

The Continent



EXCLUSIVE

The St Petersburg infowar on 22 African countries

ILLUSTRATION: WYNONA MUTISI



COVER Russian operatives claim to have drafted Mali's new minerals charter, organised a "CAR for Trump" rally in the Central African Republic, and paid newspapers to publish stories. What documents refer to as "The Company" operated out of St Petersburg and reached into 22 African countries. South Africa, Mali, Niger, Angola and the Central African Republic feature the most. And we know this because *The Continent* has the receipts. A trove of 1,431 documents leaked to this newsroom are being worked through by a consortium, with a lot more journalism to come. (p13)

Inside

- 8 Zimbabwe:** Mnangagwa's big bite out of the constitution
- 11 Egypt:** Hard times cause spike in 'halal' investment scams
- 18 Côte d'Ivoire:** A once-pristine lagoon turns murky
- 22 Uganda:** The grannies keeping fit – by playing cricket
- 26 Travel:** A dispatch from Bujumbura, but no photos allowed
- 30 Review:** Cameroonian filmmaker debuts first novel



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THE WEEK IN BRIEF



MADAGASCAR / ESWATINI

Putschists pissed off by Mswati's 'regional diplomacy'

Madagascar's military government has criticised Eswatini for hosting ousted president Andry Rajoelina, calling it "politically unacceptable". King Mswati III met Rajoelina last week and urged a return to constitutional order. Rajoelina was removed from office in October by an elite military unit after protests against persistent power and water shortages. This was the first time the ousted president was seen in a diplomatic engagement since fleeing Madagascar, the *BBC* reports. King Mswati III's office said the meeting was part of its regional diplomacy.

DRC

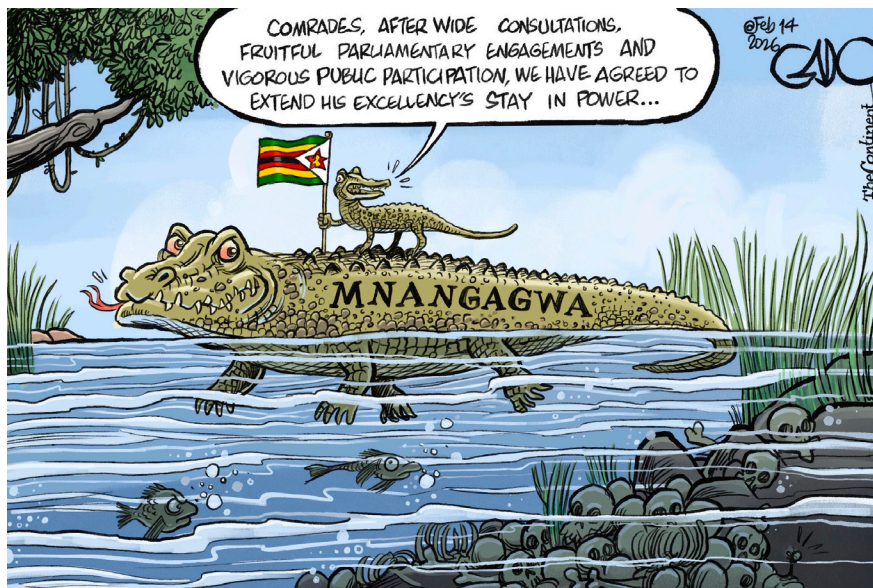
'Good guy' mineral deal faces legal challenge

Lawyers and rights groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are challenging a minerals-for-security deal between President Félix Tshisekedi and the US, which grants the US preferential access to cobalt and coltan – essential for batteries, electronics, and defence manufacturing. Critics say the deal bypassed parliament and violates constitutional protocols. At a national prayer breakfast last week, US President Donald Trump praised Tshisekedi as a "good guy" and a "very brave and wonderful man", *RFI* reports.

SUDAN

Boat tragedy on River Nile

At least 21 people have died after a passenger boat capsized in River Nile State in northern Sudan, the *BBC* reports. Nearly 30 passengers were on the vessel travelling between Tayba al-Khawad and Deim al-Qarai, according to the Sudan Doctors Network, including children and elderly people. Rescue teams continued to search for bodies for days after. The disaster was blamed on high waves on the river that the boat captain struggled to navigate.



Plus Two: Zimbabwe's cabinet approved President Emmerson Mnangagwa's plan to stay until 2030.

VALENTINE'S DAY

No cash bouquets, Central Bank warns

Lovers who fashion bouquets out of Kenyan bank notes this Valentine's Day could find themselves behind bars. The Central Bank of Kenya said that rolling, stapling, or gluing banknotes into floral-style arrangements "defaces" currency and is illegal. People found guilty of damaging notes risk up to seven years in jail. The bank said the altered notes cannot be processed easily by ATMs and that it is costly to replace them. The bank clarified that cash gifts are allowed, but only if the money itself isn't damaged.

