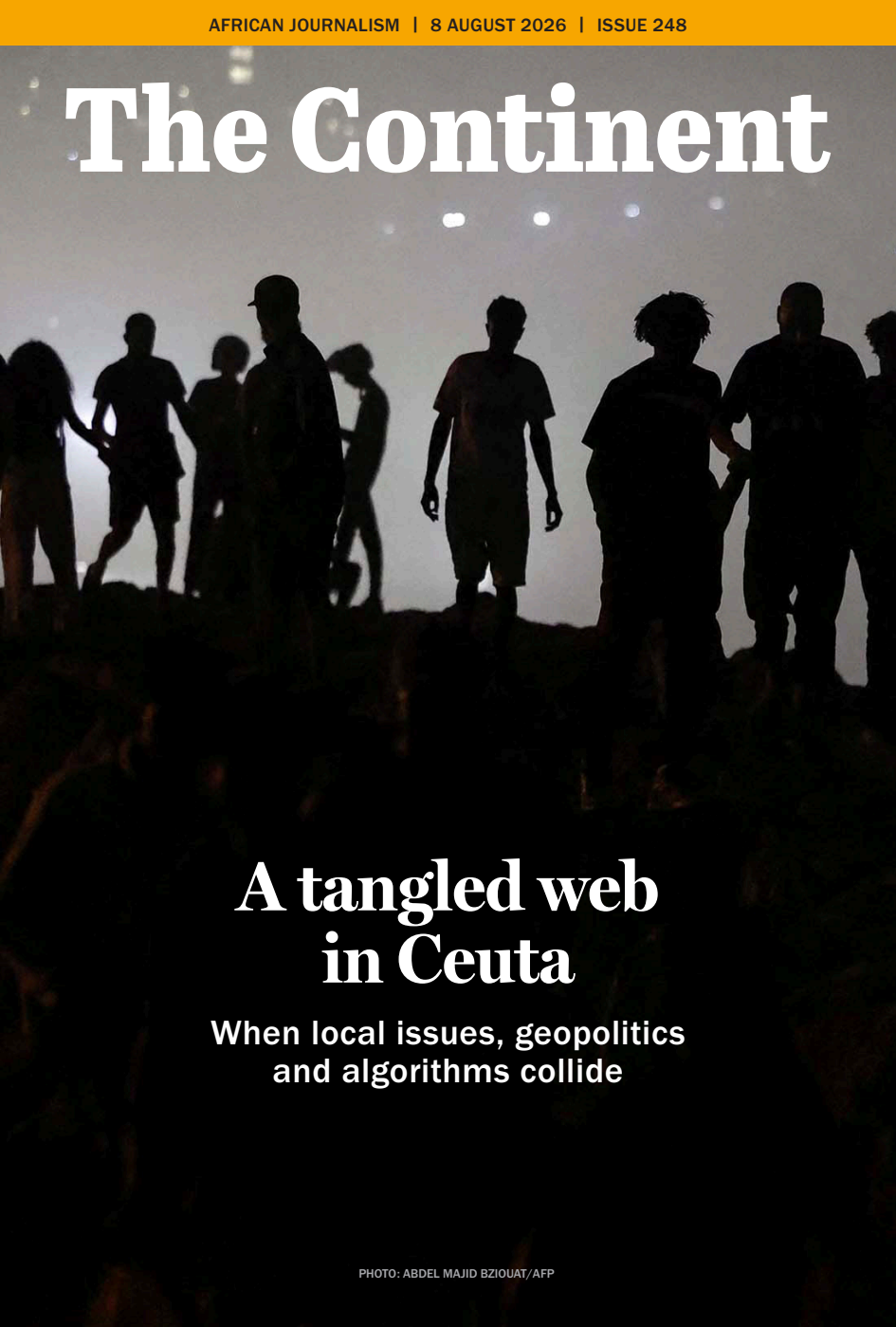


The Continent



A tangled web in Ceuta

When local issues, geopolitics
and algorithms collide



COVER Images of tens of thousands of people getting into Ceuta have flashed around the world. They gave ammunition to anti-immigrant voices, notably the leaders of Italy and the US. The Spanish state quickly forced almost all the people back home, saying its track record keeping migrants out of Fortress Europe was, in fact, stellar. But broad narratives don't need anchoring in reality. So, last weekend, Ceuta provided a canvas for geopolitics, local politics and algorithms to smash together. Absent from those narratives were the voices of the people, 70 of whom died, crossing into the Spanish enclave. The Moroccans *The Continent* spoke to talked about misleading messages, and the reasons they left home – like a government spending big on an upcoming football world cup but not its people. Various factions seized on that, in a region where Spain, Morocco and Algeria have a complicated relationship. And each of those has complicated relationships with the EU, US and Israel (p13).

Inside

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

LIBYA

Prisoners mount jailbreak amid clashes

Inmates at a prison in western Libya broke out after armed clashes in two nearby towns, *Reuters* reports. Authorities have not revealed how many people escaped Surman jail. Fighting between rival groups in Surman and Zawiya reportedly killed three people and injured several others. The violence also raised concerns for the oil refinery in Zawiya, the country's largest. Libya has been plagued by unrest since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

CRIME

Artificial intelligence fuels rise in cybercrime

Over half of reported cybercrime cases across Africa now involve AI, according to Interpol's latest African Cyberthreat Assessment. Online scams remain the biggest threat, with criminals using AI to create convincing emails, deepfakes, and fake identities, *Africanews* reports. Reported financial losses jumped from \$192-million in 2024 to \$484-million last year. The report found the continent's digital growth is outpacing cybercrime laws and law enforcement's ability to enforce them.



