

# The Continent

**Genuine Italian  
leather – straight  
outta Nigeria**



PHOTO: TEMILOLUWA JOHNSON/THE CONTINENT



**COVER:** In Kano, grandfathers work alongside their sons and grandchildren in ancient, stinky pits to make genuine high quality leather products. The leather goes to Italy and Spain. It then powers a billion-dollar industry selling high fashion for eye-watering prices. The generations sculpting that leather can make as little as \$330 a year. This week's cover is yet another example of the 'global extraction, western benefit' ethos of modern capitalism. But the workers are organisation and building local partnerships, so there's that. And the photos are quite nice. *Page 13.*

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# THE WEEK IN BRIEF

## NIGERIA

### Lagos office-block fire kills 10 people

At least 10 people died and 25 were injured after a fire broke out in Afriland Towers, a seven-storey building in Lagos. Videos on social media showed occupants jumping from upper floors to escape. The Lagos emergency agency said the blaze began in the basement, where inverter batteries ignited due to poor maintenance and lack of ventilation. The victims were mostly office workers trapped inside; survivors suffered burns, fractures, and smoke inhalation.

## EGYPT

### Gold thief melts down priceless artefact

Egyptian officials searched for a missing 3,000-year-old gold bracelet for nine days – only to find it had been stolen and melted down. The bracelet once belonged to King Amenemope, who ruled Egypt in about 1,000BC. It disappeared from a safe in Cairo's Egyptian Museum. Investigators found that a restoration specialist took the bracelet and sold it to a gold-foundry worker, who melted it for scrap. The artefact, worth about \$4,000 in gold, had priceless historical value.

## CAMEROON

### Fungal infection threatens cocoa harvest

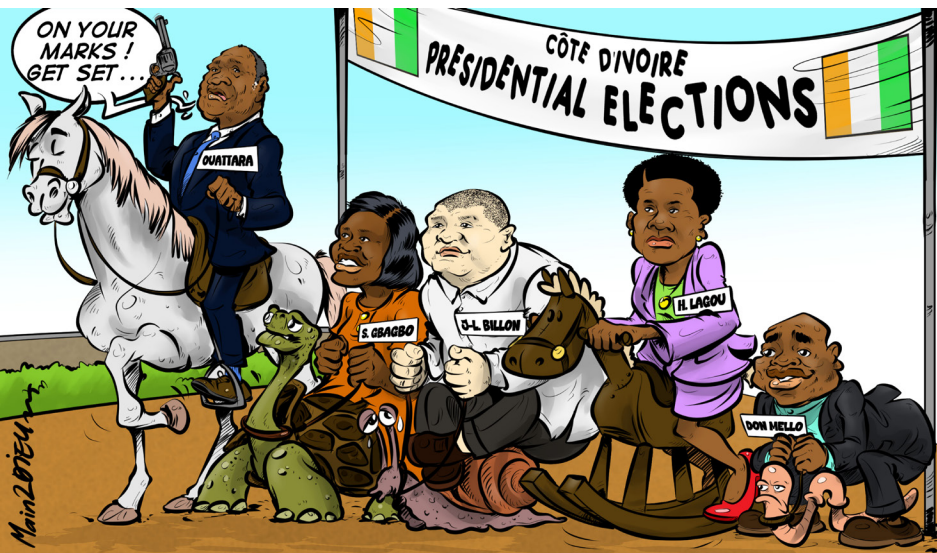
Cocoa plantations in Cameroon's southwest are being ravaged by black pod disease after weeks of heavy rain created ideal conditions for the fungal infection. Important cocoa hubs, including Muyuka, Mbonge and Kumba, have been badly affected, *Africanews* reports. Officials say the outbreak has been worsened by a surge in counterfeit agrochemicals and farmers' reliance on cheap, unverified fungicides smuggled from Ghana and Nigeria.



PHOTO: CRISTINA ALDEHUELA/AFP

The fungal disease, which thrives in wet conditions, is an increasingly significant threat to the country's top cocoa-producing regions.





## MIGRATION

## Migrant voyage takes a murderous turn

Spanish police have arrested 19 people accused of murder and torture after dozens of passengers vanished from a migrant boat sailing from Senegal to the Canary Islands, the *BBC* reports. Survivors said that amid engine failure, storms and food shortages, some passengers were branded “witches” and violently attacked. Police believe about 50 people were thrown overboard during the weeks-long journey. The boat was rescued south of Gran Canaria on 24 August with 248 survivors from Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau.

## RWANDA

## An Africa first in cycling, over 100 years later

The UCI Road World Championships will take place in Africa for the first time since the cycling event was first held in 1921. Rwanda was named as the host for the event, starting Sunday, at last year’s championships in Zurich. Mauritian Kim Le Court, who wore the Tour de France Femmes yellow jersey this year, said: “To be on the start line of the very first World Championships in Africa... is something I never imagined.” The women’s individual time trial starts from Kigali’s BK Arena. Eritrea, South Africa, Algeria, Mauritius and Morocco lead the continent’s rankings in cycling.



