

The Continent



**The chef
who escaped
Putin's war**

ILLUSTRATION:
YEMSRACH YETNEBERK



COVER: Russia has recruited more than 1,400 Africans to fight on its front lines in Ukraine, according to leaked military records. Flying from Gaborone to Moscow, Kgosi Pelelekae, who had fruitlessly sought work for years, thought he was going to be a chef in Russia. Instead, he was taken to a military training camp in Khabarovsk, an experience that traumatised him (p15). He was one of the lucky ones – because he returned. Many recruits die within months of landing in Russia, shunted to the front lines with little training. The data suggests 40% of Gambian recruits were dead within 15 months (p19). Botswana's opposition is calling for a review of relations with Russia. The big question is if African governments can create meaningful opportunities for the young, unemployed, and desperate people signing up.

Inside

- 8 Nigeria:** After years of calm, a suicide attack in Maiduguri
- 11 Afcon:** Senegal's January win overturned in the boardroom
- 13 Analysis:** The humble fishing boat evolves into tool of war
- 21 Kenya:** Fake drugs prove a headache for regulators
- 23 Photos:** Hunting dogs in Algeria keep a tradition alive
- 31 Quiz:** The Nazareth River is somewhere in Africa, but where exactly?



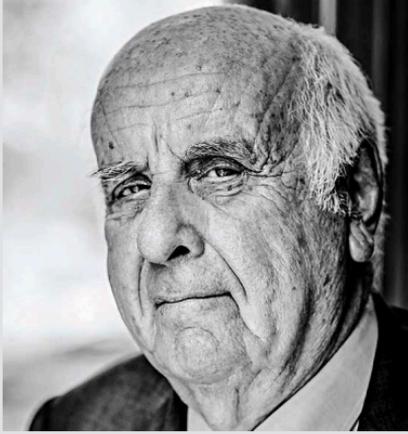
READING IS RESISTANCE

Forward this paper to someone who needs to think differently.

Get the latest edition of *The Continent*, plus every back issue (all 232 of them) by visiting thecontinent.org.

To subscribe (for free!), save *The Continent's* number to your phone (+27 73 805 6068) and send us a message on [WhatsApp](#)/[Signal](#)/[Telegram](#). Or email us: read@thecontinent.org

THE WEEK IN BRIEF



Final reckoning: *Étienne Davignon, the only Belgian official to be charged for the murder.*

DRC

Belgian to stand trial for Lumumba murder

Former Belgian diplomat Étienne Davignon, 93, will stand trial for his part in the 1961 plot to murder Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Over six decades later, he is charged with facilitating the murder by transporting Lumumba and two associates to Katanga, where they were murdered, *The Guardian* reports. Of 10 people implicated in the plot, only he yet lives. He is the only Belgian official to ever face trial for the murder.

ZAMBIA

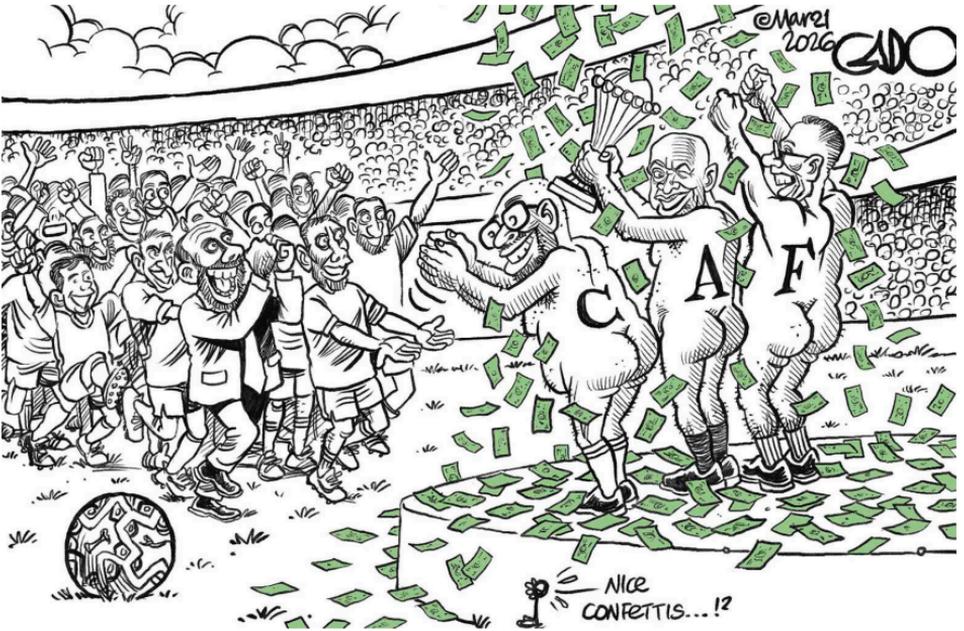
Death-by-elephant ruled ‘misadventure’