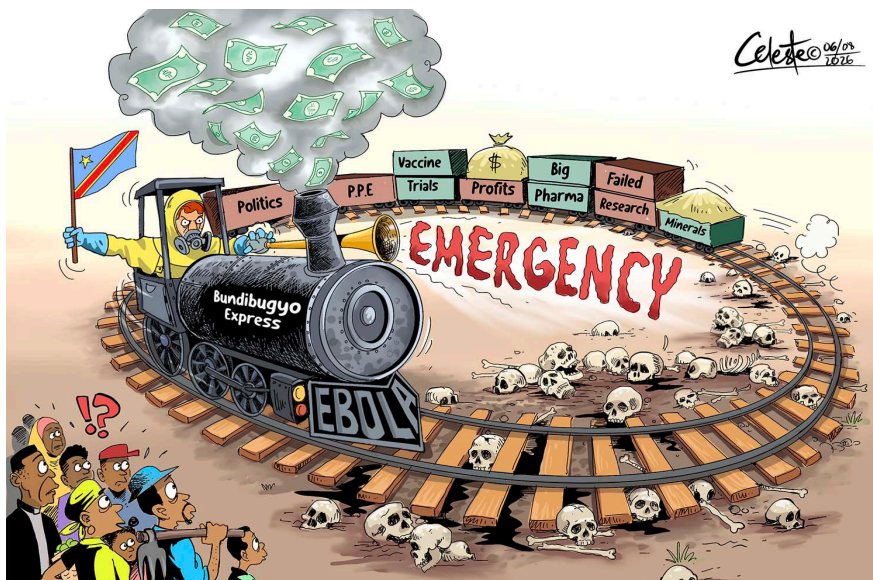
PHOTO: JORIS BOLOMEY/AFP

Next round's on me, lads: Nigerian soldiers at a military base in Monguno, Borno State.

NIGERIA

Mo' money, mo' morale

President Bola Tinubu has approved military pay rises of up to 80% as his country battles insurgency, banditry, and kidnappings. From 1 September, soldiers from private to staff sergeant will receive the biggest increases, while senior officers will receive pay hikes of 30% to 50%, *Reuters* reports. The changes will raise the armed forces' annual wage bill from 484.6-billion naira (about \$356-million) to 678-billion naira. Tinubu said the increases are aimed at improving troop welfare and strengthening the military, which continues to face attacks from insurgents, armed gangs, and separatist groups.



Communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are increasingly suspicious of foreign support for Ebola interventions in the country. They are wary of ulterior motives of profiteers in the 'Ebola business'.

DRC

Export of heavy metal banned to localise lucre

In a bid to push mining companies to process more minerals in the country instead of abroad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has banned exports of copper and cobalt concentrates. The ban takes effect immediately, though the mines minister can grant exemptions in strategic cases, *Reuters* reports. The DRC, the world's largest cobalt producer and second-largest copper supplier, has also introduced a tax on mining byproducts to increase revenue from its vast mineral wealth.

HEALTH

Jabs over tabs in HIV prevention

South Africa has launched a dashboard to track the roll-out of the biannual HIV-prevention injection Lenacapavir. According to *Bhekisisa*, early data shows 98.5% of people offered a choice prefer the injection to a daily pill. Local pharmaceutical firm Aspen Pharmacare has secured a licence to produce a monthly prevention pill, pending successful trials. The patent holder for Lenacapavir, US-based Gilead, is also assessing South African companies that could manufacture generic versions of the drug.

ETHIOPIA

A return to arms

Fighting flared up in northwestern Tigray in what looks like the biggest threat yet to the 2022 Ethiopia-Tigray peace agreement, *Al Jazeera* reports. Tigray's regional government accused federal troops of launching the attack. Addis Ababa says forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front started it. The clashes come after months of growing tensions, with Ethiopia accusing the Sudanese army of backing "mercenaries" linked to the Tigray group. Sudan fired back, saying Ethiopia allowed drone attacks by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces to be launched from its territory.



Jostle and oust: Miss Malawi Thandi Chisi.

MALAWI

Age before beauty?

Winning your country's premier beauty pageant clearly isn't enough to secure a spot at Miss World. Reigning Malawian beauty queen Thandi Chisi has been replaced by first runner-up Ireen Navicha, the daughter of a cabinet minister, *TRT* reports. Organisers first said 27-year-old Chisi was too old, then apologised after realising she isn't. They now say the decision reflects a new approach of giving more finalists international opportunities. Miss World has already confirmed Navicha as Malawi's contestant. Chisi says she'll respond "at the appropriate time".

GUINEA

Francs, but no thanks

Guinea has opted out of a planned West African single currency, becoming the first member of the Economic Community of West African States to do so. Officials say the timing does not suit the country's economy, arguing Guinea's weak production base and Asia-focused exports make joining the 2027 launch risky, *Vanguard* reports. Analysts say the move highlights a regional headache: a shared currency needs shared economic strength, not just shared borders. For now, Guinea will stick with the Guinean franc while Ecowas presses ahead with its decades-old dream of a single currency.

LIBERIA

Coke-caper cops caught tasting the feeling

Days after the country's biggest-ever drug bust, authorities in Liberia burned 4.2-tonnes of cocaine, worth more than \$330-million. The suspects charged in the case include the highway-patrol chief and the head of the major crimes unit. Another senior officer is being investigated for allegedly helping to move the drugs. Two foreign nationals have also been arrested. The seizure highlights West Africa's growing role as a transit hub for cocaine bound for Europe, *AP* reports.

