrative discussions and threatened with penalty payments. They now adhere to the rules and we have a good overview of what is exported from the Netherlands.”

The new regulation appears to be having an impact: an analysis of fuel trading figures shows that exports from the Netherlands to West Africa have dropped from 24.2-million litres per day to just 7.8-million since it was introduced.

But dirty fuels are still getting into West African petrol stations. “This is not a problem that the Netherlands can solve alone,” said Bright Simmons, vice-president of the Accra-based think tank Imani-Africa. “The traders are in Switzerland. The Netherlands is nothing more than a transit port.”

Tank storage companies in the

Netherlands, whose businesses have been hit hard by the new regulation, agree. “The demand for these cheap fuels in West Africa remains. If we don’t supply them, someone else will,” argued the lawyer of two tank storage companies.

Sure enough, traders appear to have already moved their operations to places with less restrictive regulations. The Belgian port of Antwerp has dramatically increased its share of fuel exports to West Africa. Simmons argues a better solution would be for an EU-wide export ban on dirty fuels – but even then, traders could just move their operations even further afield, to ports in the Middle East or Asia.

In response to questions from the investigative consortium, both Vitol and Trafigura – the world’s first- and second-largest oil traders respectively – said that they fully comply with all applicable regulations. “Only West African countries themselves can set requirements for fuels,” said Vitol. “Importers will buy the most competitively priced product that meets those local requirements, regardless of which country the fuel comes from.”

In other words: Vitol will continue to sell dirty fuels to West African countries, until those countries tell them not to.

Harjono, the Dutch fuel specialist, has another solution: “It is of course much better if crude oil from West Africa can also be refined on-site, instead of having to ship it halfway across the world twice.” ■

This research was carried out with the support of the European Journalism Fund. Additional reporting by Louis Goddard and Datadesk.



All of us: Afcon fever has taken hold in Côte d'Ivoire – and around the world. Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP

Afcon is for us – Afcon is us

This is more than just a football tournament

COMMENT

Olalekan Olatokunbo

It's easy to do a traditional tournament preview. We can get into favourites, players to watch and the best kits, but let's frame it differently. Let's celebrate.

It's a time for chaos and romance, a time to look at the beauty and complexity that is the African continent. For one month, 24 African countries go on a football pitch and try to conquer the continent. Billions of people on the continent and in the diaspora watch with

eager eyes, not just for their country but for their rival to lose. Banter is key. So is heroism: Remember that time that Didier Drogba and his Ivoirian teammates used the Afcon stage to help stop a civil war?

The level of play is world class: from Victor Osimhen, Mohamed Salah, Azzedine Ounahi, and Mohammed Kudus to the red-hot Serhou Guirassy and Yankuba Minteh, there are tons of players who are at the very top of their game.

It is also thrillingly unpredictable. By the time you read this, the first round of the group stage has already taken place,

and the second round will be well on its way. We expected host Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Morocco to win their opening matches, and they did, but who would have thought that tiny Cape Verde and Namibia could conquer heavyweights Ghana and Tunisia respectively?

These enter the annals of the other famous upsets in Afcon history, such as Madagascar beating Nigeria in 2019, Zambia beating Ghana in 2012 – and then winning the tournament – and Malawi beating Algeria in 2010.

You may complain that watching a match is not smooth or the gameplay isn't the best, but that is the essence of it. Afcon is a celebration of us. And, like

us, it is imperfectly perfect. For example, Côte d'Ivoire is hosting the tournament, but their second civil war ended just 13 years ago. Some of the countries in the tournament are younger than the competition itself.

Africa has a long history with colonialism, civil wars and oppression, among a host of many issues, and this tournament is a form of escape — a way to look forward to a hopeful future.

For a month, our history, our pain, our joy, is expressed on a football pitch. "The music of Africa is a big sound: it's the sound of a community," the late great Fela Kuti once said. Nowhere is that sound louder than on the Afcon pitch. ■

**Net result: Côte d'Ivoire's
Seko Fofana scores in the
Afcon Group A opener
against Guinea-Bissau.**
Photo: Franck Fife/AFP



Football is far too relaxed about being used for sportswashing

Luke Feltham

Another international football tournament, another dose of sportswashing. This time it's right in the name. The TotalEnergies Africa Cup of Nations kicked its first ball in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire last Saturday. Over the next month, 24 national teams will vie for the most glamorous trophy on the continent.