## SOUTH AFRICA

## Sofa so good for Cyril's couch-stash cash clash

Three people are currently standing trial in South Africa for allegedly stealing \$580,000 that was hidden in a couch at President Cyril Ramaphosa's Phala Phala game farm in 2020, *AP* reports. The theft triggered a political firestorm for Ramaphosa, who denied wrongdoing, although he hasn't explained certain facts pertaining to the case. These include why he didn't initially report the theft, why the cash was stashed in a couch, and why the large amount of foreign currency was not declared to the Reserve Bank.



**Justice overdue:** *Agnes Wanjiru was found murdered near a UK training base in Kenya.*

## KENYA

## Arrest warrant issued in Wanjiru murder

A Kenyan court has ordered the arrest of a British national linked to the 2012 murder of Agnes Wanjiru. The young woman's mutilated body was found in a septic tank near a British army training base. The court did not name the suspect, who is reportedly in the United Kingdom. Prosecutors plan to file an extradition request, *Al Jazeera* reports. Wanjiru's family said, after 13 years, justice is long overdue. The case, and other alleged abuses by UK army personnel, has triggered scrutiny of Britain's military presence in Kenya.

## SOMALIA

## TikTokers arrested for parodying president

Somali police have arrested several social media content creators accused of insulting President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and other national leaders in TikTok videos, the *BBC* reports. Authorities say they violated Somali laws and Islamic values. Influencers have been arrested and jailed in the past for spreading clan-based insults, incitement, or "immoral" content, but this is the first case involving a top politician. In 2023, the government considered banning TikTok altogether, citing concerns over morality and national security, but backed down after strong public opposition.

## GAMBIA

## Homework-checker in-chief rejects ejection

Security personnel forcibly removed Gambia's auditor-general Momodou Ceesay from his office after he refused reassignment to the trade ministry, the *BBC* reports. The auditor-general's office has security of tenure, so Ceesay can be removed only under strict legal conditions. He has clashed with President Adama Barrow since 2022, when the finance ministry blocked his audit reports. Barrow dismissed these reports as "opinions", rather than formal findings. Ceesay's removal triggered public outrage and threats of protests.

## SUDAN

## French bank on trial for funding atrocities

BNP Paribas is facing a jury trial in the United States over allegations it helped to finance Sudan's human-rights abuses under dictator Omar al-Bashir, reports the *Financial Times*. The class-action suit, revived in 2019, has been brought by more than 20,000 Sudanese refugees. They say the French bank gave the al-Bashir regime access to US markets and oil revenues used to bankroll atrocities, including the Darfur genocide. Although BNP paid a \$8.97-billion settlement in 2014 over sanctions violations, victims say they received no compensation.

## EQUATORIAL GUINEA

## Hague to unsteady Teddy: Maison? Mais non!

The International Court of Justice has ruled in favour of France in a dispute with Equatorial Guinea over a luxury Paris mansion once owned by Vice-President Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, son of President Teodoro Obiang. French authorities confiscated the mansion and other assets after convicting Obiang of embezzling millions in state funds. But Equatorial Guinea argued that it was a diplomatic building. The court ruled that it is a private residence. Obiang has also faced corruption



PHOTO: MICHELE SPATARI/AFP

**House arrest:** Vice President of Equatorial Guinea Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, making waves wherever he goes.

probes in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Brazil. ■

## NEWS

## UNITED STATES

# A more orderly aid exit, but an exit all the same

**America has a new plan to pull back from global health funding, but it still wants out.**

OVER THE next 18 months, the United States will overhaul its role in global health. A new state department policy, published on Friday, outlines a slower, more orderly pullback than this year's abrupt closure of USAid.

The quick summary is that the US will shift from open-ended, multilateral mechanisms to time-limited, bilateral agreements.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio also wants to cut out international NGOs, which often act as intermediaries between American funding and local organisations – saying they failed to transition their work to local governments because of “perverse incentives that encourage NGOs to self-perpetuate”.

Catherine Kyobutungi, the executive director of the African Population and Health Research Centre, told *The Continent*: “Generally, they are saying all the right things about integration, data

systems, co-financing, cutting out the implementing partners, et cetera. I hope they pull it off.”

Speaking to Health Policy Watch, Dr Jirair Ratevosian, who was the US global Aids co-ordinator under former president Barack Obama, applauded the policy for not disrupting front-line care, like HIV drugs and mosquito nets, while pursuing “integration at last”.

The Trump administration also said it would purchase lenacapavir for two million people in high HIV-burden countries. In clinical trials, the twice-yearly injection prevented HIV infection in 99% of people.

**“Generally, they are saying all the right things about integration, data systems, co-financing, cutting out the implementing partners, et cetera. I hope they pull it off.”**

Still, the new policy is largely an exit strategy. The US expects local government and faith-based hospitals to absorb the healthcare it has been funding. Grantee countries will have co-financing targets beginning in 2027, with an end goal of being fully self-financing.