CAMEROON

Absent, but still rearranging the furniture

President Paul Biya is missing in action, but this hasn't stopped him from reshuffling Cameroon's military top brass. The 93-year-old, in power since 1982, has promoted his presidential guard chief and replaced commanders in four of five military regions, *CNBC* reports. Biya has been out of the public eye for nearly two months during a "private stay" in Europe. The military shake-ups continue a pattern of Biya reorganising the security leadership during moments of political tension.

UGANDA

Memory, according to Muhoozi

A statue of Yonatan Netanyahu, the elder brother of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has been unveiled in Uganda, outside the old Entebbe airport terminal. The elder Netanyahu was killed during the 1976 Entebbe hostage-rescue mission, where Israeli commandos rescued over 100 hostages held by Palestinian and German hijackers. Ugandan army boss General Muhoozi Kainerugaba described the rescue as a defining moment in history that reflected strong ties between Uganda and Israel, the *BBC* reports.



PHOTO: UGANDA PEOPLES' DEFENCE FORCE

Plinthed: Entebbe's Yonatan Netanyahu statue.

NEWS

MALARIA

Mosquitoes on the move

Parts of Africa are now too hot for malaria to spread – but once-cooler regions are much more at risk than ever before.

ABIODUN JAMIU IN LAGOS

THE CLIMATE crisis is forcing changes in the transmission patterns of malaria, making it less of a danger in West Africa, but much more of a threat in the east and south of the continent, a new study by *Nature* has revealed.

Mosquito-borne transmission of the disease usually peaks at about 25°C and becomes far less likely when temperatures fall below 16°C or rise above 34°C. The malaria parasite – *Plasmodium* – needs warm temperatures to complete its growth cycle inside the mosquito before it can infect a human.

West and Central Africa has carried the greatest malaria burden, with a historical temperature average of between 25°C and 33°C, as well as a wet climate that favours mosquitoes' breeding.

By contrast, Southern Africa and high-altitude East Africa have historically been cool enough to keep the disease from becoming a major public health burden.



PHOTO: EMMANUEL CROSET/AFP

Area effect: A worker fumigates the interior of a building as part of a malaria elimination effort.

That's changing. Rising temperatures and extreme weather in Southern and East Africa are making the areas more suitable for malaria parasites to spread.

Meanwhile, thanks to global warming, much of West Africa has become less hospitable. As temperatures rise above 34°C, the lifecycles of the parasite and mosquitoes break down, making it too hot for malaria to spread.

Countries that currently don't have the health infrastructure to fight malaria will have to build it quickly.

"There will be an increased burden of malaria and higher transmission in places where transmission is currently low," Tanimola Akande, a professor of public health at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, told *The Continent*. "Governments in most sub-Saharan African countries are not doing enough to respond by building climate-resilient health systems." ■

MALI

Russian strike kills villagers it was ‘defending’

Paramilitaries under Russia’s banner are acting on Mali’s behalf, leaving a trail of civilian deaths in their wake.

KIRI RUPIAH

AN AIRSTRIKE co-ordinated by Russia’s state-controlled Africa Corps killed eight civilians, including three children, in the central Malian village of Kyrnia.

According to a Human Rights Watch report released last week, aircraft dropped at least two munitions on the area on 15 June, killing people outside the village chief’s home and at a cattle

market. About 100 fighters from Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin had gathered in Kyrnia but none of the strikes hit their positions.

The findings were based on interviews with witnesses, military sources, and journalists, as well as satellite imagery and geolocated videos. The country has relied on Russian military support since 2021 as it battles armed groups linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State. In June 2025, Africa Corps replaced the Wagner Group. Rights groups have continually accused Malian forces and their Russian allies of carrying out abuses against civilians.

Ilaria Allegrozzi, Human Rights Watch’s Sahel expert, said the Malian government cannot absolve itself after giving Russia broad operational freedom.

“A state cannot outsource the conduct of military operations and then disclaim responsibility for the consequences,” she told *The Continent*. ■



Blast zone: A screen grab from an Africa Corps video showing the moment an air strike hits the village of Kyrnia on the 15 June.

PHOTO: AFRICA CORPS

ZAMBIA

The unhitching dilemma

Can the country do better than the devil it already knows?

BARNABAS ZULU IN LUSAKA

AS IT heads towards general elections on 13 August, Zambia is weighing a second term for President Hakainde Hichilema against an opposition movement led by National Reconciliation Party for Unity and Prosperity leader Brian Mundubile.

The president's supporters point to economic reforms, free education, debt restructuring, and efforts to restore investor confidence as signs of progress. Yet critics say economic pressures have continued to affect households, particularly the high cost of living, unemployment, and the prolonged energy crisis.

Civil rights activist Brebner Changala, who once supported Hichilema, said the political mood has shifted as the ruling United Party for National Development can no longer ignore growing public dissatisfaction. He told *The Continent* the mood at opposition rallies across the country shows that citizens are increasingly looking for an alternative.

Mildred Phiri, a vendor at Lusaka City Market, said the president has failed to deliver on key campaign promises, citing the price of maize meal as one of the biggest disappointments.

Hichilema's 2021 promise to reduce the staple commodity to about 50 kwacha (about \$2.60) from 150 kwacha has not materialised. Instead, a 25kg bag of mealie meal now retails at 220 kwacha.

The electricity crisis is another election issue. For nearly four years, Zambia has experienced prolonged power cuts after low water levels affected hydroelectric-power generation.

The mood at opposition rallies shows citizens are looking for an alternative.

However, Joseph Kabwe, a phone repairer, told *The Continent* the government's achievements should not be overlooked. He cited the increase of constituency-development funds to 40-million kwacha (about \$2.1-million) per constituency. He also noted the reduction in inflation from about 24% to 6.4% over the past five years as evidence of an improving economy.