The French petro giant – formally just Total – has been sponsoring the tournament for a while now, its largesse distracting the public from the bad press and criticism its core businesses attract.

Like in October, when a criminal complaint of manslaughter was filed in France against TotalEnergies by survivors and family members of victims of the 2021 militant attack in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique near its \$20-billion natural gas project.

Officially, the death toll was reported to be in the dozens but journalist Alex Perry found that 1,200 people likely perished in the attack. In the court filings, survivors and relatives of victims accuse Total of failing to take the measures necessary to protect subcontractors and of wilfully failing to assist people in danger. Total has denied all accusations.

Or in East Africa, where residents who

live or lived along the path of its EACOP project – a crude oil pipeline running from western Uganda to eastern Tanzania – say they have been stripped of their lands and livelihood. The Climate Accountability Institute estimates that the pipeline will result in 25 times more carbon pollution than the combined current annual emissions of Uganda and Tanzania.

The East African Court declined to hear a legal challenge against TotalEnergies by environmental groups, on the grounds that it was filed too late, but the groups remain vocal in their calls for the company to be boycotted.

But it can be hard to hear such calls over the roar of a cheering crowd, so it's not hard to understand why "sportswashing" – cleaning one's image by sponsoring professional sport – is so effective.

Organised sport unites humanity like no other activity. A good 1.5-billion people watched Lionel Messi lift the World Cup in Doha in 2022. In the 90 minutes of a football match, or between the ropes of a boxing bout, we are united in an enthralling collective experience.

United – and distracted.

The best known, and perhaps most successful sportswashing venture was 1974's Rumble in the Jungle. Kleptocrat Mobutu Sese Seko stuffed the pockets



of boxing promoters to host the fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But the practice dates back to at least 1936 when Adolf Hitler famously hosted the world in Berlin for the Olympics. Results were mixed for Hitler, with black US athlete Jesse Owens claiming four gold medals – effectively giving the middle finger to notions of Aryan supremacy.

Today, sportswashing takes many forms – from suss destinations of Formula One races to football club ownership. Saudi Arabia has risen as the unchallenged champion of this domain. The kingdom needs to diversify its income beyond fossil oils – a depleting resource that is attracting bad press for burning up the planet.

Enter sport, the great “unifier”.

The kingdom will host the 2034 Fifa

World Cup. It has already plucked some of football’s stars from the biggest leagues to a competition that has as many viewers as Saudi Arabia has rivers.

Twenty-five of those players – Sadio Mané, Kalidou Koulibaly and Riyad Mahrez, among them – return to the African continent this month to thrill fans in the TotalEnergies Afcon, helping the company get some positive media mentions after the slew of negative ones in recent months.

But we should never forget that sportswashing is a machiavellian tool that is being honed in the games we love.

It is equally malicious in the hands of a morally corrupt prince or a French multinational. ■

Luke Feltham is the acting editor-in-chief of the Mail & Guardian.

PHOTO ESSAY

A holy celebration to start the year

Donning white handwoven scarves – netela for women and kuta for men – Ethiopian Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas, or Genna as it is called here, on 7 January. In the Ge'ez calendar, the day falls on the 29th of the fourth month, Taḥṣaś. **Amanuel Sileshi** and **Michele Spatari** captured this year's celebrations in the capital Addis Ababa and up north in Lalibela, a Unesco World Heritage site renowned for its centuries-old rock-hewn churches.



Deck the halls

At a market in the Shola district in Addis Ababa, a vendor waits for customers looking for decorations. Photo: Amanuel Sileshi/AFP



Lighting the way

Congregants worship at the Bole Medhanialew Church in Addis Ababa on the evening before Genna celebrations. Photo: Amanuel Sileshi/AFP



Thy rod and thy staff

Priests chant and dance during the Genna celebrations. Photo: Michele Spataro/AFP



Quench thy thirst

Patrons chill at a bar ahead of Genna celebrations. Photo: Michele Spatari/AFP



Rest thy soul

Pilgrims headed for the Genna celebrations in Lalibela rest at a camp. Photo: Michele Spatari/AFP

