

with Mail & Guardian

The Continent



Another junta, same old problems

Photo: Radio Télévision du Burkina/AFP



COVER: A billion people are expected to be competing to survive along the Sahel by 2050. Intense heat, failed states and violent uprisings already make survival difficult. Three countries in the region have recently fallen to military coups, with many citizens cheering the rise of the generals who have promised to restore order and quash insurgency. But military leaders are rarely well equipped to deal

with the complex challenges of governance. And foreign powers are forever hovering, waiting for an excuse to meddle.

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- These are troubled times for Franafrrique (p26)

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ETHIOPIA

Red Cross restarts Tigray operations

Tigray, which has been at the centre of Ethiopia's violent internal conflict for over a year now, received medical aid and supplies from the Red Cross for the first time in five months, the humanitarian organisation said this week. Recently the World Health Organisation said it had been blocked from sending supplies to the region since May 2021. Awkwardly, the WHO's director-general Tedros Ghebreyesus is Tigrayan, which you may be shocked to learn Ethiopia's government is not especially pleased about.



Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP

SENEGAL-GAMBIA

Separatists seize Senegalese soldiers

Nine soldiers from Senegal's West African mission in The Gambia were reported missing by the Senegalese army early this week. The soldiers are believed to have been captured by insurgents aligned with the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance, a separatist group in the region. The soldiers went missing following clashes that also left two soldiers dead. Casamance is the southern region of Senegal, on its border with The Gambia. The Casamance separatist conflict has been under way for nearly 40 years now.

SUDAN

Civilian alliance agrees to UN talks

The Central Council for Forces of Freedom and Change, a civilian political alliance in Sudan has conditionally agreed to take part in UN-brokered talks, which are intended to move the country past the months-long deadlock between protesting citizens and the generals who grabbed power in October. Another prominent group, the Sudanese Professionals Association, has rejected the talks. This week, as part of a civil disobedience campaign against the military, residents of Wad Madani closed businesses and blocked road access to the city.



Stampede-gate: CAF president Patrice Motsepe said a stadium gate that should have been open was closed for “inexplicable” reasons

AFCON

Deaths at home team game

A child was among eight people killed in a stampede at Olembe stadium in Yaounde, Cameroon, during the Afcon host nation's victory against Comoros on Monday in the final-16 fixture between the two nations. Built for a reported \$300-million, the stadium will now not host any further matches. Covid-19 protocols had been put in place to prevent organisers from selling more than 60% of the stadium's capacity of 60,000. However, because this was a home match, the cap was temporarily raised to 80%.

FUELISHNESS

Nigeria puts bold climate laws on ice

Last November, Nigeria passed a new petroleum law which set ambitious goals intended to reduce the country's carbon emissions. The law will now have to be amended because the government says it can't actually afford to remove fuel subsidies by July 2022, as required by the legislation. The country is facing rising inflation which, its junior finance minister says, makes the July timing “problematic”. The government will therefore seek to give itself another 18 months to ponder the matter.

UGANDA

Breast milk bank is up and running

Ugandan mothers are happily donating breast milk to a bank that was launched last November by various hospitals in Kampala. It can store as much as 250 litres of human breast milk at a time, which is then distributed to preterm babies around the city. Typical donors are breastfeeding mothers who produce more milk than their babies can consume, and may find relief in expressing it. It's also a relief for preterm babies who have serious difficulties digesting non-human milk and baby formula.

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EGYPT

Cairo companies to produce Covid pill

Molnupiravir, the covid treatment pill, has been approved for emergency use in Egypt. The Egyptian Drug Authority said

the pill will be produced by five local firms at first, and several others will join later. Created by American pharmaceutical Merck, the pill can be taken at home after one starts to experience Covid symptoms. In clinical trials last year, the treatment cut the risk of severe disease and hospitalisation by 50% to 30%.



Photo: Merck & Co, Inc/AFP

GHANA

Mining explosives company shut down

Authorities in Accra said this week that they have shut down the Maxam Mining Company Limited after more than a dozen people were killed and many more injured in a massive explosion that levelled hundreds of buildings in Ariate in rural Ghana. The devastating blast was triggered when a truck transporting explosives manufactured by the company collided with a motorcycle at around noon last Saturday.

RUSSIA-UKRAINE-NATO

Cold war heats up

After a 10,000-strong Russian troop build-up on the border with Ukraine, western powers fear that Vladimir Putin is planning a ground invasion similar to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. If he invades, the United States and United Kingdom say they will cut Russia out of the Swift international money transfer system, limit its access to US dollars and target Putin with personal sanctions. Nato, the military alliance of western powers, has also increased its presence in Ukraine.

Mozambique

War follows those who fled into the west

With regional forces retaking Cabo Delgado, insurgents turn their attention inland

Luis Nhachote

The insurgency in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado has shifted west, with communities attacked and thousands displaced as forces from Rwanda and the Southern African Development Community, or SADC, continue the operations they began last year.

Following the recapture of Mocimboa da Praia, with its strategic harbour and airport, soldiers have worked to secure areas that are critical to gas exploitation – by and large along the eastern coastal area.

Under that pressure, insurgents began focusing their raids further west, across the provincial border and into the district of Mecula, which itself borders Tanzania at the Ruvuma River.

Local sources tell *The Continent* that

insurgents attacked the community of Naulala just before Christmas. They looted the local health post, taking medicines and medical equipment, robbing stalls and looting food products. The local chief's home was burned down. Another attack was reported nearby on 27 December, in which five residents were killed. The governor of the province told *The Continent* last week however that “the current situation is calm”.

About four thousand people have been displaced by such attacks, adding to the six thousand people already displaced in the province – a third of whom had themselves arrived from Cabo Delgado, then in the throes of the initial insurgency.

This month, Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi and his Rwandan counterpart, Paul Kagame, renewed their agreement for Rwandan troops to stay in Cabo Delgado, with no details about when they will leave provided. The deployment started at a thousand soldiers and police and has since doubled. SADC's mission has also had its mandate extended for another three months.