“It’s pragmatic, performance-oriented – and a bit ruthless,” said Ratevosian. ■



# ZAMBIA

## Wizard assassin case pits beliefs against the law

A magistrate has handed down jail terms to two men for planning to kill the president by performing a magic ritual.

OLGA MANDA IN LUSAKA

A Zambian court has sent two men to prison for “attempting to use witchcraft” to kill President Hakainde Hichilema. The case relied on a colonial-era law. It’s the first time the country’s courts have handed down such a conviction.

Magistrate Fine Mayambu sentenced Leonard Phiri, 43, and Mozambican Jasten Mabulesse Candunde, 43, to two and a half years in prison for professing knowledge of witchcraft and possessing alleged charms: a live chameleon, a red cloth, and a white powder.

“Had the convicts executed their mission ... it could have caused the death of a head of state within five days,” Mayambu said, without elaborating.

The ruling appears to have ignored a 2020 high court ruling that said that witchcraft accusations required demonstrable harmful outcomes, not

mere possession of traditional items.

Police said the two were promised more than two million kwacha (\$85,000) by a brother of one of Hichilema’s political rivals to carry out the ritual.

The case highlights the tension between colonial-era witchcraft laws and modern rights. The law defines witchcraft as pretending to use supernatural powers to cause fear, annoyance, or harm. Accusing someone of being a witch is also a crime.

“We are 61 years after independence and still dealing with unproductive issues of sorcery and witchcraft,” lawyer Dickson Jere told *The Continent*. Neighbouring Malawi and Botswana also retain similar laws.

Human rights lecturer Theresa Sambo said Zambia’s witchcraft law could be challenged as unconstitutional but remains enforceable as long as it is on the books. – *Additional reporting by Kiri Rupiah.* ■



PHOTO : AFP

**Charmed:** President Hakainde Hichilema appears to be safe from sorcery and arcane assault, for now.

## CHAD

# The Déby presidential level-ups just keep on coming

The former president's son, who went from military ruler to elected president himself, can now unlock the real boss level: President-for-life.

## MAHAMAT ALI IN N'DJAMENA

LAWMAKERS aligned with the opposition walked out of Chad's Parliament on Monday to protest a proposal that would effectively make Mahamat Déby president for life. In their absence, fellow legislators approved changes to the country's Constitution that would allow the president to run for an unlimited number of terms.

Opposition party leaders Ngaradjina Roubakoua and Mahamat Ahmat Lazina walked out with other legislators from their respective parties, Rassemblement National des Démocrates Tchadiens – Le Réveil and Mouvement National pour le Changement au Tchad.

Defending the proposal, Tchoroma Hadji Woli Mahamat argued that presidential elections are an unnecessary expense, given that power is obtained through “divine emanation”.

After the walk-out, the national assembly passed a package of proposed constitutional changes. They took a slightly less radical position to Woli



PHOTO : AFP

**Power up:** Chad's Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno arrives at his presidential inauguration in 2024.

Mahamat's: unlimited runs for the presidency.

Chad's constitution is relatively new – and it was first adopted in December 2023. At the time, Déby was the military ruler of the country, having taken power after his father, Idriss Deby, was killed by rebels in 2021. At the time of his death, Déby senior had been president for 30 years.

The younger Déby was declared democratically elected in May 2024 polls that his opponents disputed. He can now aim for life presidency when the senate approves the most recent amendments, which are expected to sail through. ■

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# LIBYA

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## The meteoric rise in ‘space stone’ smuggling

**For one shepherd, finding a meteorite provided a welcome boost to his finances. But the unregulated trade in these cosmic objects is causing disquiet.**

**HINDIYA AL-ASHAIBI IN BENGHAZI**

Abdul Hamid al-Fituri, 49, was grazing his sheep in Tocra, northeastern Libya, when he came across a small, heavy stone with a strange shape. It was black with a smooth, silky texture and odd protrusions and holes in some parts.

Al-Fituri's curiosity about his find, which took place in January 2024, led him online. "With my younger brother's help, we searched for its identity via the internet and social media sites," he says. "I discovered it was a meteorite, very rare and valued at thousands of dollars, and could be sold through Facebook groups."

Offers poured in for Al-Fituri's stone on "Selling Meteorites in Libya", a Facebook group with more than 11,000 followers. A buyer who identified himself as Syrian contacted Al-Fituri on WhatsApp, asking him to weigh, pass a magnet over, and film the stone under direct sunlight. After seeing the video, he offered \$1,700, which Al-Fituri refused. Eventually, the shepherd agreed to sell the 9kg meteorite

for about \$3,300 to a trader who sent an associate with cash.

Libya is one of the world's best sources for large, well-preserved meteorites.

Most of the space rocks are found further south of Tocra: in Al-Ghani, a limestone plateau stretching nearly 200km by 60km. Al-Ghani's hard limestone surface lacks quartz sand so the meteorites are not eroded by windblown particles and its hyper-arid climate helps to preserve them for millennia with little weathering.