A court in the United Kingdom has ruled that the death of a tourist trampled by a charging elephant in Zambia was misadventure, the *BBC* reports. The tourist was on a guided walking safari in South Luangwa National Park last July when the animal attacked. The coroner’s court had been adjourned pending a report from Zambia’s ministry of tourism, which ultimately informed the ruling. Misadventure differs from accidental death, as it involves a person voluntarily engaging in a risky activity.

SECURITY

French troops find path back in to Africa

The French army has begun training African forces on environmental protection in Gabon. Teams from Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Chad, and Gabon will take part in field exercises and workshops on countering unlicensed gold miners, deforestation and other ecosystem destruction. France was forced to close many of its bases in former colonies. It says it will limit its military actions to capacity-building.



SOMALIA

South West cuts ties with federal government

Somalia’s South West State said on Tuesday it was suspending all cooperation with the federal government in Mogadishu. Officials in Baidoa accused the central government of arming militias and attempting to unseat state president Abdiiaziz Hassan Mohamed Laftagareen. Federal authorities did not respond to requests for comment from *Reuters*, which broke the story. Last month Somalia’s federal government pushed through contested constitutional amendments that extend President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s term.

TECH

African countries all-in on AI surveillance

Eleven African governments have spent more than \$2-billion on “smart” surveillance technologies, including facial recognition and vehicle-tracking systems, a new report says. The study by the UK-based Institute of Development Studies says Nigeria is the continent’s largest buyer of the “smart city” technologies, having spent more than \$470-million on AI-enabled surveillance. Other countries, such as Kenya and Rwanda, have also widely adopted Chinese systems for facial recognition and automated number-plate tracking.

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Tick-box poll delivers an easy win

Denis Sassou Nguesso has been re-elected for a fifth term, with about 95% of the vote. Like in previous elections, the internet was shut down and traffic restricted across the capital on voting day on Sunday. State television reported a turnout of nearly 85%; however, many polling stations in the capital, Brazzaville, had short queues or none at all, *Al Jazeera* reports. Sassou Nguesso is Africa's third-longest serving president, behind Cameroon's Paul Biya and Equatorial Guinea's Teodoro Obiang Nguema.

UNITED STATES

More African travellers must pay visa 'bail'

The United States has added Ethiopia, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, and Tunisia to the list of countries whose citizens must post \$15,000 in visa bonds before they can visit the US. The global list now includes 50 mostly lower-income countries. It is part of broader efforts by Donald Trump's administration to show he is tough on immigration, which have also included rounding up, detaining and deporting immigrants. Ghana's ex-finance minister, Ken Ofori-Atta, was arrested for overstaying his visa and remains in a Virginia jail on graft charges.



PHOTO: MARGO LONGAR/APP

SOUTH AFRICA

How dare you table a fabled-gable relabel?

A proposal to rename the historic town of Graaff-Reinet after anti-apartheid leader Robert Sobukwe, has opened up a big old can of worms long thought past its sell-by date. The 250-year-old town, famous-ish for its Cape Dutch architecture (i.e. big on gables), would become one of over 1,500 places renamed since the end of apartheid. Supporters say the change would honour an important freedom fighter. Critics say it's not that they're racist or anything they just think it's risky because the town depends on tourism and rebranding is expensive and just *such* a hassle.

RWANDA

Cabo Delgado withdrawal on the cards

Rwanda could withdraw its troops from Mozambique to spite the mission's foreign backers. Olivier Nduhungirehe, Rwanda's foreign affairs minister, complained in a post on X that Rwanda was "being constantly questioned, vilified, criticised, blamed, or sanctioned by the very countries that benefit from our intervention in Mozambique". Last week, the US state department imposed visa restrictions on several senior Rwandan officials "for fueling instability" in eastern DRC, reinforcing pressure after sanctions that targeted Rwanda's military.