Adriano Nuvunga, head of the Maputo-based Centre for Democracy and Development, said Mozambique's SADC neighbours have an important role to play. He said it is “also a way of pre-empting, right at the beginning, the potential regional impact” of the insurgency. ■

Zimbabwe

Opposition gets a face lift



All change: Nothing to MDC here, move along. Image: supplied

For almost as long as there has been a Movement for Democratic Change, there have been bitter and very public fights over who gets to use the party name. Zimbabwe's main opposition party has undergone a bewildering series of splinters, breakaways and reunifications that has left even seasoned political analysts confused about who is really in charge – never mind ordinary voters.

There was the MDC. Then MDC-Tsvangirai. MDC-Ncube. MDC-Renewal. MDC-Mutambara. MDC Alliance. And those are just the ones we can remember.

The infighting became so ugly that various factions have taken each other to

court, asking judges to determine who is the real party leader and who can use its branding. It's all very messy, and does not bode well for the party's prospects in next year's presidential election.

That's why Nelson Chamisa – who claimed the mantle of MDC-Alliance leader – has embarked on a dramatic rebranding campaign. As of this week, he has ditched the MDC name entirely, in favour of an all-new name and entity: the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC).

“They have taken literally everything, but thank God, we still have ourselves,” said Chamisa. “That's why we are building on the basis of ourselves. Nothing to do with the past, nothing to do with any wrangles. If you want MDC-Alliance, take it. We do not want any confusion.”

Nevertheless, despite its bright new colours, the new party does retain some links to the old MDC, including support from veteran opposition leaders like Tendai Biti (now the CCC's vice-president) and David Coltart. And its name recalls the original MDC slogan *chinja maitiro*, meaning “change your ways” in Shona.

Now it just needs to communicate its new identity to the voters.

“Every citizen has a duty,” tweeted journalist Hopewell Chin'ono. “Pick up your phone and tell everyone in your phone book who lives in RURAL Zimbabwe that there is a NEW thing.” ■

Nigeria

The great pyramid ... of Abuja?

Dorcas Bello

Last week, President Muhammadu Buhari posed for photographs in front of a million bags of neatly-stacked rice.

This “rice pyramid” constructed at the Abuja International Trade Fair Complex is supposedly the largest ever built – not that there is a lot of competition. (*That’s only because it hasn’t been made into jollof yet. If it had been a jollof pyramid you better believe Ghana would already be building a bigger one. – Ed*)

Nigerian food pyramids are not a new phenomenon. Nigeria was the world’s biggest producer of groundnuts in the 1970s and 80s, and the northern city of Kano became famous for its huge pyramids of groundnut sacks, intended to help with logistics and to prevent insect infestation. They dwarfed the city’s tallest buildings.

The motives behind Buhari’s rice pyramid appears to be less practical and more political: a way to remind Nigerians, ahead of next year’s elections, that Buhari has delivered on his pledge to increase domestic food production.



Photo: Nigerian Presidency

Nigeria produced nine million tonnes of rice in 2021, up from just under five and a half million in 2015, according to central bank governor Godwin Emefiele.

Farming is a sensitive political issue: Buhari’s government has been widely criticised because – despite being Africa’s largest agricultural producer – the country does not grow enough to feed itself, and more than \$5-billion is spent importing staple foods every year.

The dramatic increase in rice production points to a potential solution, however. Key to this increase has been a central bank scheme, launched in 2015, which provides farmers with access to funding and technical support.

With better financing, infrastructure and production techniques, there’s reason to suspect next year’s rice pyramid will be even bigger. ■

This story was reported by the Bird Story Agency.

Burkina Faso

A complex situation finds a complicated solution

Soldiers intervened to save the country from failing civilian leadership – but no one knows what is meant to happen next

Moussa Sambo Diallo
in Ouagadougou

On the streets of Ouagadougou people cheered the coup leaders who ended President Roch Kaboré's administration on Monday. Outside Burkina Faso, international and regional bodies were quick to condemn the coup. Burkinabé political organisers, however, have been far less sure about how they feel.

Two days after soldiers led by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba took power, more than a thousand people gathered in the national square in Ouagadougou to show their support for the military junta. Proputschists also paraded in the streets of Bobo-Dioulasso and Kaya.

"It was an expected coup. I call on Burkinabé to support the new authorities for the return of peace and for reconciliation between Burkina Faso people," said Marcel Tankoano. He had organised a Saturday march against both Kaboré and Ecowas sanctions against Mali's military junta, but the government banned it.

The Burkina Faso situation had been deteriorating for several months, starting with the Solhan massacre in June 2021. Marauding militants linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State attacked Solhan, a mining town in the country's Sahel region, and executed at least 132 people. Residents who buried the bodies put that number at closer to 160. With sentiment growing that he was failing grossly at countering terrorism, calls for Kaboré's resignation began.

Then, in August 2021, a convoy was attacked in broad daylight at Gorgadji on the Dori-Arbinda Road. Some 180 people were reportedly killed. The last straw, however, for both the national army and ordinary Burkinabé, was the November incident in Inata: 57 people were killed, including 53 soldiers who had been starving for days and waiting to be replaced by a contingent that was delayed. The government had allegedly ignored calls for supplies and reinforcements.

In the wake of the Inata incident, President Kaboré demanded an



Coup's the boss: Burkina Faso in Ouagadougou show support for coup leader Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba (right) alongside Mali's putsch leader Assimi Goïta.
Photo: AFP

investigation, reshuffled his cabinet, replaced the chief of staff of the army, appointed young officers to head most of the army's structures and carried out a cabinet reshuffle.

In retrospect, this was a tactical error. One of the younger officers promoted in December was Damiba, who led this week's coup, and the reshuffle eroded support within his own political party.

By the eve of the coup, Kaboré's hold was threadbare. When the government banned the Saturday march against him, demonstrators set fire to a ruling party building. On Sunday, Ouagadougou woke to the sounds of heavy gunfire coming from the Sangoulé Lamizana military camp. On that cold morning the same sounds echoed through the cities of Kaya, 100km away, and Ouahigouya, 200km away. The army was mutinying.

By Monday evening, Kaboré had resigned, and – like Mali and Chad, two other Sahel countries – Burkina Faso was under military rule.