More than 1,200 meteorites have been found here.

### **A digital black market**

Since the February 2011 revolution, when longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi was toppled, Libyan authorities have struggled to control the southern border, a 1,790km stretch touching Sudan, Niger, and Chad. This has created opportunities for international networks to illegally search for, excavate, and filch space stones.



PHOTO: CHARLY TRIBALLEAU/AFP

**Special delivery:** Meteorites are easier to find in stark terrain, making the countries of the Sahel a rich source of space stones such as NWA 16788, above, at 24.5kg the largest piece of Mars identified on Earth.

The smuggling often includes Libyans, Syrians, Moroccans, and Turks, who meet in obscure social media spaces where prices for meteorites are set in auction-style bidding.

“We continuously follow stone sales offers via Facebook,” says online dealer Siraj Ahmed\*. From experience, he can now judge a stone’s potential significance from its colour, size, patterns, and crust. Smoothness; irregular protrusions; and yellow, green, or white dots suggest the stone is a pallasite meteorite.

Buyers seek these for rare jewelry and ornaments, Ahmed says. On FossilEra, an online retailer, a 176g slice of a pallasite meteorite is listed for \$12,000.

Meteorite prices typically range from \$150 to \$700 per kilogram but a rare find can fetch much more. A 22kg stone from Mars sold for a record \$5.3-million in July at a New York auction by Sotheby’s. The

stone was found near Kefkaf, Agadez, in northern Niger two years ago. The sale drew controversy, leading Nigerien authorities to open an investigation into the possibility it was illegally traded.

In the meantime, Niamey suspended all exports of gemstone and meteorites until stricter controls are put in place.

That’s the kind of proactive action Libya now needs, according to lawyer Nihal al Barasi. He called on authorities to monitor social media and pursue the networks trading Libyan meteorites, calling it theft and looting of Libya’s natural wealth. But Libyan law is silent about the practice. ■

\* Name has been changed to protect identity.

*This story was published in collaboration with Egab*

## PHOTO ESSAY

# Hide and seek

Meet the Nigerians who make your genuine 'Italian' leather.

**WORDS AND PHOTOS:**

**TEMILOLUWA JOHNSON IN KANO**

DUNG AND pigeon droppings ferment under the sun in the tanning pits of Kano. For decades, raw hides have been turned into leather here before being shipped to Europe's prestigious fashion houses.

Nigeria is Africa's biggest leather producer and Kano is the centre of this

sector. The Nigerian export agency says 71% of Nigeria's leather products are exported to Italy and Spain. In the United Nations Comtrade database, Italy reports importing hides, skins, or leather worth \$210-million from Nigeria between 2020 and 2024. Spain reports nearly \$156-million. The shoes, bags, and belts assembled from this leather will bear labels like "Made in Italy" but give no credit to the Nigerian workers



*Hide help: Leather-capped workers pray during their break at Majama Tannery.*



who did the dirty first steps.

Kano is a commercial city, woven through by sandy roads buzzing with two-wheelers and yellow tricycles. In the narrow lungus of Kurmi market – alleys too tight for cars – an unmistakably animal smell assaults the senses, wafting out from Majama Tannery, a 120-year-old leather-dyeing compound operating from the backyard of a mosque.

This is the place where the hides that end up in Europe are tannerised. To tannerise is to convert hides into leather by soaking, peeling, chemically treating, and, sometimes, dyeing them.

Inside the tannery Aliyu Garba, known to all as “Baba”, is working in the pits with his 15-year-old grandson. At 60 years old, he has spent a lifetime working

with hides. “These ones are from ram,” Baba explains, motioning to the bundle his son dragged across the floor.

This business includes three generations of the Garba family, which isn’t unusual. “I have been working since childhood. My forefathers did this business. My grandchild also works here,” says Ahmed Lari, who sits on a goatskin mat near Baba’s workstation. His 24-year-old grandson, Adamu, is peeling the hair off the hide.

### **Honest work has never been dirtier**

Bent over the same pits, repeating the same motions, generations of families in northern Nigeria have made leather, much of it exported to the global market.

The first step of the tanning process



*Dung deal: A tannery worker soaks goatskin in Majama's manure pits.*



*Kicker: Adamu Lari, 24 and grandson to the chairman of Majama Tannery scrapes hair off animal hide*

is called sanwa ko patoz. The workers soak hides in a mixture of ash, sodium chloride, pigeon droppings, and ram dung. This makes the hides softer and easier to peel, Baba explains.

The mixture is also the source of the overpowering smell. When the hides are soft, they are peeled to remove the fur. The process is slow and methodical. Every hair must be removed.

If it proves impossible to remove all the fur in the first peel, the hide is soaked again in another pit with pigeon droppings. After peeling, the hide is good enough to use for drum skin. But certainly not for fashion. So it is soaked again, this time in a pit with baka ruwa,

an enzymatic powder made from grinding tree seeds.

"That powder must be added," says Baba. "Without it, the hide won't take."