FINANCE

PwC sanctioned for fraud and collusion

The World Bank has barred three PwC arms – in Kenya, Rwanda, and Mauritius – from its projects for 21 months for fraud and collusion. The consultants were implicated in an investigation into Ethiopia's Eastern Electricity Highway Project. The bank said they obtained confidential procurement information to influence consultancy contracts and misrepresented the qualifications and employment status of key experts. Their penalty was reduced after they admitted misconduct, co-operated with investigators, and implemented compliance reforms.

UGANDA

White rhino recolonise old stomping grounds

Southern white rhinoceroses, which experts say are not named that way because they're originally European, because they're not, have returned to Uganda's Kidepo Valley National Park for the first time in four decades. On Tuesday, two rhinos were relocated from a private ranch in Nakasongola to begin "rebuilding" a population. Uganda used to have about 700 rhinos floating about, but conflict and poaching wiped them out by 1983.



PHOTO: GLOBAL CONSERVATION

Bit on the nose: Ugandan rangers unrope a rhinoceros at the Kidepo Valley National Park.

NEWS

DRC - RWANDA

Peace deal advances, but doubt and fighting persist

As a growing list of crises demand global attention, Goma residents fear their hopes for peace are being lost in the crowd.

PROSPER HERI NGORORA IN GOMA

RWANDA and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have agreed to take “concrete steps” to implement a December 2025 peace deal after talks hosted by the United States in Washington this week.

The measures include intensifying efforts to “neutralise” the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, an armed group linked to perpetrators of the 1994 genocide. Kigali has cited the group’s presence in eastern DRC as the reason Rwandan troops are there too. In return, Rwanda agreed to disengage its troops from the region.

Yet on the ground in Goma, optimism remains low. Residents say that as global attention turns to the Iran war, the fragile peace process is fraying.

“Since the war began in the Middle East, there have been attacks from all sides,” said Goma resident Gentil Mulume. He added that both sides mistrust each other and global inattention encourages them to ramp up attacks and advance.



PHOTO: JOSEPH NIMISHA/AFP

Pick up the pieces: Residents recover belongings at a building looted after a gun battle in Goma.

On 11 March, Goma was hit by a drone strike that killed three people, including Unicef worker Karine Buisset. The M23-AFC armed group blamed the Congolese army and authorities in Kinshasa have opened an investigation.

Congolese forces and allied groups are fighting M23-AFC rebels in the Ruzizi Plain, using both light and heavy weapons. Residents are caught between the two as the conflict slips down the list of international priorities.

“We doubt that those involved in the peace process in the DRC still remember us. For them, the major issues lie in the Middle East. I get the impression they are no longer paying any attention to us,” said Goma resident Patrick Obed. ■

NIGERIA

Bomb blasts in Maiduguri reignite fear of suicide attacks

Suicide attacks have declined since a 2015 peak. But these explosions feel all too familiar.

HUSSAIN WAHAB

THREE EXPLOSIONS killed at least 23 people and injured 108 others on Monday evening in Maiduguri, northeastern Nigeria. The almost simultaneous blasts happened at crowded locations: a popular weekly market, a post office, and the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital. Witnesses said the locations were unusually busy as traders and families prepared for Eid celebrations.

“It was cruel, unfortunate, and cowardly,” Shuaibu Umaru, a student at the Kashim Ibrahim University of Maiduguri, told *The Continent*. He and other students were left with fear that, “nowhere is truly safe anymore, not even places meant for learning”.

Homes that had expected guests for Eid are receiving sympathisers instead and hospitals across the city are packed

with the injured. No group has claimed responsibility for the bombings, but they Boko Haram is the chief suspect.

“Suicide attacks in Nigeria have become less frequent since peaking in 2015, but continue to threaten civilian lives,” said Ladd Serwat, a senior analyst at the Armed Conflict and Location Events Data project. The tactic is mostly associated with groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa Province, according to Serwat.

President Bola Tinubu ordered security chiefs to relocate to Borno state to oversee the response to these attacks. Authorities have deployed additional forces across key parts of Maiduguri to prevent more attacks.