Regional bloc Ecowas says it considers Kaboré's resignation to have been obtained under threat and intimidation, and has suspended Burkina Faso. The G5-Sahel, African Union, European Union, United Nations and France have all condemned the latest putsch.

In Burkina Faso society, it's more complicated. In 2015, citizens had mobilised to resist a coup attempt by soldiers loyal to Blaise Compaoré, whose 27-year rule had been ended by popular protests the year before.

But this week Bassolma Bazié, a prominent trade unionist who led the protest against the 2015 coup, said: "An armed intervention in a democratic process is generally a consequence of governance by ambush (corruption, crimes, state lies, arrogance, complacency, violation of freedoms, failure to keep commitments etc)."

He said that not dealing with the causes of the coup would ensure another one. ■

It's coup season in the Sahel

NEWS ANALYSIS

The Sahel is what ecologists call a “realm of transition” – a vast, semi-arid landscape stretching from one coast of Africa to the other, separating the harsh desert of the north from the more fertile savanna and rainforests of the south.

After this week, political scientists might start using the term too.

On Monday, Burkina Faso became the fourth country in this neighbourhood to experience a military coup in the past 18 months, after Mali, Chad, Mali again, and then Guinea.

Although each coup was prompted by different, country-specific political dynamics, the trend raises uncomfortable questions for the region as a whole.

Perhaps most uncomfortable of all is that in several cases the rise of military men was facilitated by widespread popular protests against civilian governments that had failed to deliver on basic governance responsibilities such as tackling corruption, increasing prosperity and keeping citizens safe. No wonder people celebrated: they want to try something – anything – different.

For all the generals' bravado, the task ahead of them is daunting. Thanks to its harsh climate and vast distances, the

Sahel is one of the world's hardest places to govern. And it's going to get harder.

The Sahel is home to the world's fastest-growing population: a billion people will be living in the 23 countries of the Sahel and Equatorial Africa by 2050, according to the World Bank.

Because of its young population, it has the world's highest dependency ratio, with 87% dependent on the remaining 13% to provide for their basic needs.

By 2050, temperatures will also have risen by between three and five degrees celsius, more than 1.5 times the global average, in a place that already experiences monthly averages of 35 degrees.

“The region is a canary in the coal mine; a presage of what is to come in other vulnerable parts of the world,” said the World Economic Forum in 2019. “Rainfall is erratic, and wet seasons are shrinking. There are lean times ahead.”

These existential crises must be solved against the backdrop of chronic and worsening insecurity that even outside military intervention has been unable to stem. (In fact, the clumsy meddling of foreign powers has arguably made things worse.)

These are daunting, near-impossible challenges for whoever sits in the region's various presidential palaces.

The junta leaders will have to have the imagination to come up with other solutions. But if the non-promise made by Burkina Faso's new rulers this week is anything to go by, don't hold your breath. They effectively said: we shall see once peace returns. ■



SCIENCE

The noisy heart of our galaxy

A world-beating telescope in South Africa is now showing us what lies at the centre of the Milky Way. It's beautiful.

At the centre of our galaxy is a supermassive black hole. It's 25,000 light years away and has – for most of human history – been impossible to see. The clouds of dust and gas thrown out by the constellation Sagittarius mean normal telescopes can't see that far.

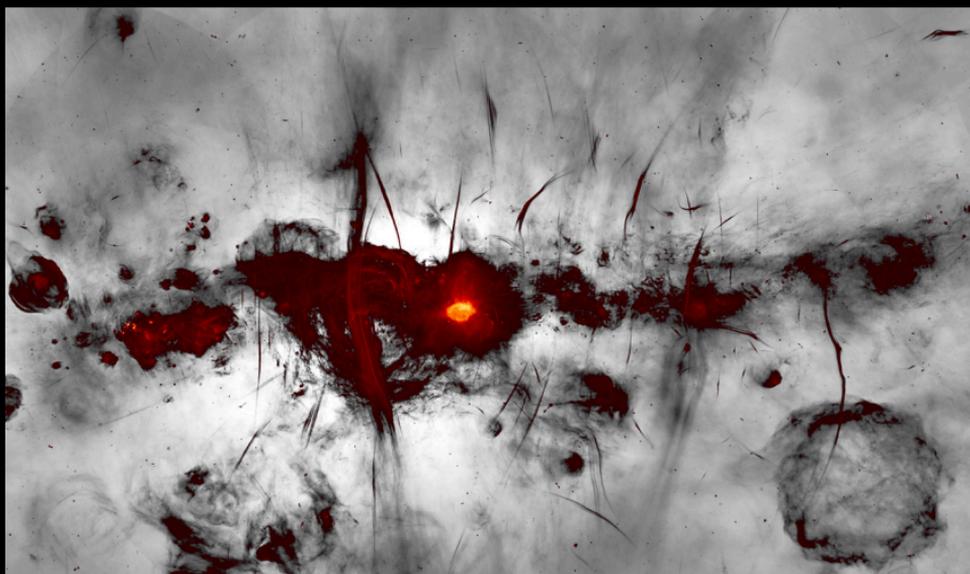
Now a giant telescope in South Africa has pieced together what it looks like using radio waves.

MeerKAT, the world's most sensitive telescope, is based in the Karoo, a huge area of South Africa with little light and noise pollution. Being in the Southern Hemisphere also means fewer satellites overhead to interrupt the telescope and its 64 dishes.

This picture was released this week but was taken in 2018, when MeerKAT was first put to work scrutinising the sky. It



Chaos captured: The black hole in our Milky Way comes through as an angry, orange blob when captured using radio waves.



took 200 hours to capture all the bits that make it up, with two supercomputers in Cape Town putting it all together.

MeerKAT is the first step in an even more ambitious project, the Square Kilometre Array.

Built in South Africa and Australia, it will be the largest piece of scientific equipment ever built once construction is finished in 2024, and will be poised to answer more questions about the universe and events like the Big Bang. ■

Malawi

Unravelling a web of corruption

President Chakwera was elected with a mandate to clean up corruption. But this pits him against some of the country's richest men – and even members of his own cabinet.