SOMALIA

Close call in emergency plane landing

A plane carrying 55 people veered off the runway into the shallow coastal waters of the Indian Ocean during an emergency landing at Aden Abdule International Airport on Tuesday. Somalia's Civil Aviation Authority said the pilot reported a problem 15 minutes after take-off from Mogadishu and requested to return. The Fokker 50 aircraft, bound for Gaalkacyo, suffered damage to its wing and nose but no casualties were reported. Authorities praised the pilot's swift response that averted disaster, the AP reports.



MUSEUM OF STOLEN HISTORY

Nigeria to get more than 100 bronzes back

The UK is set to return 116 artefacts looted by British troops in 1897 to Nigeria, after ownership was formally transferred from the University of Cambridge. The transfer follows a 2022 request by Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments and approval from the UK Charity Commission. The Benin Bronzes are currently held at the university's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Plans are under way for the physical return of most items to Nigeria before the end of the year, the *BBC* reports.

UNITED STATES

All that glitters: Trump statue for G20 summit

A group of cryptocurrency enthusiasts is funding a giant golden statue of Donald Trump to be installed at the venue of this year's G20 summit in Miami. The "Don Colossus" is a towering likeness of Trump mounted on a steel and concrete pedestal created by sculptor Alan Cottrill, according to *The New York Times*. The crypto investors hope to use the statue to promote their memecoin, \$PATRIOT. The White House says it has no involvement in the project and The Trump Organization did not respond to *The Times*' requests for comment.

SOUTH AFRICA

Crypto bros doing the most

Power utility Eskom is exploring a potential partnership with bitcoin-mining firm Bitmach to use surplus electricity for cryptocurrency mining, *Daily Maverick* reports. If implemented, Eskom would redirect excess power generated into bitcoin mining, a move that could build on its recent return to profitability. The investors want to position bitcoin as a contributor to industry through the partnership. South Africans, who were suffering frequent loadshedding until March 2024, will be surprised to learn about the excess electricity the proposal refers to.

ZAMBIA

Former first son's assets seized

Zambia's high court has ordered the seizure of assets worth more than \$1.3-million from Dalitso Lungu, son of former president Edgar Lungu. The forfeiture includes 79 vehicles and 23 properties in Lusaka, among them a shopping mall, petrol station, and luxury apartments. The court said Lungu and his company had failed to provide a credible explanation for how the assets were lawfully acquired. Edgar Lungu died last June and has yet to be buried amid a legal dispute between his family and the current Zambian government.

TANZANIA

Historic market rebuilt after fire

The rebuilt Kariakoo Market was inaugurated this week, nearly five years after a fire destroyed the historic trading hub in the commercial capital of Dar es Salaam. The government spent Sh28-billion (\$10.8-million) reconstructing the six-storey complex, which now includes underground parking and upgraded fire-safety systems, *The Chanzo* reports. The market's original vikombe (cups) architectural motif, dating to the 1970s, has been preserved. Kariakoo Market serves traders across East and Central Africa, and is a major contributor to the city's economy.

NIGERIA

US troop deployment planned

The United States plans to send about 200 soldiers to Nigeria to train its military in the fight against Islamist militants, a US official said this week. A small US team is already on the ground. The deployment follows airstrikes ordered by President Donald Trump on Christmas Day against what he described as Islamic State targets allegedly persecuting Christians. *Reuters* has reported that US surveillance flights over Nigeria have been operating from Ghana since late November. The Nigerian



government has denied any systematic persecution of Christians in the country.

NEWS

KENYA

Foreign minister seeks answers on Russian conscripts

Over 1,400 Africans have likely died fighting for Russia. The family of one of them wants their son back. And answers.

ROBERT AMALEMBA IN KAKAMEGA

KENYA'S FOREIGN Minister Musalia Mudavadi plans to visit Moscow after the deaths of Kenyans who had been enticed to Russia with promises of well-paying jobs. They were reportedly sent to the frontlines of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The ministry estimated 200 Kenyans had been lured to Russia by November 2025, Mudavadi's press secretary, Jacob Ng'etich, told *The Continent*.

Josephine Omwoma is struggling to come to terms with the death of her son, Erastus Mundia, 38, who left Kenya in October 2025 after being promised a sales job in Russia. The family last spoke to Mundia on 20 November. After repeated calls, they contacted the agent who had facilitated it all, who claimed Mundia might be in an area without network coverage.

Then a friend called with devastating news: Mundia had died in uniform.

"It crushed my heart. I cannot sleep... All I want is closure," Omwoma told *The Continent* from her home in Lugari, Kakamega. "I want the government to



PHOTO: TONY KARUMBA/AFP

Missing: Charles Ojiambo Mutoka, 72, with photos of his son Oscar, who was killed in Ukraine.

bring his body – and those of others who died there – back to Kenya for burial." The family has made several trips to the ministry of foreign affairs seeking to repatriate his body.