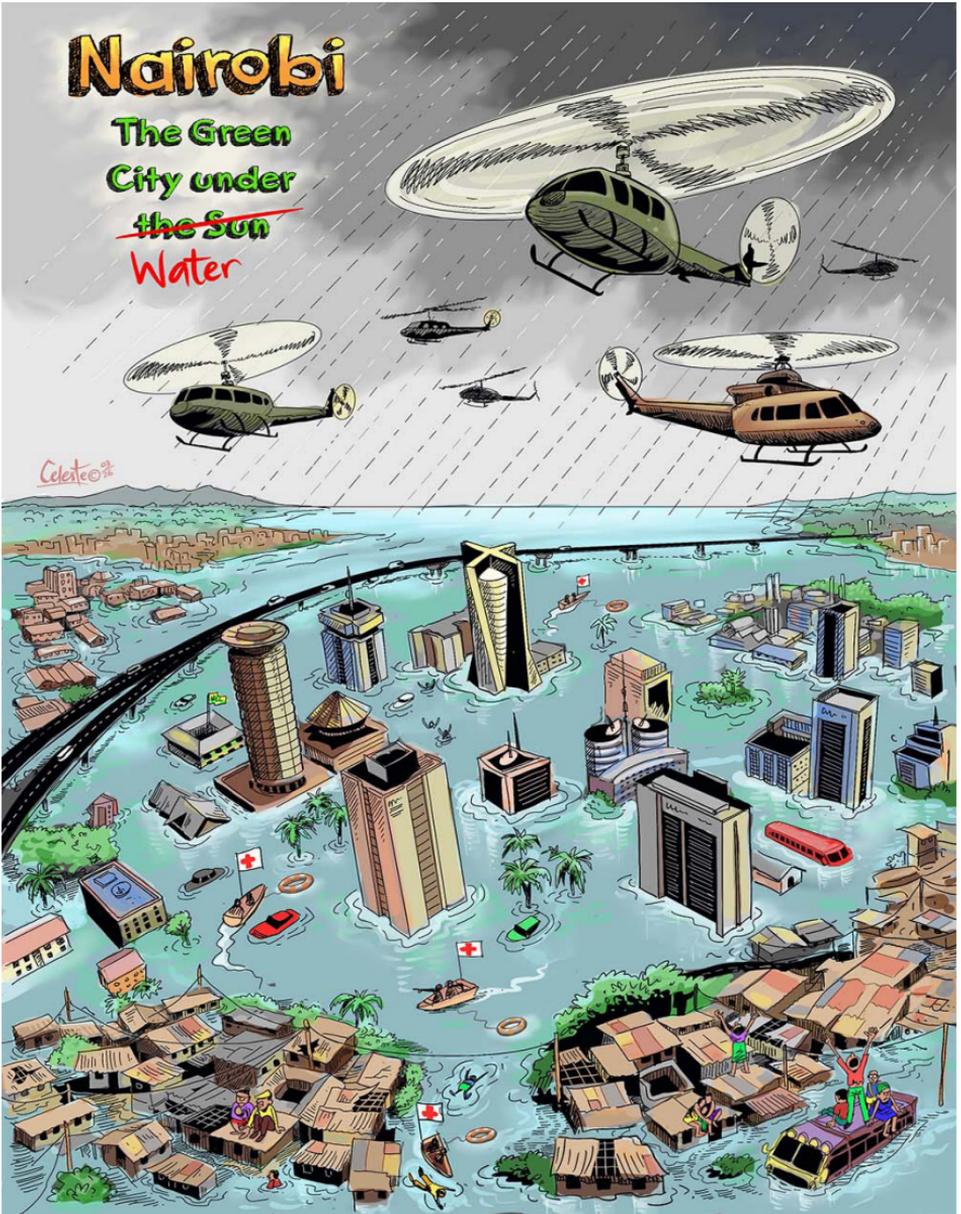
Two days after the bombings, the Nigerian military said it killed at least 80 insurgents while repelling an assault on its base in Mallam Fatori, 200km from Maiduguri. ■



PHOTO: JOSSEY OLA/AP

Aftermath: Police at the scene of a bomb blast at a market in Maiduguri, Nigeria on Tuesday.