After this treatment, the hides can now be thinned and spread to dry.

**Tanners once rubbed the drying hides with vegetable oil to shine. Now, they use spent engine oil, a cheaper alternative.**

Tanners once rubbed the drying hides with vegetable oil to shine. Now, they use spent engine oil, a cheaper alternative that leaves a dirty brown finish. The hides glisten under the Kano sun.

Soon they will be cut and sewn into handbags, shoes, wallets, belts, and more. But not here.

Outside the tannery, Magaji Ahmed is dyeing leather, a craft he began learning at age 12. Behind him, strips of leather





*Grease lightening: Majama workers rub used engine oil on the leather to give it a burnished sheen.*



*Finishing line: A man hangs up hides to dry after they're done being processed in the pigeon-poo pits.*



hang like curtains, drying into shades of red.

Export markets want their hides tannerised, but local people often use them raw, especially as outdoor seating. Water cannot penetrate hides with fur, Lari explains.

Every worker in Majama belongs to a workers' union – the Kofar Wambai Tannery Custodians' Association – but organising for collective action has yet to improve their welfare and earnings. Tanners sell cheaply to bulk buyers, brokers, and warehouses, making enough money only for subsistence. Baba says he makes no more than 500,000 naira a year (about \$333).

The Nigeria leather industry is estimated to generate at least \$600-million a year, but most of it goes to people in the middle.

Still, that could change. Tanneries like Ztannery – less than 10km from Majama – are trying something new: partnerships with local designers. The tannery now operates as part of Lagos-based brand Winston Luxury Leather.

The entry of Winston Luxury certainly nods to Kano's central place in leather fashion. But it remains to be seen if the brand will avoid replicating the old hierarchy: selling leather as a “luxury” while the men who soak hides in dung remain unseen and poorly paid. ■



*Tan gent: A Majama worker changes the water in a tanning pit, readying it for the next processing run.*



***Oh snap:** Aliyu Garba holds up a newly soaked crocodile skin .*



***Sift shift:** Aliyu Garba's sisters pound acacia seeds into бага ruwa powder in the tannery's backyard. This powder is essential in the softening process of the hide.*

## FEATURE

# Vanishing returns: Sudan's 'disappearing' crisis

Thousands of people have gone missing without a trace in Sudan's war, exacerbating a decades-old pattern that leaves their families trapped between hope and despair.

EISA DAFALLAH

SULafa Mohammed Ahmed Khalil hasn't seen her brother Othman Mohammed in nine months. The 42-year-old disappeared on 19 December 2024, during a visit to comfort neighbours after a rocket hit their house. "Since his disappearance, we haven't tasted joy," says Khalil. "Sadness hovers over our house."

Mohammed left behind two daughters and a pregnant wife. His youngest daughter has never seen her father. She was born after his disappearance.

The family's search has taken them across displacement camps and hospitals, following every rumour and lead. Someone claimed to have seen him at Zamzam camp, which they searched exhaustively. They found nothing.

Their experience is far from unique. In August, the International Committee of the Red Cross identified the conflict in Sudan as the main reason it is receiving many more requests to locate missing people. In 2024, the charity recorded more than 7,700 requests to help to locate people missing in

Sudan's conflict, a 52% increase compared to 2023. "This figure represents just a small fraction of those who have disappeared," says Patrick Youssef, the Africa director. "Our teams are receiving hundreds of messages, emails and calls from people looking for their loved ones."

Not all the missing are taken by belligerents in the conflict. But many are.

After the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) liberated Khartoum state from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in May 2024, dozens of civilians were arrested on charges of collaboration. Tabian Othman's brother disappeared on 3 August from Omdurman. She filed a police report and has searched hospitals and prisons, to no avail.

If he were taken to the SAF detention centres, a good outcome is unlikely. "The conditions inside are reportedly horrific. Many of the missing have died in custody," says Abeer Suleiman, a spokesperson for the Sudan Missing Persons Initiative. Families often learn of the death of their relatives in detention only when fellow detainees are released.

Like the SAF, the RSF "disappears"





PHOTO: AFP

**Ghost town:** Sudanese Armed Forces fighters patrol a deserted market area in Khartoum. The army's war with Rapid Support Forces has killed tens of thousands of people and uprooted over 12-million more.

people it suspects of spying for government forces.

Rami Sami Mohammed's uncle, Issam Mohammed al-Radi, a mechanic in his sixties who maintained trucks for a gold-prospecting company, disappeared in June after RSF forces took control of the strategic triangle border area between Libya, Egypt and Sudan.

Al-Radi suffers from age-related health problems requiring continuous medical care, so his nephew fears for his life if he is in captivity.

Even before this current war, forced disappearance was not uncommon in Sudan. Dozens of families are still searching for relatives who went missing during the December 2018 protests and on 3 June 2019, when the army dispersed a sit-in at its general command.