Last week, Ukraine reported the death of two Kenyans – Ombwori Denis Bagaka and Wahome Simon Gititu – who reportedly died after being recruited to fight for Russia from Qatar. A list published by French investigative outlet *All Eyes on Wagner* includes 10 more Kenyans among 1,417 Africans who reportedly died fighting for Russia in the Ukraine war. That list doesn't include the three men named in this story, suggesting casualties could be higher. ■

ZIMBABWE

‘The Crocodile’ takes a big bite out of the Constitution

Observers slam Emmerson Mnangagwa’s latest power grab as the president seeks to extend his term limit.

JEFFREY MOYO IN HARARE

ZIMBABWE’S CABINET has approved draft legislation that would extend presidential terms from five to seven years. That would mean President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s term lasts until 2030, rather than 2028 under current laws.

The draft law also proposes the president be elected by a parliamentary vote, instead of directly by the electorate, as is currently the case. Justice Minister Ziyambi Ziyambi said public consultations would be held before the proposal goes before parliament for debate. Both chambers are dominated by the ruling Zanu-PF party.

The move has alarmed observers, who see it as a power grab by Mnangagwa, who has been consolidating his position

since taking over in a 2017 coup.

“This is an abuse of power,” Professor Lovemore Madhuku from the University of Zimbabwe’s Law School told *The Continent*. He noted the president received only a five-year mandate in the last election. “This proposal would simply extend the president’s stay in office without any input from the electorate.”

Rashweat Mukundu, a media researcher at International Media Support, called the move “a classic [from the] rule book of authoritarianism, where the constitution is manipulated to suit personal political interests”.

Back in 2008, Zimbabweans overwhelmingly supported a new constitution that set presidential term limits at two five-year terms.

“In substance, these proposals cumulatively centralise power rather than distribute it. Zimbabwe does not need constitutional engineering to extend power. It needs constitutional fidelity to protect it,” said Jameson Timba, a Zimbabwean opposition politician.

Legal challenges to the move are expected. But the recent death of one of Mnangagwa’s biggest critics within Zanu-PF – Blessed Geza, also known as “Bombshell” – is likely to leave the field wide open for the proposal to sail through. ■

SOUTH AFRICA

Foot-and-mouth disease surges, losses mount

For a country that eats a ton of meat, rising prices are hitting consumers where it hurts: their wallets.

TEBADI MMOTLA IN BOKSBURG

SOUTH AFRICA is battling its worst foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in years, with farmers warning of steep financial losses and rising meat prices. In 2025, more than 24,000 cases were recorded – nearly three times the 7,700 reported in 2022 – and the virus has spread to eight of the country's nine provinces.

Foot-and-mouth is a contagious viral disease affecting cloven-hoofed animals, such as cattle, sheep and goats. It causes blisters, fever, lameness, and weight loss. Between 1% and 5% of adult animals that contract it die, and up to 20% of young animals. Secondary infections such as lesions and mastitis can be fatal.

Dirk Verwoerd, head veterinarian at commercial farm Karan Beef, said the crisis was avoidable. "It is not a drought or a flood. This is the result of gross mismanagement and incompetence."

Farmers say vaccine shortages worsened the outbreak. The government plans to vaccinate 80% of the national herd of 12-million cattle. This month, South African scientists rolled out the country's first local foot-and-mouth vaccine in 20 years. This should ease vaccine imports, currently being sourced from Botswana, Türkiye, and Argentina.

But Karan Beef has had its import and export operations cancelled. "I'm not even touching on the production losses or the hundreds of cattle that have died – that we had to shoot because their feet came off," Verwoerd said. "Terrible things. I don't have the vocabulary to describe it. It's so bad."

National beef exports fell 26% in 2025.

Consumers too, have had to grapple with higher meat prices amid a broader cost-of-living crisis. In a country that is one of Africa's highest consumers of meat per capita, meat prices rose 12% over the past year, with beef up more than 20%. ■



PHOTO: SIPHWE SIBEKO/REUTERS

Crisis: A shortage of foot-and-mouth disease vaccines worsened the outbreak in South Africa.

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FEATURE

'Halal' investment scams resurge in Egypt

Halal scam: yes, it's a paradox. But these schemes are not what they seem.

SHAIMAA EL-YOUSSEF IN CAIRO

BASSEM NATHAN is a day labourer from the village of Tanouf in Minya Governorate, southern Egypt. He was looking for a way to protect his earnings from the country's soaring inflation when he met a self-styled "investment specialist". The man convinced Nathan and 300 other villagers to take out bank loans and hand over the cash for what was supposed to be a high-yield investment project.

The maths was seductive. Inflation in Egypt had consistently held at more than 10% for years, hitting a peak of 38% in September 2023. The investment project would generate a monthly profit of 10,000 Egyptian pounds (\$213) for a 200,000 pound (about \$4,200) investment. That's a 60% annual return, far outstripping even the worst inflation recorded so far. Half of the profits would cover the bank-loan repayment, leaving the rest as passive income for investors such as Nathan.