KENYA



We live in the same world.

Let's read from the same page.



Get *The Continent* delivered for free every week.

Message +27 73 805 6068 on [WhatsApp](#), [Signal](#) and [Telegram](#), or email read@thecontinent.org and send "Subscribe"

THE TEAM

Lydia Namubiru Editor-in-Chief
Christine Mungai News Editor
Refiloe Seiboko Production Editor
Matthew du Plessis Managing Editor
Gado Cartoonist
Simon Allison International Editor

Yemsrach Yetneberk Illustrator
Paul Botes Photo Editor
Sipho Kings Publisher
Evania Chiza Finance
Ashleigh Swalle Designer
Wynona Mutisi Illustrator

OUR PARTNERS

The Continent has received support from the following institutions: 11th Hour Project, African Climate Foundation, Africa No Filter, African Union, Amplify SA, Ford Foundation, Fred Foundation, GIZ, Luminare, National Endowment for Democracy, Mott Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Pulitzer Centre and the Swiss Philanthropy Partners.

FOOTBALL

Morocco wins Afcon 2025 in the boardroom – for now

CAF's ruling this week is episode two in the drama series of the Rabat Afcon finals. But it's not over yet.



PHOTO: MISPER/AP/WU/AP

Team building: A mural in Dakar celebrates Senegal's victory in the Africa Cup of Nations.

AZIL MOMAR LÔ IN DAKAR

SENEGAL has been shaken on an unprecedented scale. The ruling by the Confederation of African Football (CAF) that Senegal forfeited the Afcon 2025 final after players walked off the pitch is the talk in carpentry shops, on public transport, and in the streets of Dakar.

On Tuesday, two months after Senegal lifted the trophy after a chaotic final in Rabat, the CAF Appeal Board decided the walkout had in fact violated regulations and awarded Morocco a 3-0 victory.

"In my entire life, I've never seen anything like this in football," said Ousmane Diop, a member of 12è Gaïndé, the national association of supporters

of the Lions of Teranga. During the tournament, he flew to Morocco to support the team. All this week, he has worn the Senegal pre-match kit – jacket, jersey, and hat – to show national pride despite CAF’s ruling.

“It hurts,” he said. “When I first heard the news, I couldn’t believe it. But after checking it over and over again, I realised the crazy rumour was true.”

The Senegalese government issued a statement calling for an “independent international investigation into suspected corruption within CAF’s governing bodies”. President Bassirou Diomaye Faye updated his Facebook profile with a symbolic image: seated at his desk, with the trophy glowing on a shelf behind him.

While the ruling might be expected to please Moroccan players, none has publicly reacted. Senegal’s players, however, had a field day online. Pathé Ciss posted a laughing emoji with the caption “Champions of Africa!” Ismaïla Sarr shared several laughing emojis on Instagram. El Hadji Malick Diouf wrote: “Champions, speak up!”

Idrissa Gueye used more words: “We know what we went through that night in Rabat. And that, no one can take it away from us,” he wrote, also calling for the release of 18 Senegalese fans facing hooliganism charges in Morocco.

Moussa Niakhaté added: “Come and get them [the medals]. They are crazy.” Goalkeeper Yehvann Diouf reposted an image of the trophy celebrations with the caption: “You can add three more goals in favour of the crybabies.”

It’s not over yet

The Senegalese Football Federation described CAF’s decision as “unjust, unprecedented, and unacceptable” and confirmed it will appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), the Switzerland-based body that serves as the global supreme court for sports disputes. CAF president Patrice Motsepe acknowledged the planned appeal, saying: “We will adhere and respect the decision that’s taken at the highest level.”

“CAF is making a fool of itself,” said Patrick Kabou, the lawyer defending the Senegalese fans on trial in Morocco. He believes the decision will be overturned “as soon as it lands at the CAS”.

The outcome may hinge on the referee’s testimony. He initially called the match for Senegal despite a 15-minute walkout by Senegalese players protesting a penalty awarded to Morocco and submitted a report reflecting that decision.

However, “the next day he also filed a supplementary report in which he stated that he tried to stop the match and declare Senegal to have forfeited, but that the chair of the referees’ committee ordered him not to,” explained sports journalist Philippe Doucet. The second testimony was the basis for Morocco’s appeal, which it eventually won.