As Zambia approaches election day, the question is whether the country is on the right path under Hichilema or if the frustrations of daily life have created the appetite for a new political direction. ■

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DRC

Bundibugyo is hitting children the hardest

Young lives account for almost one in three Ebola deaths, although they comprise only one in four confirmed cases.

PROSPER HERI NGORORA IN BUNIA

AS EBOLA spreads in the Democratic Republic of the Congo children are fast becoming its biggest victims.

The Bundibugyo strain of the disease has already claimed more than 1,700 lives from 3,600 confirmed cases. Health workers describe the situation as dire.

The United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) has found that children are dying at a disproportionately higher rate than adults. Children account for nearly one in four confirmed cases (25%), but for almost one in three deaths (33%).

The agency told *The Continent* these findings are based only on confirmed cases for which age was recorded.

About 600 confirmed cases are missing age data and could not be assigned to an age group.

Unicef added the 330 recorded child deaths represent a minimum because some of the cases without age data are likely to have involved children. Under-18s have accounted for 743 cases.

Children younger than age five are particularly affected, according

to Unicef, which attributes this situation to disruptions in "childhood immunisations, safe deliveries, and essential healthcare in the epicentre of the outbreak".

Existing vaccines target the Zaire strain and clinical trials for a jab to curtail the Bundibugyo strain are still in early phases.

Clinical trials for a jab to curtail the Bundibugyo strain are still in the early phase.

Anne*, a 40-year-old and mother of five living in the Sayo neighbourhood of Bunia, lost her seven-year-old son, Joseph*, in June. She noticed he had signs of fatigue and a high temperature. On the day he became sick, he had just finished his school exams and they were waiting for the end-of-year results.

Joseph was admitted to the Ebola treatment centre in Bunia. He died 10 days later.

One of his siblings, who contracted the virus from him, survived.



PHOTO: MOSES SAMASAMA

Stay safe: A health worker raises awareness of Ebola in a camp for displaced people in Bunia, DRC.

“My heart is aching and feels heavy. I still can’t quite come to terms with the fact that my son was taken from me so suddenly,” Anne said.

Kahindo Mireille, a doctor who works at the Lengabo referral health centre near Bunia, contracted the disease through her 10-month-old son.

“I was in contact with my child, who was ill. That’s when I contracted the disease. I had headaches and diarrhoea,” she said. “My son was bedridden and I was treated quickly before my condition became serious.”

Both of them survived.

Jean Kaseya, director of Africa Centres for Disease Control, visited Bunia this week to assess the Ebola response. He noted the outbreak remains out of

control in eastern DRC, despite ongoing containment efforts.

“Uganda shows that this epidemic can be stopped. The question we must ask ourselves is: What are we not doing right? At present, there are no predictions as to when the outbreak will peak or end.”

Children are also affected by anxiety surrounding Ebola.

A report by Save the Children found thousands of children are living with the fear and trauma associated with Ebola.

The charity is providing mental health support to nearly 4,000 affected children in Ituri province, the epicentre of the outbreak of the Bundibugyo strain of Ebola in the DRC. ■

*Names changed to protect identity

REPORT

A lot happened in Ceuta. Here's the breakdown.



Desperate measures: Migrants cross from Morocco into Ceuta, on 30 July. PHOTO: ANTONIO SEMPERE/AP PHOTO

Last weekend, 72,000 people crossed from Morocco into Ceuta, one of Spain's two North African enclaves. The images reverberated around the world. For the right wing in the West, it was fodder to hype up anti-migrant rhetoric. Real images mixed with the fake. This was an 'invasion'. Never mind that Europe has paid off governments in North Africa to stop migrants. Moroccans have their own domestic reasons to want to leave. But the deadly rush in Ceuta has also exposed a centuries-old web of colonial history, territorial disputes, and regional rivalries stretching from Western Sahara to Gaza.

SAID CHOUKRI IN FNIDEQ

AYOUB* wasn't planning to travel on the day everything changed. A young, married Moroccan man in his early thirties, he lived a quiet life in Larache, a fishing town on the Atlantic coast.

Then came 30 July. "Messages spreading on social media convinced me and my friends the chance had come," he said. Ayoub packed fast and travelled 150km to Fnideq, the Moroccan border town across from Ceuta, believing the way across was open. Just a few hours later he would learn otherwise.

Ayoub was one of an estimated 72,000 people who crossed into Ceuta, by sea and land, in less than two days on 30 and 31 July – the largest mass crossing the region had seen since 2021. Spanish authorities said 70,000 had since left Ceuta and at least 75 people had died trying to cross.

Spain then installed a 500m floating sea barrier to stop such a crossing from happening again.

Mohammed*, 23, told *The Continent* he left a town near Rabat about a year ago and settled in Fnideq to wait for his chance. He played football for a club in the capital, until he lost his spot to a player who had connections to the manager.

"From that day I started losing faith that hard work alone builds a future," he said in a phone call.

Mohammed is still hiding in the forests around Ceuta, avoiding Spanish police. "I only leave after dark, looking for bread or water, then go straight back."

A strategic crossing point

On a clear day you can see Spain, and British Gibraltar, from Ceuta. For the past 2,000 years this has made it a vital part of empires, with control over the narrow sea exit to the Atlantic at stake. Portugal seized the fortress town in 1415 as it built up its overseas empire, turning it into an early hub for the transatlantic slave trade. Spain took ownership in 1640. Now, high fences and barbed wire keep Africans out.