Before that, hundreds of political dissidents disappeared during Omar

al-Bashir's rule (1989-2019). "We have cases of enforced disappearance dating back to 1989 whose fate remains unknown," says Othman al-Basri, a human rights lawyer.

Because ruling authorities have often been involved in disappearing people, they keep little to no official records on the disappeared. This is why volunteers in the Sudan Missing Persons Initiative are documenting the details – and the fates, if possible – of people who have been forcibly disappeared.

Without such documentation, families like Khalil's are left without closure.

"Not knowing is the cruellest part," Khalil says, tears streaming down her face. "When someone dies, that's a known fate. But forced disappearance is more brutal – the family remains in constant anxiety, imagining his circumstances and suffering." ■

## DEBATE

# The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

THE NILE is the world's longest river and perhaps its most contested – for its lifeblood, its identity, and its leverage. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam sits at the heart of this tension.

In Egypt, the Nile sustains more than 100-million people in desert land. In Uganda, being home to its source is a national pride. Rwanda might argue that the Kagera River is the true source of the Nile. In Sudan and South Sudan, it nourishes crops and seasonally floods riverine lands, yet is an immovable feature of people's lives. Meanwhile, with this dam Ethiopia has made the boldest modern claim to the river.

Ethiopians view this as a development right long denied by colonial-era rules. Egyptians call it an existential threat, saying huge water volumes were “withheld” when the reservoir was filled. Perceptions matter: Egyptian farmers see dry canals as proof the river is being stolen and officials in Cairo have threatened to send 1,000 troops to Somalia, Ethiopia's neighbour.

The reality is complex. Ethiopia filled the reservoir during years of heavy rainfall and not all the stored water would have flowed to Egypt anyway, given irrigation in Sudan and the Aswan High Dam's very high evaporation. Water will also re-enter the Blue Nile



after powering the Renaissance Dam's turbines. Still, drier years loom under climate change. Will replenishing the dam in such circumstances validate Egyptian fears? We asked a contributor from each country to weigh in. ■



# ETHIOPIA

**SAMUEL GETACHEW IN ADDIS ABABA**

ETHIOPIA inaugurated the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam last week. At 5.15 gigawatts, it is Africa's largest hydropower project – and a national symbol. Save for a \$1-billion loan from China Exim Bank, local revenue and citizen contributions met most of its \$4-billion cost. More than 25,000 people took part in its 14-year construction.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has promised the dam will accelerate industrial growth, generate foreign currency, and provide affordable

electricity. The government estimates national power access for Ethiopia's population of 129-million could rise from 54% now to 78% within a decade.

From the beginning, it was framed as a national project. Ethiopians at home and in the diaspora bought bonds and made donations. This crowdfunding became a rallying cry for self-determination. Public celebrations in Addis Ababa and across the country greeted its opening, with commentators comparing it to a present-day Adwa – the historic victory over Italian colonial forces in 1896.

“Those who initiated, supported,



**Hail hydro:** The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam was inaugurated on 9 September. PHOTO: LUIS TATO/AFP



PHOTO: LUIS TATO/AFP

**Cymbal of pride:** The Ethiopian Republic March Band perform at the opening of the Renaissance Dam.

and fought for this project have etched their names into the history of the Renaissance Dam. To all who gave, whether through finances, knowledge, energy, media, diplomacy, or professional skill, you are forever remembered as Ethiopia's dedicated children," Abiy said at its inauguration this month, which was scheduled to coincide with the Ethiopian New Year.

In the region, Ethiopia has sold the dam as a Pan-African asset from which neighbours like Sudan, Kenya, and Djibouti can import electricity. Abiy argues that it would pay for itself in seven years and has pledged the construction of 10 more dams within the next 15 years.

That promise does nothing to calm water-politics anxieties downstream in Cairo, but ordinary Ethiopians are ecstatic.

The dam is both an achievement and

a beginning. Years of erratic electricity have been a brake on productivity and development in Africa's second-most populous country.

Health centres in rural Ethiopia are unable to use modern machines like X-rays or ultrasounds, which means most treatment is simply based on a patient's history and description of symptoms.

The Renaissance Dam promises to erase those hardships, although it won't happen overnight. Ethiopia will need to expand grid connections by building transmission lines before electricity access reaches its rural areas.

It's such details, rather than the friction with downstream neighbours, that Ethiopians will care about in the years to come. Right now they bask in a renewed sense of national pride, at the centre of eastern Africa's energy future. ■

# EGYPT

## MAHMOUD ABDEL RAHMAN IN CAIRO

HASSAN Ashour stands in his fields in Beheira Governorate, staring at cracked earth that should have been irrigated two weeks ago. His crops are withering. “We haven’t found water in the canals for 15 days now and the water has been irregular for four months,” he says.

“I’ll try to extract water from underground but abandoning the land will never happen,” he adds. But groundwater isn’t rich in silt and nutrients like the water from the Nile, which affects crop quality.

Other farmers are reducing production

or leaving land fallow during summer due to lack of reliable water, says Hussein Abdel Rahman, head of the Egyptian Farmers Union, which represents 500,000 farmers. Those in the desert hinterlands have to drill expensive wells.