For now, football managers in Dakar continue to treat the trophy as Senegal’s. Earlier this month, the federation announced it would present the Afcon trophy to the Senegalese diaspora in France during a friendly against Peru on 28 March in Paris. ■

ANALYSIS

The geopolitics of fishing

Aircraft carriers are nice, if you can afford them. Fishing boats may be even more effective – and not just for Iran.

SIMON ALLISON

IRAN is restricting maritime traffic along the Strait of Hormuz, choking off 20% of global oil supplies. The United States government, which operates the most expensive and sophisticated navy in the history of the world, is asking its allies to send reinforcements to reopen the strait, to little avail. Without vast aircraft carriers or destroyers to project maritime superiority, Iran relies on a not-so-secret weapon to maintain control of this vital waterway: fishing boats.

This tactic was developed on the other side of the Arabian Peninsula, off the coast of Yemen, where Houthi rebels – supported by Iran – have deployed “kamikaze drone boats” to great effect. These are small wooden or fibreglass boats that look like fishing boats but have been rigged to attack container vessels in the Red Sea. They are unmanned, controlled remotely by GPS and a live video feed, and can sink large ships, including bulk carriers.

Iran is believed to have its own fleet of drone boats, which are easy to hide and difficult to defend against. The prospect of a multibillion-dollar aircraft carrier being holed by a wooden skiff could be why the US has yet to send its naval

vessels into the Strait of Hormuz – and why potential allies might be nervous about committing their own ships.

Iran has spent years developing low-cost, relatively low-tech responses to the overwhelming conventional military superiority of its key adversaries: the US and Israel. Its Shahed-136 drones cost just \$40,000 to produce and thousands can be manufactured every week. The air-defence systems for shooting them down can cost several million dollars.

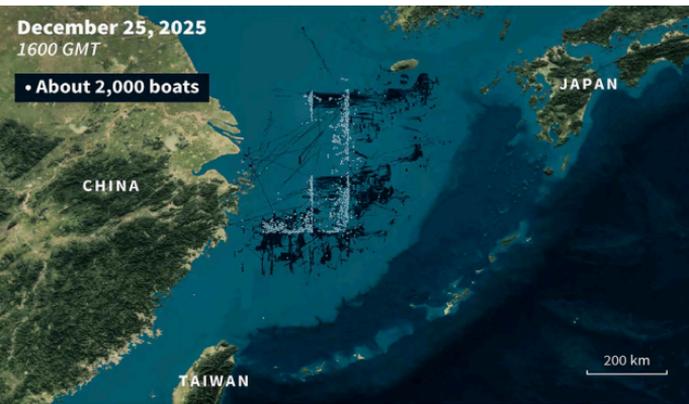
The Chinese armada

Iran is not the only country that has made fishing vessels central to its national security.

On Christmas Day in 2025, more than 2,000 Chinese fishing boats assembled in the South China Sea. On a map, their 400km long formation looked like two reverse L-shapes. Amid near-gale force winds, the boats – each spaced about 500m from the next – held their positions for 30 hours and then dispersed. This was first observed by ingeniSpace, a satellite imagery analysis firm.

“Something didn’t look right to me because in nature very rarely do you see straight lines,” said Jason Wang, the company’s chief operating officer.

Similar formations, with 1,000-



Fishing trollers:

On Christmas Day in 2025, over 2,000 Chinese fishing boats assembled in an L-shaped formation in the South China Sea. The boats held position for 30 hours and then dispersed.

GRAPHIC: SABRINA BLANCHARD AND PATRICIO ARANA/AFP

odd boats, were observed in January and earlier this month. China has not commented on the exercise, but analysts speculate it may be in preparation for a potential maritime blockade of Taiwan.

China has the world's largest fishing fleet, with tens of thousands of vessels spread out across every ocean. These are not wooden skiffs but larger commercial vessels. This fleet is often criticised as the main driver of overfishing globally. Several thousand of these form part of China's "maritime militia".

The maritime militia is regularly deployed for political purposes. In 2024, Chinese fishing vessels prevented a Filipino aid convoy from reaching the Scarborough Shoal, of which China and the Philippines both claim ownership of.