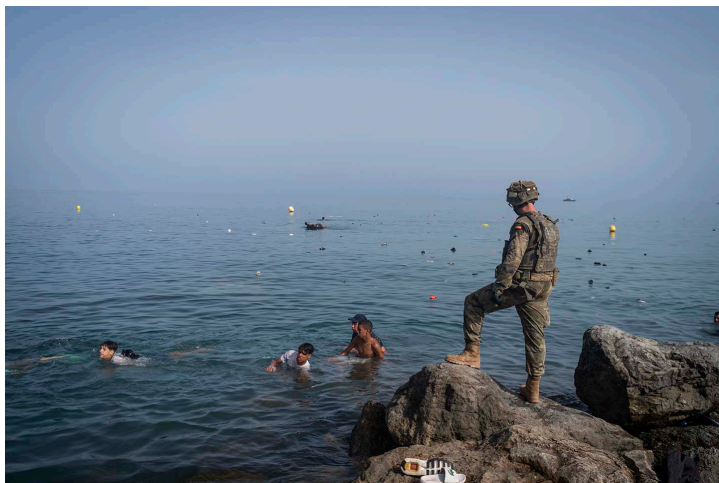
Osman*, a 25-year-old barber, spent days similarly hiding in the forests around Ceuta with dozens of other young men, surviving on little food and water. He was arrested on Wednesday, together with Ayoub, and sent back to Fnideq.

"Fear never left us for a single moment," he told *The Continent*. "We only left our hiding places at night, looking for a piece of bread or a bottle of water."

Many of the people who crossed, he said, were in far worse shape – some injured, some with broken bones. But they refused to leave, afraid of being sent back to Morocco.

A digital push – and a parallel claim

The three men's decisions to cross into Ceuta were, above all, digitally mediated. An open-source intelligence report by Spanish analyst Chema Gil found



Above: A Spanish soldier watches migrants cross the border in Ceuta.

Left: Migrants who arrived from Morocco queue for a meal on a beach at the Spanish enclave.

PHOTO 1: ADRI SALIDO/
GETTY IMAGES
PHOTO 2: BERNAT
ARMANGUE/AP PHOTO

weeks of digital mobilisation preceded the crossing, after the Spanish Supreme Court ruled on 8 July that migrants intercepted at sea cannot be simply returned.

The messages simplified and misreported the ruling, portraying the Spanish border as legally open and encouraging migrants to cross.

The investigation identified two WhatsApp groups run from Algerian (+213) numbers sharing routes and

meeting points; Facebook pages amplifying the content; and a viral video falsely showing a swimmer heading towards Ceuta. Social media profiles based in France and Tunisia were also involved, the report concluded.

The campaign generated more than 11-million potential views and interactions, built on four narratives: the court ruling as an “opportunity”, the ease of crossing, urgency, and images of people who’d made it.

A parallel narrative ran alongside it, mobilising Moroccans further: it framed the crossing as a “return” to Moroccan land. That was amplified when messages revived a US Congressional report, drafted in April 2026, that described Ceuta and Melilla as “Spanish administered” and “located in Moroccan territory”, rather than part of Spain.

The investigation did not identify the admins of the groups or determine whether there was a centralised organisational node generating the messages. But several experts who spoke to *The Continent* emphasised there are legitimate reasons for Moroccans to want to make the crossing.

Migration researcher Hassan Bentaieb said the decision to migrate “builds up over a long accumulation of economic, social, and psychological frustration”. Rumours simply accelerate a decision and digital platforms shape a mental image of migration itself.

“Young people are constantly exposed to videos that present arrival in Europe as a happy ending,” Bentaieb said. “Scenes of drowning, arrest, deportation, or the hardship migrants face afterwards are largely missing.”

Migration researcher Hassan Bentaieb said the decision to migrate “builds up over a long accumulation of economic, social, and psychological frustration”.

Algorithms amplify selective, success-only portrayals of migration.

“This selective way of presenting experiences can create the impression among some young people, minors, and even struggling families, that reaching Ceuta has become possible and easy,” said media expert Maria Abdali.



Exhausted:
New arrivals sleep on the beach after reaching Ceuta from Morocco on 3 August.

PHOTO: BERNAT ARMANGUE/
AP PHOTO



Beat down: A police officer attacks a man who arrived in Ceuta from Morocco.

PHOTO: PEDRO NUNES/
REUTERS

Platforms keep showing users more of what they've already engaged with, Abdali noted, making the phenomenon look more common – and less risky – than it is.

A deep economic gap

Researcher Hanane Serghini points out that minors have attempted this crossing since the 1990s – driven by poverty, dropping out of school, and a mismatch between training and the labour market. Now, sometimes whole families attempt the crossing.

“This isn’t a passing event but a structural phenomenon that keeps reproducing itself as the social and economic context shifts,” Serghini said.

The figures back up the underlying frustration. Unemployment among Moroccans aged 15-24 stood at 27.2% in the second quarter of 2026, according to Morocco’s High Commission for

Planning – nearly three times the national average of 9.5%.

Meanwhile, Morocco has poured tens of billions of dollars into infrastructure in recent years – high-speed rail, port expansion, highways, and airports – much of it tied to preparations to co-host the 2030 Fifa World Cup. The government approved roughly \$41-billion in World Cup-related spending in its 2026 budget alone.

Mohamed Saber, head of the Forum of Public Policy Researchers, said the gap between Morocco’s big infrastructure gains and its social payoff explains part of the pull.

“This [investment] hasn’t translated enough into real, sustainable jobs for large numbers of young people,” he said, calling migration “a practical test of whether local development can turn economic growth into opportunities citizens actually feel.”

A web of interested and affected parties

SO-CALLED irregular migration to the European Union is down. After 2015, the union has worked hard on deals with other countries to keep migrants away. Tough migration laws came into effect this June. The EU's border agency says 178,000 people entered the bloc illegally last year, a quarter fewer than the year before. But Western extremism framed many of its narratives in 2015, when a million refugees, mainly from Syria, arrived at EU borders.