The track record looked solid too. The scheme had paid its investors consistent monthly returns for four years when Nathan joined.

Then the "specialist" reportedly persuaded people to repeatedly double their bank loans and investments. The scheme unravelled when he suddenly declared bankruptcy in 2025.

Alarmed villagers gathered at their local church to report the matter to the priest and tallied their collective losses for the first time: 32-million pounds (\$682,300) had been collected between them. They filed a police report. Nathan still faces a lawsuit from the bank for defaulting on the debt he took to invest in the scheme.

**The track record looked solid.
The scheme had paid its
investors consistent monthly
returns for four years.**

The scams are widespread. In 6th of October City near Cairo, Esraa Gama lost 200,000 Egyptian pounds of her inheritance to a scam that was purportedly investing in a veiled-clothing business. In Mansoura, northern Egypt, Sarah El-Metwally and her sisters sold land to invest 200,000 pounds in what was to be a

pharmaceutical business, only to later discover their “investment” was empty warehouses with no drugs. “We are three girls who cannot farm the land,” she says. “We thought this investment would cover our basic needs.”

These ordeals hint at a resurgence of al-mustariḥ – a local term for predatory investment scammers. They frequently weaponise religious belief to build trust, by denouncing ordinary bank interest as *riba* (usury, which goes against Islamic principles). They position themselves as a halal alternative for people looking for passive income.

Al-mustariḥ pyramid schemes first emerged in Egypt in the 1980s. The scammers don’t invest in any productive assets or business. If they invest in anything at all, it is in speculative assets. The most notorious was created by Ahmed Al-Rayan, who attracted more than 200,000 depositors, with assets reaching 6-billion pounds by the mid-1980s. Schemes like his offered a 30% return, when banks were offering just 7%. Al-Rayan was using previous deposits to pay new investors. He was jailed in 1989. New banking rules implemented after his case forced more than 100 investment companies to regularise.

Now, with the country in a deepening economic crisis, these schemes are resurging. The latest data, from 2020, put the poverty rate in Egypt at 29.7%, but World Bank estimates suggest it may have surged past 32% after record inflation and the devaluation of the Egyptian pound.



Fake faith funds: Ahmed Al-Rayan created the most notorious investment scam in Egypt.

Even with the despair of growing poverty, the scams’ appeal perplexes professional bankers. Sahar El-Damaty, a former deputy chairperson of Banque Misr, points out that official bank interest rates can reach up to 30% on long-term investments, especially on high-yielding certificates of deposit. She also says that Egyptian banks have strong safety records, “yet the shadow economy remains a reckless adventure with zero regulatory safeguards”.

The secret might lie in the scammers’ approach to “customer” recruitment. They often adopt religious personas to lure victims. That *modus operandi* is so effective that faith in the schemes persists even after they unravel. “The tragedy is that victims often don’t blame themselves. Instead, they sometimes claim the government is to blame for shutting these companies down,” says lawyer Essam El-Islambouli. ■

This story was published in collaboration with Egab

INVESTIGATION



The Wagner Group collapsed. Its Russian infowar network lives on

Russian operatives engineered narrative-change campaigns across Africa, paid for media coverage, and drafted policies for governments. We have papers to prove it.

OFFICIALLY, the private military company known as the Wagner Group collapsed in 2023 when its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, died in a plane crash after his short-lived march on Moscow against the Russian government.

But new documents obtained by *The Continent* reveal the influence of Russian operatives has near-seamlessly continued since then. They spent more than \$7.2-million (600-million rubles) for narrative influence operations in Africa and Latin America in 2024. The document leak has not been reported before. It is, arguably, the most extensive public release of information on Russian influence operations so far.

Twenty-two of the 30 countries targeted were in Africa. Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, South Africa, Niger, and Angola were the top priorities, going by the budgets allocated to them.

Over the past five months, *The Continent* has hosted an investigative

consortium including *Dossier Center* and *iStories* in Russia; *All Eyes on Wagner* and *Forbidden Stories* in France; *openDemocracy* in the UK and Latin America; and two independent Russian-speaking journalists to examine the leaked files. Through open-source research, academic and security source interviews and additional independently sourced financial records, we have verified the documents are authentic.

Buying outrage and amplifiers

In the leaked documents, the former Wagner operatives, who regrouped under a company called StratConsult, report having spent more than \$150,000 in CAR in February 2024. More than a third of that spending was directed towards orchestrating a “CAR for Trump” rally and similar activities.

To the casual observer, the “CAR for Trump” rally was a genuine – if odd – demonstration of a convoy of at least 50



Propaganda: A statue of Russian soldiers protecting a family glows in Bangui.

PHOTO: BARBARA DEBOUT / AFP

motorcycles riding through the capital, Bangui, to picket the US embassy on 10 February 2024. That event was featured in at least 48 media articles, from as far afield as South Africa.