Jack McBrams in Lilongwe

Malawi's president Lazarus Chakwera dissolved his entire cabinet after corruption charges were brought against his ministers of lands, labour and energy. Announcing the decision on Monday, he said it was taken to compel the three ministers and other public officials to answer to the charges and accusations.

The accusations against Newton Kambala, the energy minister, are related to fuel import deals. Labour minister Ken Kandodo is accused of stealing Covid funds. Kezzie Msukwa, the lands minister, is said to have profited off a land conflict involving a UK-based Malawian businessman.

It's the climax of an anti-corruption sweep that has also implicated former and current public officials in the central bank, the immigration department and the ministries of finance, local government and gender.

In October, Malawian and UK authorities collaborated to arrest billionaire Zuneth Sattar, the UK-based businessman in the case involving the lands minister. He is accused of having bribed Msukwa with cash and a car to gain leverage in a conflict with a local community.

In early December, the former finance minister Joseph Mwanamveka and Dalitso Kabambe, a former central bank governor, were arrested over the allegedly corrupt sale of a state-owned bank, and falsifying official documents. On the same day, Ben Phiri, also a former minister, was arrested for alleged corruption in the gender ministry between 2018 and 2020.

In mid-December, Malawi's anti-corruption bureau arrested billionaire Abdul Karim Batatawala and Fletcher Nyirenda, a commissioner at the immigration department, over a procurement contract that had led the Malawian government to lose 4.7-billion Malawian kwacha (\$5.7-million).

They all pleaded not guilty.

Batatawala's story is a striking tale of what a man might make of himself even in a small economy, if, under the table, he

shakes hands with government officials whose propensity for graft go unchecked.

Speaking confidentially to *The Continent*, a close associate of the flamboyant businessman said he “owns almost half of real estate in Blantyre,” and estimated his net worth at 80-billion Malawi kwacha (\$10-million). Blantyre is Malawi’s commercial centre.

Batatawala did not respond to *The Continent*’s requests for comment.

Road to riches

Batatawala, who is of Pakistani origin, arrived in Malawi with his two brothers in 1992. His first job was a shopkeeper selling watches and batteries in an electronics shop in Limbe, a small centre in Blantyre. He worked for the company for three years before quitting to set up his own business. He worked under the radar until 2002, his first brush with the law, when he was arrested for procurement fraud. He was acquitted.

Today his business interests include: Blantyre’s premier healthcare facility, Sheffer Clinic; luxury apartments, a lakeside cottage, an office complex, two malls, several warehouses and shopping centres under his Pamodzi Settlement Trust; real estate in India, South Africa, the UK and Dubai; and a raft of companies with which he nets a steady stream of government contracts.

Of his many supply contracts with Malawian government bodies, the most eye-popping was the 2012 award to supply uniforms to the immigration department for 10-billion kwacha. The department’s entire annual budget is about 500-million



Shafting graft: President Lazarus Chakwera vowed to give graft short shrift. Photo: Amos Gumulira/AFP

kwacha. In 2019, without delivering the uniforms, Batatawala demanded that the department pay him 53-billion kwacha, more than five times the agreed amount when the contract was signed.

It was in the midst of such displays of graft and government dysfunction that Chakwera campaigned for the presidency. Even the incumbent then, Peter Mutharika, was implicated, accused of receiving a \$180,000 bribe from a businessman the year before.

Chakwera pledged that fighting corruption would be a major undertaking of his government. Now he and his new, yet-to-be-appointed cabinet must deliver.

As noted by Malawi’s former public prosecutor Kamudoni Nyasulu, the arrests are a good start, but if they are to be of any consequence they must be followed by successful prosecutions and convictions. “We have been here before,” Nyasulu told *The Continent*. “Unless we move past arrests, this means nothing.” ■

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

"Either I know all about Africa's rivers or I'm in denial."

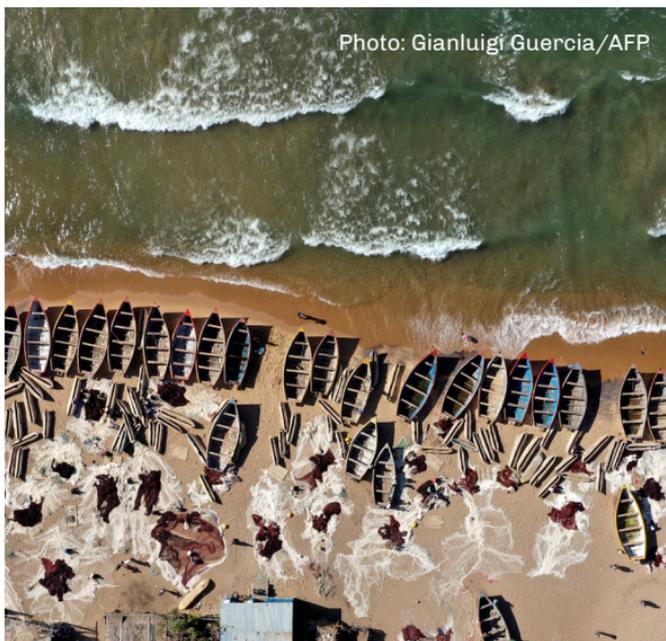


Photo: Gianluigi Guercia/AFP

- 1_What are people from Burkina Faso called?
- 2_What does Ecowas stand for?
- 3_Which country does Sadio Mané represent?
- 4_The Benin Expedition of 1897 was conducted by which sovereign state?
- 5_João Lourenço is the president of which country?
- 6_In which country can one visit the Masai Mara national park?
- 7_True or false: Lake Malawi (pictured) is part of the African Great Lakes.
- 8_Who is Femi Kuti's father?
- 9_True or false: Jollof rice is a staple food of South Africa.
- 10_What is the continent's longest river?

HOW DID I DO?