Things got worse, things will get better

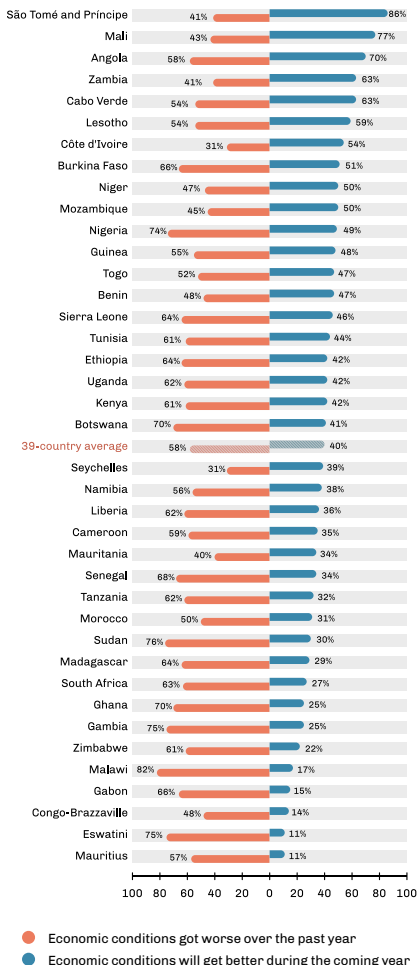
As we ease into the new year, who doesn't look back to take stock, and look ahead to scan the horizon? Afrobarometer surveys don't align with the calendar year but our interviews from late 2021 to the middle of 2023 do give a sense of the continent's outlook.

If we take economic conditions as a yardstick, a majority (58%) of Africans across 39 countries think things got "somewhat worse" or "much worse" during the preceding year. Only 20% say they got better, and 21% see no change. Malawians (82% worse) are the gloomiest; Seychellois and Ivorians are least glum (31% each).

Looking ahead, the cross-country spread is wider: Over two thirds of Angolans (70%), Malians (77%) and São Toméans (86%) are optimistic things will improve over the coming year, compared to just 11% of Mauritians and Eswatini.

As the shape of the graphic suggests, having a bad year doesn't preclude optimism about the next one. So while none of our respondents showed us a reliable crystal ball, here's hoping the São Toméans are right and the Mauritians have it all wrong. ■

Economic conditions: Worse last year, better next year | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



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

Inside the memories of people who lived Congolese history

History and recollection really are never black and white

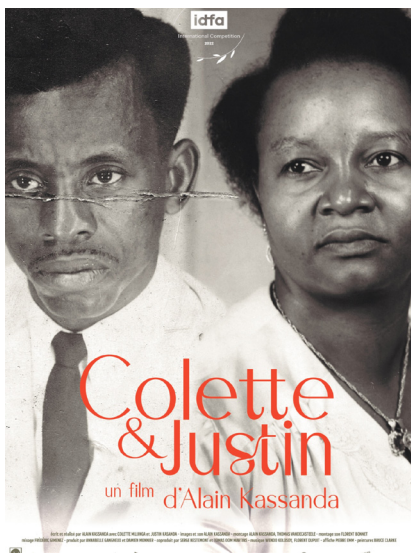
Line Sidonie Talla Mafotsing

When Alain Kassanda's parents moved with him to France from the Democratic Republic of Congo at age 11, top of their mind was his education. It was in 1991, amid an open-ended countrywide teacher's strike in the DRC. When he returned decades later, he got a re-education. In *Colette et Justin*, we tag along as Kassanda delves into Congolese history through the memories of grandparents, which he first captured on a borrowed camera and recorder.

"I didn't plan on making a film, initially. I just wanted to capture their words because I knew that they were getting old," Kassanda told *The Continent*.

Born in 1928 – two decades after the end of King Leopold II's brutal plunder – Kassanda's grandfather, Justin, had a wide-spanning memory of Congo's formative years. "The more I learned through my grandfather's stories, the more the idea of a film became present," says Kassanda. The result is Kassanda's first full-length film – which Justin didn't get to see as he died in 2018, during its production.

Colette's recollections give us granular insight into the colonial experience. The



"I didn't plan on making a film, initially. I just wanted to capture their words because I knew that they were getting old."

boys were taught in French and turned into well-oiled machines for colonial Belgians, while the girls were taught "home economics" in the regional language until the ages of 13 or 14.

She directly witnessed the Belgian-manufactured divisions between the Lulua and Baluba ethnic groups. Without Colette, an important part of Congo's story would have been lost.

As Justin and Colette narrate their early years, the viewer is gripped by the film's backdrop of archival footage from the colonial times. From videos of children sitting in missionary schools to photos of boys and men shackled with chains around their necks, the Belgians' manipulation and brutality towards the people of Congo is on display.