But the leaked internal reports suggest much of that coverage in various media outlets was paid for. The operatives reported paying \$800 for an article on the rally in *Pulse Live* in Kenya, \$600 for one in Chadian outlet *Alwihda Info*, \$400 for another in *Ghana Web*, and \$220 for a report in *Savanna News* in South Africa, among others.

When we followed up with *Alwihda Info*, director Djamil Ahmat Mahamat told *The Continent* the outlet increased its vigilance last year after receiving several dubious requests to publish paid articles from individuals who

vaguely presented themselves as African journalists. The leaked documents list at least 36 *Alwihda Info* articles among the operation's paid placements.

Pulse Live's director of content told *The Continent* that they don't always know the ultimate funder of paid content campaigns placed through third parties such as PR firms, and have no relationship with the people or organisations in this story.

Ghana Web and *Savanna News* did not respond to the requests for comment.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso the operatives set out to "launch a series of anti-French rallies" to bolster interim President Ibrahim Traoré's campaign for African sovereignty, which has seen him become a social media sensation.

The influence operation may have

extended beyond the staged rallies and engineered media coverage to the highest levels of policy and governance. The Russian operatives took credit for drafting Mali's new mining code, which was unveiled in 2023. The code seeks to expand state ownership of mines to at least 35% from 20%.

This change in policy sparked a well-documented dispute between Mali and Canadian mining company Barrick Gold. Malian authorities detained four Barrick Gold employees for nearly a year, suspended its operations, and demanded hundreds of millions of dollars in back taxes. Last November, Barrick paid \$430-million to settle the dispute and accepted the new mining code before its employees were released.

In the documents our journalists reviewed, the Russian operatives say they "developed a draft of the new code on the extraction of minerals, which was adopted by the transitional government of Mali". Their intention, they say, was to sway Mali towards nationalising companies in the sector for its economic sovereignty, but also "squeezing out corporations from unfriendly countries".

In Namibia, Russian operatives worked to weaken opposition parties and boost support for Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah's 2024 campaign. At the time she was the South West African People's Organisation's presidential candidate. They fabricated a letter, falsely attributed to UK MP Sarah Champion, claiming Britain had funded the opposition Independent Patriots for Change. According to leaked internal reports,

the stunt forced the UK ambassador in Namibia to publicly deny the claim.

They used a similar strategy in Chad, by crafting campaign messaging in favour of the incumbent, President Mahamat Déby, and portraying opposition candidate Succès Masra as a US-backed Trojan horse for US interests in the country.

In Namibia, Russian operatives worked to weaken opposition parties and boost support for Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah's 2024 campaign.

In South Africa, during 2024 talks to form a government of national unity, Russian operatives targeted the Democratic Alliance, their internal reports claim. They argued that if DA members took key ministries such as foreign affairs or justice, it could harm Russia's political and defence ties with South Africa.

The long shadow of Wagner

The whole operation was run from an office on Pirogova Lane in St Petersburg, led by former Wagner operative Sergei Sergeyevich Klyukin. He had previously worked for Wagner in Sudan, including efforts to support Omar al-Bashir's regime. Here in St Petersburg, he registered the company StratConsult in March 2024 and managed nearly three dozen staff. Recent information obtained by *Forbidden Stories* suggests the wider network had grown to more than 60

operatives by December 2025. The group made their payments for their Africa influence campaign in cash and, at least in one case, through cryptocurrency.

After leaked files became public in October 2025, StratConsult was dissolved the next month, suggesting the operation may reappear under another name.

The Wagner Group was founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin during Russia's 2014 war in eastern Ukraine, where it supported separatist forces. It operated across several African countries from 2017 as a hybrid force combining security services, political influence, and commercial interests.

Wagner deployed active combat fighters in several countries, including CAR, Mali, and Sudan, to support governments facing insurgencies or

internal unrest. In return, companies linked to Wagner secured access to gold, diamonds, and other natural resources, creating a model in which security assistance was tied to mining concessions.

The group was also associated with political consulting and information campaigns that promoted pro-Russian narratives and challenged Western influence. For Moscow, Wagner provided a way to expand its geopolitical footprint without formally deploying Russian troops, offering plausible deniability while deepening military and economic ties in fragile states.

In 2023, Wagner's relationship with Russia's defence ministry collapsed. Prigozhin led a brief march on Moscow in June and, two months later, he died



PHOTO: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/ANP

Proxy: In Burkina Faso, operatives allegedly launched rallies to bolster interim President Ibrahim Traoré.



No go: Malian protesters thank Wagner for France's withdrawal of troops.

PHOTO: FLORENT VERGNES/AFP

in a plane crash, which also claimed the lives of Utkin and other leaders. The Wagner Group was officially dissolved and Russia restructured Wagner's operations into the state-controlled Africa Corps (also called Afrika Korps) under the Ministry of Defence by early 2024, absorbing personnel, assets, and contracts in Africa.