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

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

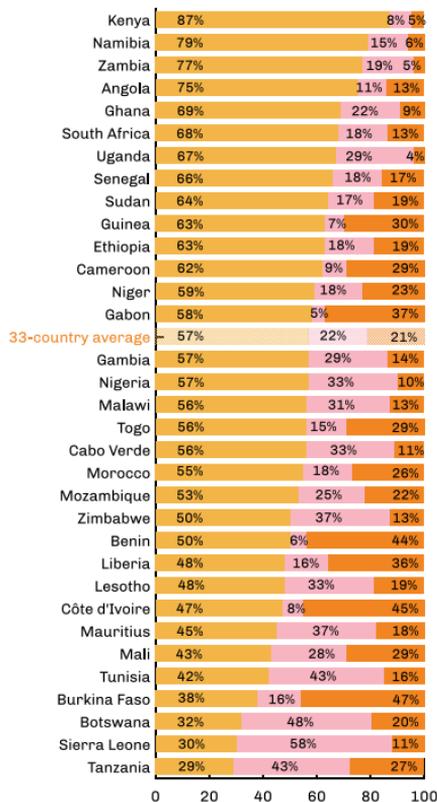
Have we borrowed too much from China?

Between 2000 and 2019, African governments and state-owned enterprises received at least \$153-billion in loans from China, according to Johns Hopkins University's China Africa Research Initiative. This cash – mostly for transport, energy, and mining projects – has been welcomed by credit-starved governments, but critics condemn it as part of China's "debt trap diplomacy" that could cost countries their sovereignty. How do ordinary citizens see the loans?

On average across 33 countries where Afrobarometer asked the question between late-2019 and mid-2021, fewer than half (47%) of citizens knew their country received loans from China. But among those who knew, a majority (57%) said too much had been borrowed. Only one in five (21%) said their country had not borrowed too much from China.

In 23 of the 33 countries, at least half of citizens thought they were in too deep. The four countries receiving the most money had large majorities who said too much was borrowed: Angola (\$42.6-billion, 75%), Ethiopia (\$13.7-billion, 63%),

Borrowed too much from China? 33 African countries | 2019/2021



*Excludes respondents who have not heard about loans from China

■ Borrowed too much from China
■ Don't know/Refused to answer
■ Not borrowed too much from China

Zambia (\$9.9-billion, 77%), and Kenya (\$9.2-billion, 87%). Namibia was an outlier: In for only \$49-million, but 79% thought they were in too deep.

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.

Personal pain and universal womanhood

Wilfred Okiche

In Seko Shamte's unabashedly pro-feminist drama *Binti*, the challenges of womanhood are front and centre. From infertility and domestic violence to poverty and special needs parenting, the heroines of *Binti* (Swahili for young women) are all going through it.

In a quartet of stories only tangentially related, the first Tanzanian film to be licensed on Netflix brings to life the very real struggles of women on the continent. Dar es Salaam may be the setting, but the emotions, challenges and obstacles the film throws up for its protagonists are so palpable they are able to speak to anyone regardless of provenance.

Tumaini (Bertha Robert) struggles to raise the money she owes a local loan shark. An acquaintance of hers, Angel, (Magdalena Munisi) is trapped in a relationship with a violent partner even as she presents the outward appearance of a charmed life. Angel is friends with Stella (Helen Hartmann) who has been trying, unsuccessfully, to have a baby.

In perhaps the film's most compelling arc, Rose (Godliver Gordian) is trying to balance a high-flying career with raising a special needs child – with little help from

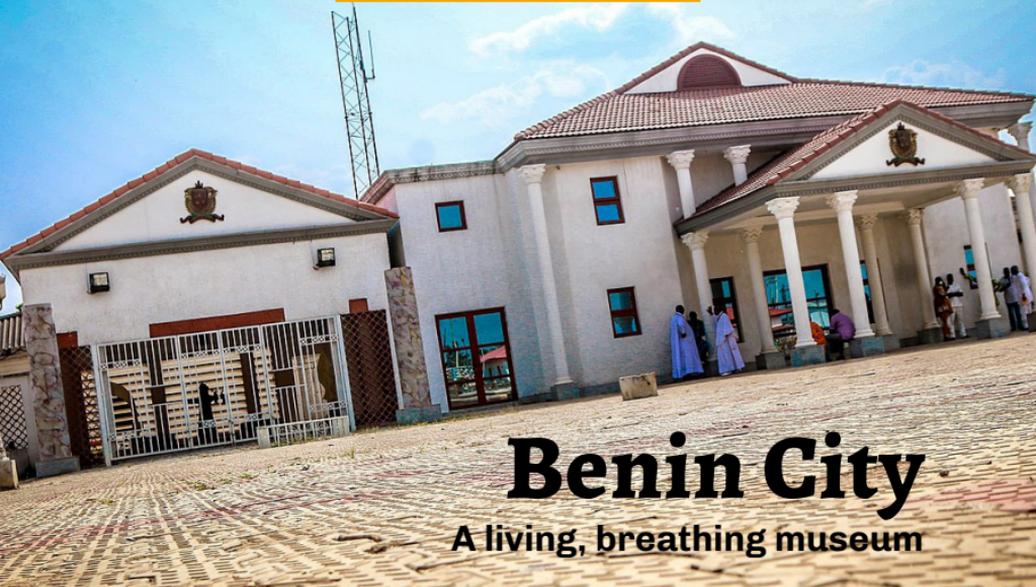


her unsupportive husband,

The stories of *Binti* are not necessarily set up to build to any emotional or logical conclusion, though there is some catharsis to be found. The screenplay, credited to Shamte and Angela Ruhinda – both working from a story by Maria Shoo – is instead concerned with highlighting how these various realities and inequalities unite women across any kind of divide.

Binti wears its feminist badge proudly, and while such stories have certainly been related elsewhere, director Shamte brings with her an airy, refreshing touch. This injects some kinetic energy to her social commentary, propelling the film to its muted but effective finish. ■

Binti is now streaming on Netflix



Benin City

A living, breathing museum

Bob MajiriOghene Etemiku

Benin City used to be known as the Ireland of West Africa. In days gone by, a Yoruba prince sent to live among the Edo people of the Bight of Benin encountered in the people a fuss and vexatiousness he had hitherto never experienced. After he had sired a son the Yoruba prince left Edo, which he had somewhat offhandedly described as “Ile Ibinu”, ire-land.