Images of thousands of men crossing into Ceuta were a chance for right-wing governments like that in Italy to capitalise. Influencers descended on the enclave for context-free videos. US President Donald Trump used it as a chance to stoke people's fears during the country's local elections, which are being held this year.

That all of this happened on Spanish territory played into deeper tensions. Spain has also been a vocal critic of Israel's genocide in Gaza. In addition, it refused US access to its bases for the war on Iran.

Morocco and Algeria are regional rivals, divided above all by Western Sahara. Morocco claims the territory as its own and seized the 80% it occupies from Spain decades ago. In his previous term, Trump recognised that seized territory. Morocco is also a close ally of both the US and Israel.

Algeria backs the Polisario Front,



PHOTO: AP PHOTO

Fenced off: People who attempted the crossing to Ceuta return to Fnideq in Morocco on 1 August.

which seeks independence for Western Sahara.

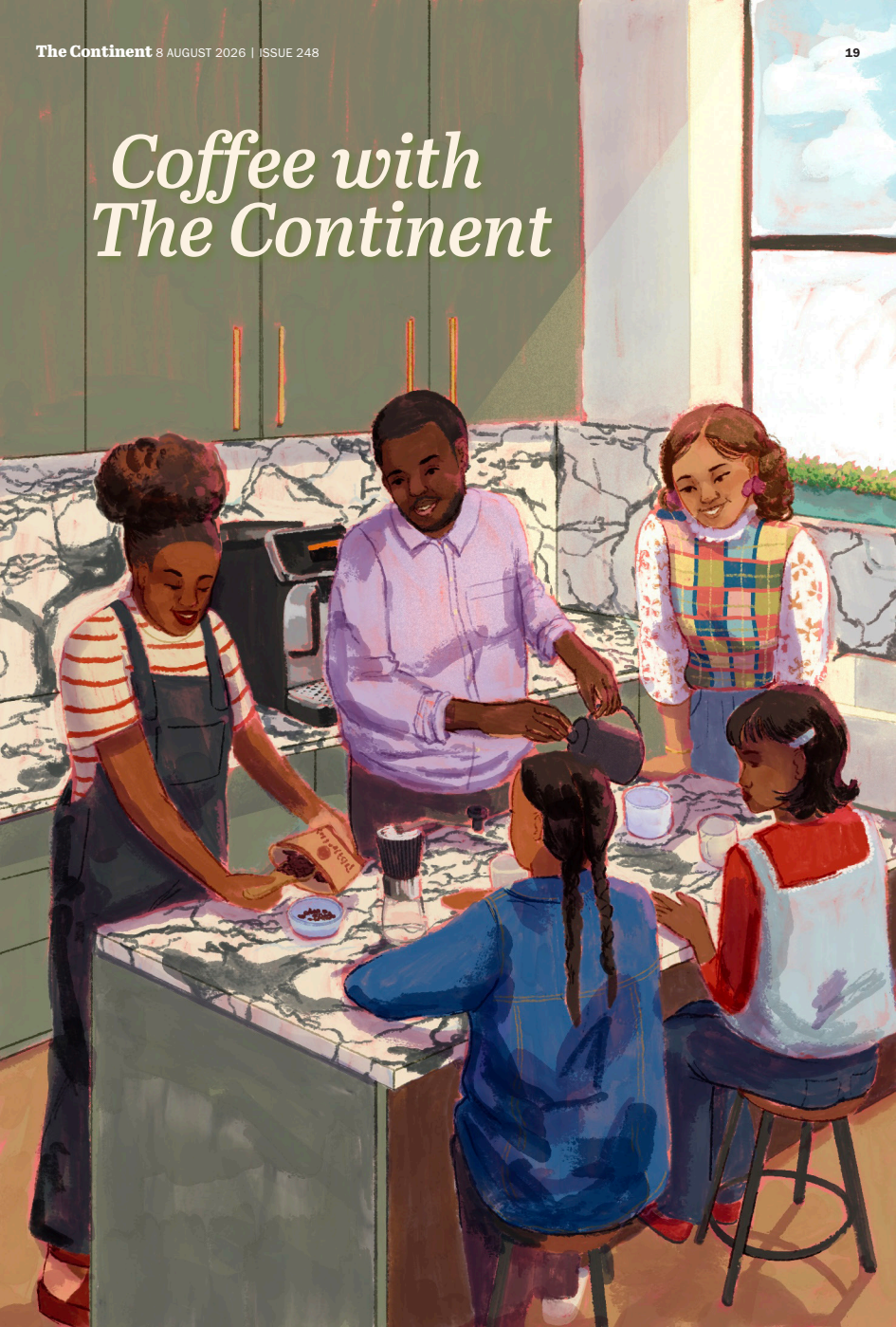
In 2021, after Spain admitted the Polisario Front's leader for Covid treatment, Morocco's border controls around Ceuta were relaxed. More than 8,000 migrants crossed en masse into the enclave. Morocco repeatedly denies using migration as diplomatic leverage.

This time, Spanish officials are briefing European media that Morocco relaxed its controls again. This follows Spanish negotiations with Algeria for gas, which is critical to the Spanish economy.

Moroccan authorities have said their security forces actually limited the number of migrants last weekend. Earlier this week, an unnamed Moroccan government source said Rabat was "neither the policeman nor the concierge of Europe" and called for the EU migration partnership to be revisited. ■

* Full names not used to protect identities. This article is published in collaboration with Egab. Additional reporting by Kiri Rupiah

Coffee with The Continent



INTERVIEW

Welcome to Coffee with The Continent, where we chat to smart people with smart ideas. You're all invited. This week, our guest is **GRIEVE CHELWA**, the Zambian economist. He is chair of social sciences and an associate professor of political economy at The Africa Institute, Global Studies University, in Sharjah, UAE.