Leaked files show that, by January 2024, efforts were under way to revive and expand influence operations launched under the group's founder Prigozhin. At least one document in StratConsult's leaked files was written in August 2023, when Prigozhin was alive,

showing continuity between the two.

The StratConsult staff appear to have inherited their former boss' relationships in Russian intelligence. The documents repeatedly mention Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, SVR, as a partner to "the company", stating it could supply intelligence and defend the group's operations from the scrutiny of Russia's defence ministry.

Klyukin and SVR did not respond to the consortium's request for comment. Over the coming editions, *The Continent* and its partners will reveal more details about these operatives and their activities across Africa and Latin America. ■

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FEATURE

Ghana's galamsey poisons Ivorian lagoon

'Natural water is easy to pollute but very difficult to de-pollute,' says an Ivorian expert. Ineffective inter-state committees aren't helping.



ALL PHOTOS: THIERRY GOUÉGNON

GAËL ZOZORO IN ASSINIE FRANCE

Assinie France is a small island village nestled between the Aby Lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean in southeastern Côte d'Ivoire. For months, the villagers here have watched with unease as the clear waters of the lagoon steadily turned yellow and muddy, with clay and slimy deposits. The discolouration eventually

spread beyond the lagoon into the open sea.

Catches by local fishers have sharply decreased since the water discolouration began, driving fish prices up, says Patience Akouba, a vendor in the village. "Before, we bought the kilo at 1,800 CFA francs (\$2.90). Today it has gone up to 3,000 CFA francs (\$4.84)," she says.



ILLUSTRATION: YEMSRACH YETNEBERK

An estimated 3,500 workers in the area are fishers. For lack of alternatives, local fishers continue to ply their trade, despite the apparent pollution. “Even if the water is dirty, we still fish,” says Isaac Assemian, who adds that the fish themselves are increasingly rare. “Before, we didn’t need to go into deep water. Today, we are forced to go very far out to sea. One of our [colleagues] went fishing a few weeks ago and never came back.”

The pollution is also endangering another pillar of Assinie’s economy: seaside tourism.

The islanders attribute the discolouration to unregulated gold panning taking place upstream in rivers between Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, particularly along the Tanoé River. Gold panners stir up the bottom of the water to recover the ore, says Josias Mahan of the Anti-Pollution Centre, a public body in Côte d’Ivoire.



Muddy waters: *Galamsey – unregulated gold mining – in Ghana imperils Ivorian fishers' livelihoods.*

“All the mud resulting from this activity is discharged directly into the waterway,” he told *The Continent*. Unregulated operations are also more likely to discharge toxic chemicals into the water, primarily mercury, which is used in rudimentary gold processing.

The first major alert that Ghana-side pollution was flowing into Ivorian lives came in 2017 in Bianouan, 20km from Ghana.

The Aby Lagoon is an important ecosystem. It is home to a significant mangrove forest, a breeding and nursing ground for many marine creatures. However, about three-quarters of the

watershed that feeds it, via the Bia and Tanoé rivers, flows from Ghana. There, unregulated gold mining, known as *galamsey*, is a longstanding issue.

“The bed of the river is shared between the two countries. When an illegal activity takes place on the other side of the border, the Ivorian authorities have no possibility of direct intervention,” says Noël Gogbeu Kodou, who heads the chemistry lab at the Ivorian Anti-Pollution Centre.

The first major alert that Ghana-side pollution was flowing into Ivorian lives came in 2017 in Bianouan, the last Ivorian village along the Bia river, less than 20km from Ghana. That year, the national water company had to close a drinking water supply in Bianouan because the water had become visibly discoloured.

Côte d'Ivoire has tried several cross-border responses to the issue since then.

It sent a delegation to Ghana in 2017 and an inter-state committee was set up to deal with the creeping pollution. "But this committee did not achieve its objectives, which explains why this phenomenon has [continued]," Mahan said.

In May 2023, another Ivorian inter-ministerial mission travelled to Ghana. Each country agreed to increase the surveillance of its watersheds and regularly monitor water quality. Côte d'Ivoire has since installed a water and forests base in Noé, near the border, and says it is collecting scientific data

regularly. New missions are planned.

The gold-panning ecological disaster is perhaps even more acute for Ghana. Its own Water Resources Commission says 60% of Ghanaian freshwater bodies are contaminated by toxins and chemicals used in informal gold mining.

But solutions to galamsey continue to evade Ghana. Successive presidents have failed to deliver on promises to rid the country of the informal gold mining and processing that has been practised for more than a century. In the latest state push, the Ghanaian army is reportedly being trained by French troops in jungle combat, specifically to take on unlicensed miners. ■



Net zero: Ivorian fishers face reduced hauls and risky working conditions due to murky water.