Ile Ibinu eventually became Benin, and it was recognised as a city by its very first European visitors, the Portuguese who, unlike the Yoruba prince, found it most agreeable, with well-paved and well-lit streets no different from Portuguese cities such as Lagos, Vila Nova de Milfontes, Porto or Sintra. They found there an enterprising people: keen farmers and fishermen; skilled craftsmen who forged ivory and bronze into pieces that spoke a language of the gods; traders in palm oil. And all in a thriving kingdom run from the centre of the city itself, the King’s Square, now known somewhat more prosaically as Ring Road.

Before the British expedition of 1897, the square was the site of the vast palace of the Oba, the representative of God on earth and of the ancestors of the Ibinus, the Binis. But much of that vast space shrunk after Britain’s punitive expedition of 1879. Its influence shrunk further after the Midwestern region and Bendel state became defunct.

The King’s Square in Benin City today is a living museum today,

**Round here:
King's Square,
also known as
Ring Road for
some reason**



though. If you're a visitor keen on exploring and reliving that unfortunate history of the sack of the Bini kingdom by the British in 1879, and the sad story surrounding the looting of its artworks, you should start your journey at the Benin museum, just a stone throw from the Oba of Benin's Palace, the Oredo secretariat, and the Urhokpota Hall.

Inside the museum, you are likely to get a three-dimensional view of what the glory of Ancient Benin was forged from; how that past was captured through the lenses of Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge and the potential that this city holds for national unity. A good reason for you to visit the Benin museum would be to witness how the Benin museum is almost empty, unlike the museums of certain other countries that are abundantly blessed with Beninese artworks.

Another place you may want to visit is the Palace of the Oba of Benin. It is one of the oldest and most respected cultural institutions in the world. Ask to see the very personable secretary to the Benin Traditional Council. Try not to point at this or that ... and, ahem, you shouldn't wear especially black or red clothes to the Palace of our Oba.

Around the square, local officials have made sure to strategically erect monuments and images that tell the story of the kingdom. On the road leading to the palace, there is an image depicting Olokun, a river goddess often worshipped by Benin people. But it is the stories told about some of the trees and the hundreds of bats that occupy them that used to give me the creeps my first time visiting the museum grounds.

After the British sacked Benin, they set up shop and ran the city from here. You will find, as you enter, a seemingly innocuous tree right there in front of the museum. It is said that this was the exact spot where the British compelled a revered king, Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, to kneel three times before his captors, prior to being exiled to Calabar. There is also a little cubicle to your left as you enter this museum, where it is said – in very hushed tones – that Oba Ovonramwen was kept for three days before his exile. I once entered it and struggled to shut the door behind me. It was beyond me how a king could have been made that small.

But by far the one tree at the museum that gave me the heebie-jeebies is the one facing Akpakpava street. Like the many other trees on the museum grounds, it is home to thousands of bats, screeching and shitting on you if you deign to sit under their branches, as if to underscore their assertion that it is their space upon which you are intruding. Nobody knows where the bats come from, nor where they fly off to at dusk.

One historian told me recently that this tree facing Akpakpava road, haughty and tall, was the tree from which the British hanged the Benin chiefs who fought to defend their kingdom.

A more comfortable and less bat-riddled sight in Benin is Igun (pictured below) – a street that has stood here for 700 years. It is the source of some wonderful cuneiform and hieroglyphic art pieces that the British stole in 1897. Their like is still being forged here. It was here that I sat with Osarobo Otote, a craftsman, and was lucky to be allowed to see and record



**Forge: Those
bronzes you've
heard about?
Got 'em here.**

the making of one such piece – clang by clang, mould by mould, bronze piece by bronze piece. These Igun guildsmen were the king’s griots and chroniclers. They were master craftsmen, who recorded the history of their kings and queens and of the unique relationship with their ancestors, using ivory, bronze and iron. For 700 years, they have lived and worked on this street, and it is here that you may still find exquisite artwork for sale, no different from those stolen by the Brits.

King’s Square has many roads leading to many four- and five-star hotels, and there are many fast food establishments in the vicinity. But if you really want a taste of Edo food you should try Mama Ebo’s pepper rice on Airport Road, or go to the corner by Salvation International Secondary



Centred: Let's not forget the astounding architecture

School for goat meat and yam pepper soup. Or take a taxi to Ogbelaka: they serve ema – pounded yam – and soup, but the local snack is roasted plantain with fried fish and sauce.

“Edo no be Lagos” was a politician’s slogan during the governorship elections of 2019 in Edo state, appealing perhaps to the ire and indignation encountered once upon a time by a Yoruba prince. Because although Benin City may not have the economic muscle, chutzpah or lights of Lagos, Abuja or Port Harcourt, no other Nigerian city centre can claim the prestige or privilege of being a living, breathing museum. ■

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Brace yourselves for a new Cold War

Africa is again becoming the stage for the proxy wars of foreign powers

Solomon A Dersso

During the last Cold War, African nations were trapped in the middle, forced to choose sides as the United States and the Soviet Union sought to expand their respective spheres of influence. When it ended, Africa was largely left to its own devices; to “fend for itself”, in the words of the late Kofi Annan.

This was no bad thing. The world’s indifference gave African actors the space to assume increasing responsibility for the affairs of the continent. It was in this era that the Organisation of African Union transformed into the African Union, and there was progress on the economic front. But the pendulum is swinging in the other direction once more. Foreign powers, old and new, are increasing their engagement with the continent.

This trend began in the late 2000s, as the rest of the world realised that the continent’s fast-growing population and its extraordinary natural resources made

it a significant geopolitical asset.

Initially, this engagement mostly took the form of financial instruments such as aid, trade, and loans. In recent years, however, it has also been playing out in the security arena: through military training and technical support; arms sales – including drones, which are changing the nature of conflict in some countries; and the establishment of military bases.

At least 13 foreign powers currently maintain some kind of military outpost on the continent: Belgium, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the UK and the US.

The nature and intensity of this “new scramble for Africa” is all too familiar, and suggests that we are on the brink of a new Cold War – if it hasn’t started already. And this time it might be even more devastating than before, thanks to at least two worrying trends.