Egypt needs about 81-billion cubic metres of water a year but officially receives only 55.5-billion from the Nile. With 112-million people and per-capita water availability at about 500 cubic metres a year – half the amount the United Nations defines as the “water poverty” line – the deficit is stark.

Agriculture is the biggest user of water in the country. The government



PHOTO: KHALED DESOUKI/AFP

**High and dry:** A farmer takes a break on the banks of the Nile river near Egypt’s southern city of Minya. Farmers say the lack of a reliable water supply is forcing them to scale back and leave their land fallow.

has clamped down on growing rice, sugarcane, and bananas – water-hungry crops once central to Egypt’s agricultural economy. Rice, a former export earner, has shrunk from 700,000 hectares to less than half that since 2018, pushing up local prices fourfold.

“We used to grow rice before, but now it’s not possible because of water scarcity,” says Ashour. Farmers who defy restrictions risk heavy fines.

Ahmed Ibrahim is a farmer in Dakahlia Governorate, once one of Egypt’s top rice-producing areas. He’s had to make changes too. “With the tightening measures, I switched to growing sesame,” he said. When he made the switch in 2024, he was paid 95,000 Egyptian pounds a tonne. But as more farmers followed suit, oversupply drove prices down by 10,000 pounds.

For many Egyptians, Ethiopia’s Renaissance Dam is the cause of the country’s water stress. Even Egyptian experts like Professor Abbas Sharaky at Cairo University argue that the dam’s reservoir has “cost Egypt about 30% of its water share”.

It is not a universal assessment. Other experts, like Khaled Gamal, a sustainability consultant in Cairo, blame Egypt’s population growth. Going from 20-million people in the 1960s to more 100-million now has meant more irrigation to produce more food.

But Sharaky’s assessment is a serious charge – one with many believers. “Egypt cannot coexist with any reduction in its water share,” said former irrigation



PHOTO: KHALED DESOUKI/AFP

**Rice 'n' fall:** Egyptian farmers are turning to crops that are less water-intensive, and less profitable.

minister Mohamed Nasr Allam. “This is not just about numbers. It is a direct threat to national security that could lead to consequences beyond imagination.”

To ease its water stress, Egypt has spent about 400-billion pounds (more than \$8-billion at current exchange rates) on desalination, wastewater treatment, canal lining, and modern irrigation projects. That bill will be met by Egyptians through higher taxes, Sharaky says. And, as perceptions that Ethiopia caused the shortages take root, the government might throw in another tax-payer expense: troops in Somalia.

Officially, the planned Somalia deployment is to support Mogadishu’s fight against insurgent group al-Shabaab. Unofficially, Cairo is not taking the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam lying down. ■

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This story was published in collaboration with Egab



DATA

# Crime and (no) punishment

DOES crime pay? According to respondents in our surveys, it depends on who you are.

Across 30 African countries we surveyed between late 2021 and mid-2023, six in 10 people (60%) say officials who break the law “often” or “always” go unpunished, compared to 34% who say ordinary criminals aren’t punished.

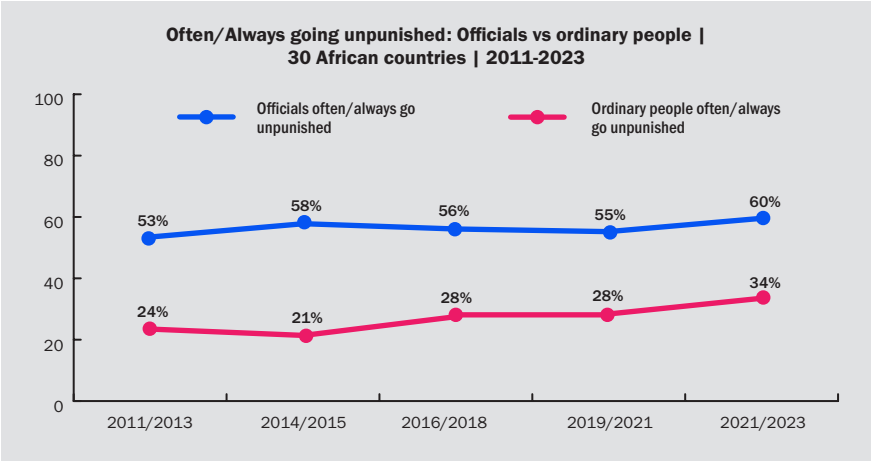
Both categories are higher than a decade ago (by seven and 10 percentage points, respectively), highlighting perceptions of weakening rule of law.

An incredible nine in 10 Tunisians (90%) say officials who transgress get off scot-free, while more than three

quarters agree in Lesotho (78%), Ghana (77%), Gabon (77%), Senegal (77%), and Liberia (76%).

Majorities of Malians (60%), South Africans (53%), and Sudanese (51%) say ordinary wrongdoers aren’t sanctioned. By contrast, fewer than two in 10 feel the same in Malawi (18%), Benin (15%), and Tanzania (12%).