PHOTO ESSAY



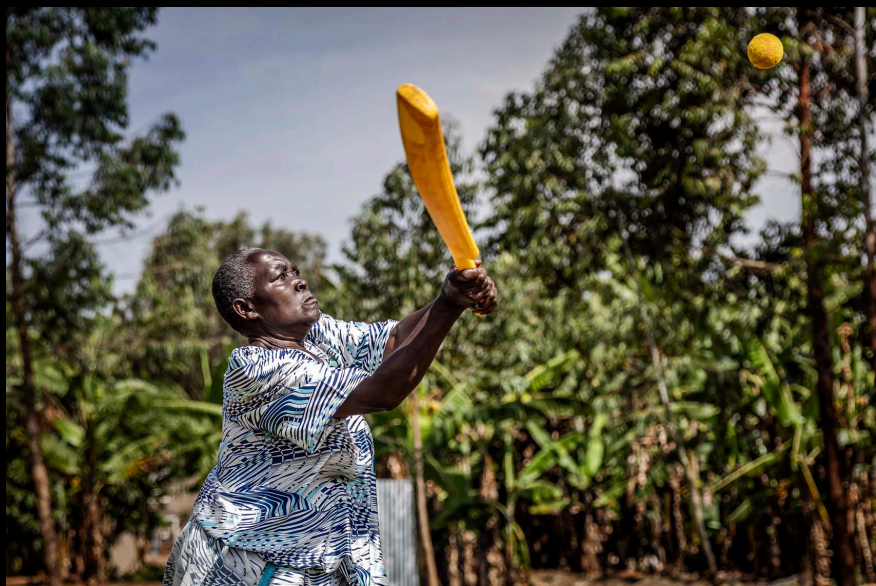
Howzat? Meet Uganda's cricket grannies

In eastern Uganda's Jinja district, enthusiastic groups of older women regularly meet on open fields to play sports and exercise together. The locals refer to them as "cricket grannies". The women have embraced the game to stay physically active and socially connected. They bond over light

exercise and training that incorporates elements of cricket. The programme, which began six years ago, is part of broader community efforts to address noncommunicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. It has attracted more than 1,000 participants. ■

ALL PHOTOS: LUIS TATO/AFP







TRAVEL

A glimpse into Burundi's silent decline

Overshadowed by war in its neighbourhood, economic depression, and continuing authoritarianism, Bujumbura feels threadbare.



NANJALA NYABOLA IN BUJUMBURA

BUJUMBURA, the smallest of East Africa's economic capitals, unfurls from Lake Tanganyika's shores into the nearby hills. Its centre is only a few kilometres from the hippo-populated waters of the freshwater lake. It's a simple town, where, in some restaurants, ordering mukeke – a fish endemic to Lake Tanganyika – results in an hour-

long wait as the kitchen staff first send someone down to the market to pick one up to cook.

Burundi's politics and economy have been in a quiet slide since the 2020 Covid pandemic which, by some accounts, claimed the life of former president Pierre Nkurunziza. At the time of his death, Nkurunziza was an authoritarian. In the run-up to his unconstitutional third term, which began in 2015, his

administration killed and arrested dissidents and passed draconian laws to constrain civic space. One notable Nkurunziza-era law was a ban on jogging in the city. The regime argued that jogging was creating opportunities for dissenters to gather and plot against Nkurunziza's rule.

On the heels of that political crisis, Burundi, a landlocked country, was also heavily affected by the Covid pandemic, which dramatically cut imports and increased their costs. As in other countries dependent on imports, the strengthening dollar added inflationary pressure.

In May 2023, on the advice of International Monetary Fund, the Burundian government devalued the local franc. It has lost 47% of its value against the dollar since 2016, fuelling black-market currency exchanges.

Fuel imports are severely constrained

and petrol-station queues are common. Indeed, my nominally four-star hotel was able to run the generator and, therefore, pump water into the rooms for only 30 minutes. Friction with Rwanda led to a border closure that disrupted trade further and discouraged tourism to two national parks near Bujumbura. They are some of the larger tourist attractions in Burundi.

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But perhaps the most significant pressure on Bujumbura today is the war in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo. Uvira in South Kivu province, which has been battered by the March 23 Movement rebel



group, is a mere 42-minute drive from the town centre. Burundi is backing the DRC government in Kinshasa in that conflict: together they accuse Rwanda of orchestrating paramilitary activity to destabilise the region and facilitate illegal mining.

Every time I raised my camera to take a photograph, a baby-faced soldier with a rifle draped across one shoulder unexpectedly emerged, demanding that I move on.

The spectre of that war haunts the streets of Bujumbura. Soldiers in various shades of fatigues lurk on every corner, suspicious of everyone who lingers a

little too long. I left Bujumbura with no photographs of any landmarks in the centre of town. Every time I raised my camera to take a photograph, a baby-faced soldier with a rifle draped across one shoulder unexpectedly emerged, demanding that I move on.