The first is the decline in effective leadership by African actors. Despite the persistence of the rhetoric of African solutions for African problems, African actors have shown a lack of resolve, cohesion, readiness and initiative in effectively responding to the various conflicts and fragile and contested transitions from Libya to Somalia, to Mali, Ethiopia and Sudan. Africa is experiencing a period of transactional and fragmented politics bereft of ideological basis and a dearth of pan-African leadership.

The second trend is the dangerous rise in the influence – usually negative – of foreign forces on conflicts and political

transitions on the continent.

These conflicts are increasingly becoming theatres for proxy war, in which foreign powers flex their muscles to determine outcomes according to their interests. Take France's military intervention in the Sahel as an example, or Russia's involvement in the Central African Republic – neither of which have led to better outcomes on the ground; or the role of “middle” powers such as Turkey and the UAE in Libya and the Horn of Africa, where the zealous supply and use of lethal weapons, particularly drones, has dramatically intensified the dynamics and costs of the conflicts there.

John Bolton, a national security adviser to former US president Donald Trump, expressed this logic most clearly unveiling America's “New Africa Strategy” in 2018: “Great power competitors, namely China and Russia, are rapidly expanding their financial and political influence across Africa,” he said, even as he outlined America's plans to expand its own influence. “They are deliberately and aggressively targeting their investments in the region to gain a competitive advantage over the United States.”

Allowing Africa to turn into a playground for big and middle power politics has already had a devastating impact on those who live here. As Ethiopian diplomat Tekeda Alemu warned in 2019, progress towards our development goals “will be thrown out the window if Africa allows the region to be a platform for the rivalry between the major powers that morphs into military activities”.

In 2022, one of the biggest policy



Power play: China's base in Djibouti is just one example of foreign powers taking an uncomfortably close interest in Africa. Photo: AFP via Getty

challenges facing African actors – including the African Union – is to figure out how to halt and reverse these dangerous trends. The starting point is, of course, to address the leadership gap and the fading commitment to pan-Africanism as an organising ideology for mobilisation and collective action.

Pan-Africanism, beyond the disingenuous lip service common today, expressed, as Fanon put it, through “a solidarity of fact, a solidarity of action, a solidarity of concrete in men, in equipment, in money”, is the only way that we are going to survive, never mind thrive in, the new Cold War. ■

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Je t'aime moi non plus: The state of Françafrique

Mbulle-Nziege Leonard

On 14 January, an estimated 60,000 Malians took part in demonstrations in the capital Bamako, ostensibly to protest against sanctions imposed on the Malian transition government by the West African regional bloc Ecowas, for their failure to adhere to an electoral timetable. But the protests were also dominated by Malians demanding an end to French interference in its domestic affairs and the withdrawal of French troops from Mali.

The special relationship between France and Francophone African nations, dubbed “Françafrique”, has remained largely unchanged since it was constructed by former French president general Charles De Gaulle, just before France granted independence to its African colonies.

De Gaulle understood it was necessary for France to consolidate its long-standing influence in Africa in order to remain a key player on the international scene. The pillar of this strategy was the signature of bilateral defence and security agreements between France and the newly independent countries.

These agreements allowed France to intervene militarily at the request of the signatory country. In return, France was granted preferential access to strategic mineral resources such as natural gas, petroleum and uranium and permitted to set up military bases as well.

The defence and security accords were glaringly neocolonial, paternalist and self-serving on the part of France, but proved an effective mechanism for achieving French foreign policy and geostrategic goals. The agreements were largely appreciated by pro-French African leaders, who saw them as an insurance policy against potential domestic upheavals.

Recent developments however suggest that France’s role as the international security guarantor across Francophone Africa is being contested, especially in the Central African Republic and Mali.

In June, France announced the suspension of budgetary assistance and military co-operation with the CAR. France accused the CAR of being complicit in a Russian-led, anti-French propaganda campaign. France has been the CAR’s foremost international security partner and, since 1960, has undertaken seven military interventions in the historically unstable country. These include Operation Sangaris from 2013-2016, which France initiated to quell sectarian violence after president Francois Bozizé was ousted.

Following the termination of the Sangaris mandate, France maintained a military presence in the CAR to train local forces and currently has 300 troops

stationed there. Despite French efforts and the presence of a UN peacekeeping force, the CAR is still beset with security challenges and since 2017, Russia has had a security presence in the country, following a request by President Faustin Touadera.

In Mali, France's President Emmanuel Macron announced in July the withdrawal of 2,500-3,000 soldiers from the contingent of 5,100 French soldiers deployed in the Operation Barkhane anti-terrorist mission in the Sahel.

France's ongoing military presence in Mali and the Sahel began in 2013, when Operation Serval was established to combat the Tuareg rebel movement in Northern Mali. The defeat of the rebel groups was followed by the emergence of several violent extremist groups, which necessitated Serval's replacement with the Barkhane mission.

To palliate the security void created by the French troop scale-down, Mali sought Russian assistance. In September, the Malian transitional government reportedly signed an agreement with Wagner, a private security firm linked to the Kremlin, that would see the deployment of 1,000 security personnel who would be in charge of training the Malian army and protecting high ranking government officials. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed discussions had taken place between Bamako and Wagner regarding the possibility of signing a defence cooperation accord and, in October, Bamako received four military helicopters, weapons and ammunition, provided by Russia.

On 23 December, 15 countries,



Domitable: Charles De Gaulle tours Francophone Africa in 1958. Photo: Jean-Gabriel Seruzier/ Getty Images

including France, Germany and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement condemning the presence of Wagner mercenary troops in Malian territory. This followed French media reports suggesting Wagner paramilitaries were sighted in the southern town of Segou. The Malian government refuted these accusations and claimed Russian military instructors were in Mali as part of a bilateral agreement.

Mali's decision to strengthen security ties with Russia is indicative of its deteriorating relations with France, which has been accused of failing to address Mali's terrorist threat effectively and focusing instead on protecting its geostrategic and economic interests in the Sahel and West African region.

Mali has also accused France of pressuring the Ecowas regional bloc to impose the sanctions it placed on Mali.