Political connection is perceived to offer protection in every one of the countries surveyed. The smallest difference is in Zambia (38% for officials vs 33% for common folk), while the impunity gap widens to 52 points in Ghana (77% vs 25%). ■

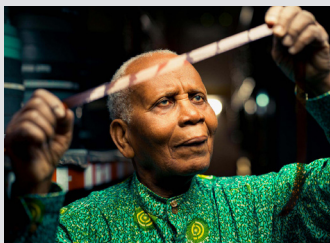






# FILM REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



STILL: THE EYES OF GHANA

## Universality comes at too high a price

**'African' films should not need to be baked in a Hollywood oven before being served.**

What makes a film African? This question was top of mind at the recent 50th anniversary of the Toronto International Film Festival, with all its historical and political complications. Is a film African because it is exclusively financed and produced on the continent? One would think so. But at this year's festival, not one of the titles fulfilled these conditions.

The Toronto programme features many African names, stories, and countries, but the financial and

executive power behind them is not always from the continent. Countries like Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa boast popular film industries that serve their local populations. But filmmakers with elevated sensibilities who want to operate on a certain scale are all having to look beyond the continent.

*Diya*, for instance, is the rare film from Chad by a filmmaker not named Mahamat-Saleh Haroun to score high-profile visibility. Achille Ronaimou's debut feature, a moral thriller about a man who must pay a blood debt, received support from France, Germany, and Côte d'Ivoire. Ditto Zamo Mkhwanazi's striking *Laundry (Uhlanjululo)*, a co-production between South Africa and Switzerland. Set in the 1960s, *Laundry* details the unravelling of a black family as they navigate the oppressive conditions of apartheid.

The festival's documentary programme opened with *The Eyes of Ghana*, about nonagenarian Chris Hesse and his lifelong attempts to preserve reels of his work from his time as Kwame Nkrumah's personal cinematographer in the 1950s and 1960s. The screening was introduced virtually by Barack and Michelle Obama, who served as executive producers.

It is easy to see how the Obamas would be attracted to Nkrumah's statesmanship and his goal of liberation through film but *The Eyes of Ghana*, as



STILL: D/YA

directed by Academy Award winner Ben Proudfoot, is about as American in sensibility as apple pie.

Hesse is an appealing subject, and his cause is noble, but Proudfoot manages to turn what could have been a raw and intimate project about cinema's role in mythmaking into a sentimental, Hollywood-like celebration that sacrifices local flavour for bland universality. It's no surprise the United States is listed as the sole production country. By contrast, last year's transfixing *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* handled this kind of situation better.

How about the case of Tarik Saleh, whose political thriller *Eagles of the Republic* marks the completion of his Cairo trilogy of films?

Saleh was born in Stockholm to a Swedish mother and Egyptian father. He has been banned from entering Egypt by the Abdel Fattah el-Sisi regime since 2017 and recreates Cairo in Istanbul for his films. *Eagles of the Republic* is Saleh's second film selected to represent Sweden in the Oscars'

international feature category. The film's plot is somewhat of a clapback. George Fahmy (Fares Fares), a popular movie star, is hired by the regime to play Sisi in a propaganda biopic but finds himself in the midst of high-level political machinations.

African filmmakers often look outward, too. Taking advantage of the freedom allowed by the positive reception of her last two projects – including two Oscar nominations – Tunisian filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania turns her gaze to the carnage in Gaza.

The film follows the death of Hind Rajab, a five-year-old Palestinian girl killed by the Israeli Defence Force during its invasion of the Gaza Strip.

*The Voice of Hind Rajab* has a hybrid documentary-fiction conceit that is as ethically ambiguous as that employed in Ben Hania's 2023 *Four Daughters*.

Call recordings are combined with scripted re-enactments based on first-hand testimonies and transcripts. The *Voice of Hind Rajab* is also a French co-production. ■

# The Quiz

- 1 Which country has the largest population of lions in the world?
- 2 São Nicolau (pictured) is an island that is part of which archipelagic country?
- 3 Denis Sassou Nguesso has spent 40 years (and counting ...) in office as president of which country?
- 4 Gbarnga, Buchanan and Kakata are cities in which country?
- 5 Ndolé is the national dish of which country?
- 6 Simone Ehivet Gbagbo is the former first lady of which country?
- 7 True or false: Benghazi is Libya's capital city.
- 8 True or false: Abiy Ahmed is Ethiopia's president.
- 9 Who won the women's 1,500m at the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo this week?
- 10 How many colours are there on Nigeria's flag?



## 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

"Forty years and counting in the same job – in this economy? Ya boi Denis must have an incredible shop steward."

# Big Pic

**Keep the faith:** Kenya's Faith Kipyegon crosses the finish line to win the women's 1,500m – the event in which she holds the world record – during the World Athletics Championships in Tokyo this week.

PHOTO: EWEL SAMAD/AFP



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