The people who govern Burundi undoubtedly inherited a complex set of conditions. But their own repeated defaulting to authoritarianism unnecessarily compounds the situation. The government responded to 2025 protests against the exclusion of the opposition in parliamentary elections with bullets and teargas. Fighting your own people, while trying to survive as a tiny country in one of the world's toughest geopolitical neighbourhoods, is borrowing trouble. ■



DATA

Not all love is (treated as) equal

VALENTINE’S Day is supposed to be a celebration of love. A beautiful sentiment no doubt, but not one everybody can share with equal freedom. Especially LGBTQIA+ folks.

In 2024, Afrobarometer asked Namibian citizens about their attitudes toward homosexuals and views on same-sex rights.

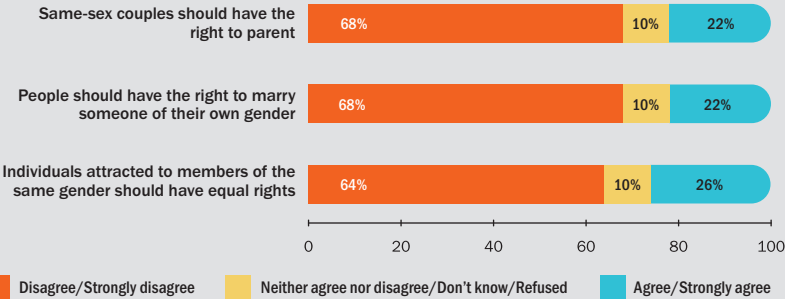
A slim majority (51%) say they “would not care” or would “somewhat like” or “strongly like” living next door to a homosexual – the fourth-highest among 38 countries we surveyed – but tolerance is lower when it comes to loved ones. More than half (58%) say they would reject a friend or family member who

is attracted to individuals of the same gender, whereas only 22% would accept them.

Perhaps even more concerning is that two-thirds oppose parenting rights (68%) and marriage rights (68%) for same-sex couples – both currently denied to them in the country. And nearly the same share (64%) oppose equal rights in general for same-sex-attracted individuals.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring Botswana, fewer than one in three respondents say they would not mind having someone in a same-sex relationship as a co-worker (30%), a friend (29%), or a member of their religious community (27%). ■

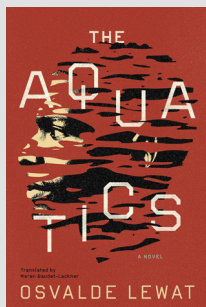
Views on same-sex rights | Namibia | 2024





TC BOOK REVIEW

BY JACQUELINE NYATHI



Seeing ourselves in inconvenient mirrors

Cameroonian filmmaker Osvalde Lewat forces us to face ourselves in her intense novel.

OSVALDE LEWAT'S debut novel *The Aquatics* (translated by Maren Baudet-Lackner) reads at first like the usual tired satire about African countries. A place called Zambuena; the Old Man, whose influence is felt everywhere; a bloated Official Party with bloated officials; a culture of terror and repression. But

then the focus sharpens on the stifling life of Katmé, wife of an ambitious, rising political star who's the prefect of Akriba. Katmé is managing a staff of servants, eating with fine silverware, and determinedly ignoring her own demon: the death of her mother 20 years ago.

Everything changes when a foreign company is contracted to build a road that plans to pass over her mother's grave. Her canny husband seizes on this as an opportunity to advance his career. The collateral damage of the manoeuvrings falls on Katmé's gay best friend and protégé, Samy. Naturally, homosexuality is illegal in Zambuena – what will people say when they find out the prefect's wife supports a person like that?

The Aquatics morphs quickly from satire to horror. What happens to Samy is unspeakable – and, as Lewat makes clear, everyone is responsible. It overshadows Katmé's own painful journey back to herself, away from the bubble in which she enclosed herself – one that will be familiar to many middle-class Africans – in the face of nightmarish inequality.

There's little redemption – except for Katmé's feminist (re)awakening, which is heartening. In contrast, the brutality, a reality for gay people across so much of Africa, is sobering. It's hard to ignore how similar Katmé is to most of us: living obliviously, caring only about our own comfort. If the *Aquatics* of the novel are monsters, then perhaps so are we all. ■

The Quiz

- 1 What is the largest city in Ethiopia?
- 2 In which country's capital city is the Catedral de Santa Isabel (pictured) located?
- 3 Who is Zimbabwe's president?
- 4 What is the capital city of South Sudan?
- 5 Which country's currency is called the ariary?
- 6 By land mass, what is the continent's largest country?
- 7 Which African country has Spanish as its official language?
- 8 Which country has the highest rhino population?
- 9 Which country's name translates to "Coast of Ivory" in English?
- 10 Soukous is a genre of music from which country/region?



HOW DID I DO?

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

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

"Mi casa es tu casa, especialmente en Guinea Ecuatorial."

PHOTO: DAVID DEGNER/GETTY IMAGES

Big Pic

Just deserts: The town of Amdjarass, Chad, hosts the annual International Festival of Saharan Cultures, drawing people from across the region to celebrate their culture in music, dance, storytelling, crafts and equestrian displays.

PHOTO: JORIS BOLOMEY/AFP



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