Idée fixer: Françafrique architect

Charles De Gaulle. Photo: Jean-Gabriel Seruzier/ Gamma-Rapho/ Getty Images

Macron and his defence minister Florence Parly have condemned this anti-French sentiment. However, Mali is not alone in alleging that French military intervention has been counterproductive and self-serving.

Similar claims were made in the CAR, before that country, too, solicited Wagner's services. In November last year, a French military convoy passing through Burkina Faso, was blocked by demonstrators protesting against France's military presence in that country.

Igor Delanoe, deputy director of the Franco-Russian Observatory, believes the requests for Russian support indicate a growing understanding by the leaders and population of the CAR and Mali that traditional partners, notably France, are not invested in solving their domestic security problems.

We should expect to see other countries within the Françafrique ecosystem seek closer defence and security ties with China, Israel, Turkey and the United Arab

Emirates, among others. Likely quite soon.

Macron has reiterated the need for African countries to take greater responsibility in addressing their domestic security needs. Still, France understands it can't afford to lose influence on the continent – a domain over which it has historically exercised a monopoly – especially to a country such as Russia, which is steadily increasing its influence across sub-Saharan Africa.

Wagner's operations will be highly scrutinised, as there are well-established allegations that it is involved in illicit mining activities and perpetrating human rights abuses in the CAR. These acts could be exported to Mali, which is both rich in mineral resources such as gold and run by military leaders who might not be especially inclined to hold those who abuse civil liberties to account.

The overthrow this week of Burkinabé President Roch Marc Kaboré could also see Burkina Faso's new leadership seek defence and security assistance partnerships from countries that aren't France.

In the near-term, we should also expect French political and military authorities to further review the terms of their defence and security engagement in the Sahel and Francophone Africa, amid the growing discontent regarding their presence in the region. ■



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Keeping up with the Coup-dashions



Continental Drift

Samira Sawlani

It's okay, you can admit it. We know you love them just as much as we do. Or love to hate them, perhaps. It's nothing to be ashamed about. Whether it's *Big Brother Nigeria* or South Africa's *Date My Family*, we all love a bit of reality TV.

Here at Drift, however, we have been gripped by a reality show for the past 18 months, and every time we think it's coming up on the end of the season, another plot twists and new characters are added to the cast. So move aside Kim, Kris and Kylie, and make way for Assimi, Mamady and the latest addition – Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. It's *Keeping Up With The Coup-dashions!*

The past few months have seen demonstrations take place in Burkina Faso, over what critics have branded the abject failure of the now out-of-work president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and his government's failure to deal with insurgent attacks, deadly violence against the citizenry, and security in the country in general.

On Sunday morning reports emerged of gunfire at military facilities, although the government was quick to deny reports



Hall of fame: Kanye West and Kim Kardashian pose with cast member Yoweri Museveni in a 2018 episode of *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*.

Photo: Ugandan presidency

that a coup was taking place. Now where have we heard that before?

Not 24 hours later we tuned in to see soldiers on TV, sitting neatly all in a row, telling us that Kaboré had been relieved of his duties, the constitution suspended, borders closed and the government dissolved. Baddabing Baddaboom.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who previously studied in France – and even wrote a book! – was named chief of the previously unheard of *Mouvement Patriotique Pour la Sauvegarde et la Restauration*.

Imagine the look on the faces of the leaders of Ecowas, and perhaps a few

others on the continent too, when they discovered that this was not just a show, but reality!

They sent out a statement condemning the coup in double quick time – although to be fair they probably just pulled their statements on Guinea and Mali from the drafts folder and changed a few names here and there.

It's funny how even in unscripted reality shows everyone follows the same script. Their next step will be to suspend Burkina Faso altogether and... oh yes, there it is, right on schedule.

Meanwhile, Kaboré's whereabouts remain unknown, and his (previously ruling) party has called for his release, insisting that they simply cannot support a coup, no matter how well it's doing in the ratings.

Once he's out and about again, perhaps Kaboré and Guinea's ousted president Alpha Condé could have their own reality show? *The Real Ex-Presidents of West Africa* is bound to do well with the nostalgia crowd.

Perhaps upon release, he and Guinea's ousted president Alpha Condé could have their own reality show?

The ultimate reality show for many of us of course is The Football, and this week has brought us another set of exciting matches at the Africa Cup of Nations, alongside some brilliant performances. Special shoutouts are in order for

Comoros, who fought gallantly till the end; Equatorial Guinea, who beat Mali to reach the quarterfinals; and of course to Malawi's Gbadinho Mhango, whose incredible goal against Morocco we'll still be talking about ten Afcons hence.

Sadly, eight people were killed outside the Olembe Stadium in Cameroon's capital, Yaounde, earlier this week. Our hearts go out to the families of all those who died, and every person affected by this awful tragedy. We hope there will never be a repeat, and call on both the Confederation of African Football and Cameroon's institutions to do all they can to make sure the tournament is safe for all.

While European and regional powers continue their back and forth with military-led governments, it's important to remember that insecurity in the Sahel region is continuing to affect lives every day. Earlier this year the United Nations said 2.5-million people have been displaced in the region over the past 10 years as a result of the ongoing insecurity, and armed groups had carried out more than 800 attacks in 2021 alone.

To bring us back to reality, in the worst way possible, Tropical Storm ANA hit the continent this week, leaving havoc, destruction and death in its wake.

At least 41 people were killed when the storm hit Madagascar, with another 15 fatalities in Mozambique, and 11 in Malawi. In all three countries countless homes have been destroyed, along with schools, businesses and health centres.

Constant tragedy appears to have been scripted into our reality now, and it shows.

Reality bites. ■

THE BIG PICTURE

Up in smoke: Workers and residents do their best to salvage whatever they can from the ashes at the Oko-Baba Sawmill, the biggest wood market in Lagos. In early January a raging fire – driven by the ample supply of fuel – ripped through the sawmill in Ebute-Metta, Lagos's commercial hub, destroying valuable timber and other goods, and forcing sawmillers, traders and hundreds of people living in the neighbourhood to evacuate the area. Photo: Pius Utomi Ekpei/AFP



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