Using this footage was a complicated choice for Kassanda. It was originally filmed for Belgian colonial propaganda. Belgian filmmakers who were enlisted to legitimise the colonial expedition rendered the Congolese people as objects to be watched – the uncivilised native. Their audiences at home were meant to marvel at how powerful their country was in comparison. Yet in many cases, it's the only visual documentation of those times.

Using this footage was a complicated choice for Kassanda. It was originally filmed for colonial propaganda. Yet, it's the only visual documentation of those times

While Kassanda had little choice but to use the visual resources readily available, he contextualised them with his own voiceover narration. "The footage is used as cinematic support but also examined as a tool of propaganda," Kassanda explains. "I asked myself: 'Why not help the

audience create their own mental images using my reflections and commentary,'" he says. Kassanda's voice became his own tool of colonial resistance, combatting myth and misrepresentation.

On complicated memories

Halfway into *Colette et Justin*, tension arises between Kassanda and his grandfather on the legacy of Patrice Lumumba. "This was the most difficult part of the documentary for me to film and to implement in the film," he says.

For Kassanda and Justin, Lumumba's Independence Day speech in June 1960 meant two different things. Kassanda argues that Lumumba's speech was honest, brave and reaffirmed Congolese pride. Justin – at that time a civil servant – remembers it as "the speech of someone who didn't know the difference between what should be said and what shouldn't."

Kassanda learns that his grandfather was not an ally to Lumumba, as he had assumed him to be, but was instead invested in the secession of South Kasai in 1960.

The interaction is a sharp reminder that history was more complicated and nuanced than we imagine.

"All of a sudden I had to reconcile two figures who are equally important in my eyes," he says. "I needed to understand my grandfather's story, not judge, and create a story that was not black and white."

This deeply personal and political film was for Kassanda, and will be for many viewers, "a process of accepting history the way it was" – and not as we think it was or *should* have been. ■

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

"Don't try the busteki till you've finished your desert."



Photo: Olympia De Maismont/AFP

- 1_ Which country is currently hosting the Africa Cup of Nations?
- 2_ Name the country that is named after the Cap-Vert peninsula.
- 3_ What is the former name of the Democratic Republic of Congo?
- 4_ In which year was former Guinea president Alpha Condé deposed?
- 5_ In what year were the bones of ancient human ancestors sent into subspace?
- 6_ The *Kwer'ata Re'esu*, a portrait of Jesus Christ, was stolen from which country in the 19th century?
- 7_ Which former president's weekly jogs were deemed "political activism" by Zambian police?
- 8_ In which country did the #OccupyJulorbiHouse protests take place?
- 9_ Busteki is meat from which animal?
- 10_ The Cathedral of Ouagadougou (pictured) is located in which country?

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

It's good to be back! We missed you, dear reader. We missed you so terribly that nothing could distract us from the melancholy of our separation. Nothing, that is, until the Africa Cup of Nations tournament kicked off!

The glitz, the glamour, the adoring crowds, the *players* – and that's just at gatherings in our living room as we tune in to the latest match – imagine what it's like in the actual stadium.

Now, before we are tempted to roll up our sleeves and wage war over who will, won't, should or shouldn't take home the trophy, let us deploy the wisdom of our leaders and wait until the winning side has proven itself. Only then will we be able to reveal we were backing the winners *this whole time*.

Unless of course we somehow *know* we're going to win. In which case we'll stop everyone from saying anything at all.

It's a lesson Comoros appears to have learned, anyway. In the island nation's elections this week, President Azali Assoumani was declared winner with 63% of the vote. His fellow candidates rejected the results, and were quoted as saying “a flagrant fraud has been committed”.

But his government decided the only response these claims deserved was the silent treatment, so it imposed a curfew, cut off access to the internet and sent in security forces who came down on protesters like a ton of unusually well-armed bricks, leaving at least one person dead and many others injured.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo was hoping for better luck on the field against Zambia in their first-round Afcon clash, which ended in a draw.

No stalemate for Félix Tshisekedi, though, whose own victory in the DRC's presidential election a few weeks ago was confirmed by the Constitutional Court last week.

Opposition party leaders including Martin Fayulu and Moïse Katumbi have since called

for people to take to the streets in protest on the day of Tshisekedi's swearing-in this weekend. Congolese authorities will no doubt be hoping the tear gas they've allocated for the protests will have dispersed in time for the Sunday afternoon match against Morocco.