VENUE* "We would have to start in the kitchen," with his version of a coffee ceremony using his fancy coffee machine.

DRINK "Can't do serious thinking without coffee!" A flat white first thing in the morning; cappuccino later in the day. Although he would prefer Ethiopian or Kenyan beans, what's available are Brazilian beans. The beans must be ground just so, and rest in the plunger for exactly four minutes before pouring.

MONUMENT** Fela Kuti's New Afrika Shrine, in Lagos. Fela is important to Chelwa, "There's a theory of pan-African development in his music." Chelwa listened to his music a lot as a student.

MUSIC AND READING Chelwa hardly ever reads fiction; he is currently reading a biography. If there were a song he wants

to be remembered a hundred years from now, it would be Fela Kuti's *International Thief Thief*.



PHOTO: THE AFRICA INSTITUTE

*We interviewed Chelwa online. His dream venue was brought to life by illustrator Wynona Mutisi.

**Last year, The Continent ran a series on iconic monuments across Africa. We're asking each guest to nominate a monument iconic to them.

Economics is not a game

GRIEVE Chelwa is a man who's gone around the world, but always kept his focus on Africa. That journey has taken him to Cape Town, Boston, New York, and now Sharjah. He obtained his first degree in economics at the University of Zambia in 2007 and later completed his PhD at the University of Cape Town.

Chelwa's focus is on Africa's economic development. He came of age in the 1990s in Zambia, the era of structural adjustment across Africa and a time of economic turmoil on the continent.

"Economic questions were everywhere around me. The company my father worked for collapsed," he says.

One night, Chelwa turned on the television to see economists discussing the dire situation in Zambia, causing him to reconsider his original plans to study medicine at university.

"My father did not speak to me for a week, but he came round," Chelwa laughs.

The turmoil of that time is also the reason Chelwa is so focused on political economy. In the course of his career, he's had to master technical economics – crunching data and building mathematical models for the goal of market efficiency – but he's always been drawn to progressive economics, which focuses on social justice, inequality, and public welfare.

This was, in part, because of his early

mentors at the University of Zambia in the early 2000s. "Teachers matter a great deal. They were the dreamers, a generation of old folks just about to leave the academy."

Chelwa says his teachers knew the problems facing Zambia and other African countries, as well as what was possible and so trained him to see the continent that way – through a humane assessment of its problems and needs. These are political questions, not just technical ones.

"What's important is not to get caught up in debt-trap chatter generated by the United States against China."

Chelwa has moved around, searching for an intellectual home for this kind of economics while also collecting the credentials required to be taken seriously in a neoliberal world.

He was also looking for a place where his growing family could belong. Cape Town did not offer that "because of the racism". Boston didn't either. Nor did the New School in New York, which, despite its progressive reputation, "did not really understand the African perspective".

Meanwhile, Zambia was not a place



PHOTO: HORST FAAS/AP

Solidarity: Egypt's Anwar Sadat welcomes Sheikh Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE to Cairo in 1977.

he could return to “because of the decimation of the academic space”, partly by those same structural-adjustment programmes.

He finally landed in Sharjah, after being recruited by the Africa Institute. There, he finds there’s no need to explain the political urgency of his work.

The institute was founded in 2018, but has its roots in the 1976 Symposium on Afro-Arab Solidarity held in Sharjah and the subsequent first Afro-Arab Summit in Cairo in 1977.

But, in Chelwa’s view, the current status of Afro-Arab solidarity is at a low point compared to the 1970s and 1980s, for example, when Egypt rescued and sheltered Patrice Lumumba’s children after his assassination.

“Achieving such solidarity today requires proactive, deliberate political projects,” he says, to confront the neoliberal impulse to pit national economies against each other in a global race to the bottom.

He is particularly vocal in his opposition to debt, describing it as “a tool of neo-colonialism and an instrument of control” in this era. Structural adjustments, he argues, gave outside powers access to African policy-making precisely because countries were so indebted.

His answer is collective refusal. Stop borrowing and, when necessary, say we can’t pay.

This is not a new idea, Chelwa says: Thomas Sankara made the same call in

1987 in Addis Ababa, often referred to as the “United Front Against Debt” speech.

Chelwa believes a united front is crucial. “We have the resources: we need to harvest these.” His thoughts bring to mind Kwame Nkrumah’s vision of a United States of Africa with a unitary central bank, a single currency across the continent, no borders, and one army.

But for Chelwa, the current African Continental Free Trade Agreement is “a neoliberal project, focused on trade rather than genuine continental unity.”

Chelwa has worked with the Tricontinental Institute, led by Marxist historian and journalist Vijay Prashad. The institute has faced scrutiny over its links to multimillionaire businessman Neville Roy Singham, who is accused of funding a global network that promotes pro-Chinese government narratives.

Chelwa is unmoved by the criticism. “The world is full of contradictions,” he says. Tricontinental’s work remains “essential to understanding the African condition” and Prashad has been “an important intellectual sounding board in a hyper capitalised, neoliberal world”.

Chelwa was encouraged, for example, by study groups reading work by the Tricontinental during the recent Gen Z protests in Kenya.

“What’s important is not to get caught up in debt-trap chatter generated by the United States against China,” he says, of the way Africa is often viewed through the prism of strategic competition between Washington and Beijing. That framing obscures the continent’s own economic realities and choices.