Over to Sierra Leone, where in November 2023 the government said they'd thwarted an attempted coup –

For whom the whistle blows



CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Samira Sawlani



Face-off: Protesters destroy a poster of Comoros President Azali Assoumani.

Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP

everyone wants to join the cast of *Keeping Up With The Coupdashians*, it seems. Two weeks later the country's former president Ernest Bai Koroma was taken in for questioning and charged with treason for what authorities described as "his alleged role in the failed coup of November 26". He has denied all charges, which his lawyers claim are part of a political vendetta.

Koroma was released on bail, requiring police permission to leave his home. This week however, the high court ruled he could travel abroad for medical reasons – and now reports suggest he's packed and ready to zoot off to Nigeria for undisclosed healthcare purposes.

Interesting choice, especially considering the number of Nigerian leaders who themselves prefer to trot off to Europe for their root canals, check-ups and colonoscopies.

While some African players are scoring goals on the pitch, this week's

perfect strike came from the government of Namibia, who tackled their former colonisers Germany head on, over their decision to join Israel's defence at the International Court of Justice. The court is hearing South Africa's case against Israel, which it has accused of genocide against the Palestinian people.

South Africa's leadership has had its failings – but in this case, they have chosen to act when so many countries have shamefully stayed silent or been complicit in the killing of thousands of Palestinians. This is what solidarity looks like.

Germany has since come on to the pitch and said that it "rejects the accusation of genocide brought against Israel" and that it wanted to support Israel at the ICJ.

This in turn prompted Namibia's presidency to point out that Germany had "failed to atone" for committing the first genocide of the 20th century, on Namibian soil. And "in light of Germany's inability to draw lessons from its horrific history", Namibia's President Hage Geingob is "concerned" by Germany's decision to join the case in Israel's defence.

Which suggests that this is not just a good time to support some of Africa's finest footballing talent. This is also a good time to remind each other of the genocide carried out from 1904 to 1908 by imperial Germany during its colonial occupation of Namibia, in which tens of thousands of Herero and Namaqua people were killed.

Perhaps that might help stave off any more own goals from our European friends. ■

Zimbabwe opposition's stark choice: Unite, or die?

Divisions are killing not just the political parties but also voters' hope that the ruling party can or will ever be removed.

Clemence Manyukwe

There is a growing feeling that Zimbabwe's opposition is in a worse position than at any time since the 1980s. None of the parties that have emerged to challenge Zanu-PF has an equivalent party structure or funding.

After Morgan Tsvangirai's death in 2018, his Movement for Democratic Change fragmented further into a bewildering array of splinter groups.

The only opposition leader capable of mobilising nationwide is Nelson Chamisa, but his Citizens Coalition for Change is struggling under a combination of state manipulation and internal confusion.

Hoping to insulate the party from outside meddling, Chamisa deliberately rejected a clear party structure and set of office-holders. This has badly backfired. The government manipulated the uncertainty about who is in control of the CCC for dissident figure Sengezo Tshabangu to set himself up as an "imposter" secretary general. He then went on to recall elected CCC MPs from the National Assembly and prevent them from contesting the resulting by-elections.

Chamisa's fallout with two of his most

influential allies, Welshman Ncube and Tendai Biti, has further undermined the prospects of an effective opposition response to Zanu-PF.

Respected opposition figures like the mayor of Bulawayo, David Coltart, have implored factions to rise above their differences. Coltart said it was "incumbent upon all democrats to work together against tyranny, irrespective of any tactical differences of opinion". Many will share this sentiment, but political mobilisation is much more difficult in the absence of hope.

The fact that even CCC MPs who got elected were manipulated out of power, has led to unprecedented despondency. Many opposition supporters now question the point of voting.

Vitalis Dhokwani, one of many disillusioned voters, put it this way: "The bottom line is we have lost hope in Zimbabwe politics. Zanu will rule 'til we all die." ■



Clemence Manyukwe is a Zimbabwean freelance journalist. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa.

THE BIG PICTURE

Hot and bothered: High among the rocks on Mount Kenya lies the Lewis Glacier. It is one of 11 glaciers on Africa's second-highest peak. Each is melting rapidly thanks to capitalism (which is heating the world as humans burn fossil fuels, cut down trees and destroy life as we know it).

Photo: Ed Ram/Getty Images



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