Chelwa ends on a note of urgency. “Economics is existential for me,” he says. “It’s not a game.” ■



PHOTO: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/AFP

Dare to invent the future: Visitors at the Thomas Sankara statue in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

PHOTO ESSAY

Ballet à terre, ballet en l'air, ballet everywhere

PHOTOS: MARCO LONGARI/AFP



Oratile Mpitso, 13, travelled from KwaThema in Gauteng to compete at the South African International Ballet Competition in Cape Town.

AFRICA'S largest ballet event, the South African International Ballet Competition, took place this week at the Artscape Theatre Centre in Cape Town. The 13th iteration of the competition featured 115 dancers competing in classical and contemporary disciplines,

with participants' ages ranging from nine to 22. As well as bringing together dancers, the event also featured a prestigious cohort of adjudicators from countries as far and wide as Russia, the United States, South Korea, Belarus, and the United Kingdom. ■



Keira Lock, 17, and Jayden Samuels, 16, summon poise, grace and control as they rehearse their choreographed sequences backstage at Cape Town's Artscape Theatre.





DATA

Exchange partners? We ship it!

AFRICA is struggling to overcome historic trade patterns that were built to export raw materials and import manufactured goods.

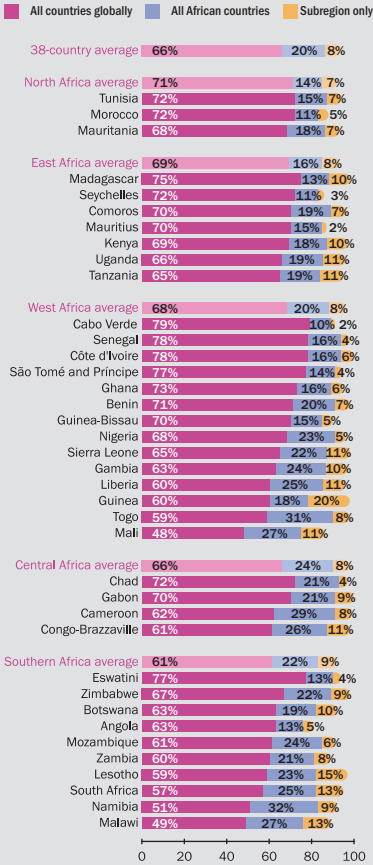
But Africans do broadly support free trade. More than six in 10 (62%) say it is “better for our economy if the government makes it easier for [our country] to trade with other countries to create economic opportunities”, compared to just 34% who would rather limit trade to protect domestic producers.

When asked where their governments should look to expand trading relationships, two-thirds (66%) say they should look globally, rather than limit trade to the continent (20%) or their subregion (8%).

Majorities favour global trade in all but two countries, Malawi (49%) and Mali (48%). Among those least inclined to focus on intra-African commerce are the island states of Cabo Verde (12%), Seychelles (14%), Mauritius (17%), and São Tomé and Príncipe (18%), perhaps in recognition of their dependence on international trade.

But just 13% of Africans have heard of the African Union’s signature initiative to boost trade, the African Continental Free Trade Area. ■

Preferred trading partners | 38 African countries | 2024/2025



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



MUSIC REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



Tyla's Jozi jams make a harsh world mellow

That Girl is back to reintroduce herself and command the airwaves, as only she can.

TYLA became a global superstar with her 2023 smash hit *Water* and she's been on a whirlwind ride ever since. Now 24, she's won two Grammys and performed on countless big stages. And, as a South African – with all the layers of identity that entails – she's become a lightning rod for cross-cultural debates around race and nationality.

As the biggest pop star on the continent, Tyla has used her visibility to centre her own sound and style. Instead of submitting to the whims of the pop machinery, she's sought to adjust the machine to include a person like herself.

*A*Pop* is her most convincing argument for this inclusion yet.

In contrast to her self-titled debut, which was crammed with polished pop anthems that see-sawed between amapiano and afrobeats, *A*Pop* carries a more specific sense of person and place.

At the same time, Tyla keeps it all exportable, embracing familiar grooves from R&B (*Right Now*) to hip-hop (*Mr Nonchalant*) and dancehall (*Double Blind*). The result is a frothy mix that goes down easy, even though there is not another obvious hit like the catchy lead single *Chanel*.

Like Tyla herself, the album is considerably more interesting when it zeroes in on the hyperlocal.

Some of her career-best songs (*Shake Ah, Jump*) have carried the unmistakable imprint of her Jo'burg heritage. Even the barebones cover of *Fairytale* is a respectful take on the 2010 classic by duo Liquideep.

Tyla clearly wants to see herself as an intrinsic part of the global pop order. *A*Pop* is perhaps too mellow to stand out in a crowded marketplace, but Tyla at least seems to keep her head above the water of the cut-throat music business. ■

The Quiz

- 1 Which African country borders the Spanish city of Ceuta?
- 2 What is the second-largest African country by area?
- 3 Kirundi, French and English are which country's official languages?
- 4 The "Ghetto Kids", who performed with Shakira at the 2026 Fifa World Cup, are from which country?
- 5 What does the acronym RSF in Sudan stand for?
- 6 Which country's women's football team is nicknamed "the Scorchers"?
- 7 Which sea is to the north of Morocco?
- 8 Which ocean is to the west of Morocco?
- 9 Which parasite causes malaria in humans?
- 10 In which country can one visit the Chinhoyi Caves (pictured)?



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

"I may have aced this quiz but I won't truly feel like I've arrived till I also have a cave that comes with a jacuzzi."

Big Pic

The last straw: A Tunisian man and his donkey make their way through the sweltering heat near Bizerte. For the past week daily life in Tunisia has been an ordeal as the country staggers under a deadly heatwave – with temperatures exceeding 48°C – amid daily power and water outages.

PHOTO: FETHI BELAID/AFP



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