China is unique in that its military doctrine combines both fishing boats and aircraft carriers – positioning it well to project power not just in the South China Sea, but in all the world's oceans. Iran on the other hand, is in a war of asymmetric power.

G for Grit

Beyond the Strait of Hormuz lies the Persian Gulf, one of the world's most resilient marine ecosystems.

Its coral withstands heat that would kill reefs anywhere else in the world; fish thrive in extremely high levels of acidity; more than four million barrels of oil were released into it during the 1991 Gulf War and its waters managed to recover.

The fishing boats of this resilient Gulf, with their evolution into warships, are now one of Iran's most effective tools.

And they are arguably the country's best chance of forcing an end to the current aerial bombardment by the US and Israel – and a return to some form of diplomacy. ■

Simon Allison is *The Continent's* International Editor. This article is co-published with *Coda Story*, a newsroom that tracks the patterns that explain the headlines. *The Continent* is partnering with *Coda Story* to expand our international coverage

REPORT

Out of the frying pan, into the firing line

How a would-be chef's desperate bid to find work beyond Botswana's borders dumped him on Russia's front line.



PHOTO: NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA/AFR

Ploy and deploy: Billboards promoting contract army service in Petushki, near Moscow.

KELETSO THOBEGA IN GABORONE

KGOSI Pelelekae left Botswana for Russia in November 2025 believing he had landed work as a chef. At Sir Seretse Khama Airport, officials stopped him, saying his itinerary didn't make sense; they mentioned the word "trafficking".

The young man, who had found

the opportunity online with the help of a friend, was frustrated that they might stop his first trip overseas. When he returned a few weeks later, he had symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

Pelelekae is one of three people publicly known to have been recruited from Botswana to fight for Russia in the Ukraine war. Records leaked from the

Russian army list 1,417 Africans who had signed contracts to fight for Russia by the end of last year. That list, published last month by French investigative outlet *Inpact*, doesn't include any citizens of Botswana. Pelelekae's ordeal, which he spoke about on a local radio show, is the first to reveal these recruitments have reached Botswana.

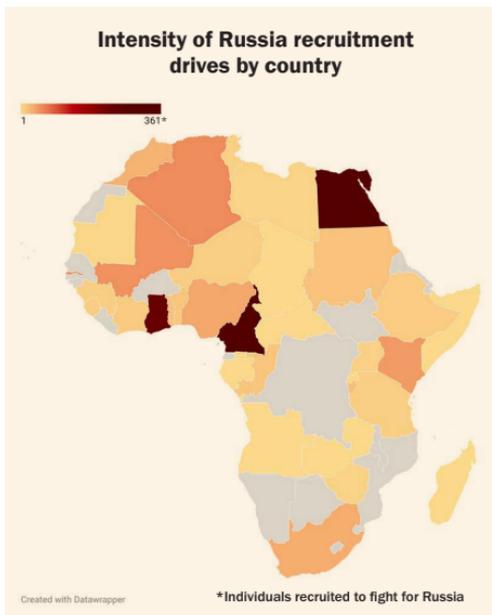
Pelelekae said he had left two other Batswana behind in Russia. Their families say they are 19 and 20 years old, and went to Russia in July 2025 for a "training programme" before ending up on the front lines in Ukraine.

The nation is spooked. Botswana's opposition leader is now demanding that the country, which previously abstained from UN votes on Russia in Ukraine, change its stance. "Botswana should reconsider its position and not back Russia," said Dumelang Saleshando. "[The] government should also take action to get Batswana there back home; the lives of Botswana's children matter."

In a statement, International Relations Minister Phenyio Butale said the ministry had facilitated the safe return of one Botswana national in December 2025. The statement added that authorities did not have verified information on the location or status of those still missing.

Young, unemployed and desperate

Pelelekae told *The Continent* that his ordeal began as a desperate bid to turn over a new leaf. The 25-year-old had been unemployed and out of school for more than five years, surviving on support from his grandmother and sister.



His mother died in 2013.

During this time, Pelelekae had several run-ins with the law. Last year he was arrested in South Africa on suspicion of theft. He had overstayed his visa and received a 10-year ban from South Africa, even though police cleared him of theft before releasing him in March 2025.

Back home, Pelelekae heard stories of people who had moved to Europe from Botswana and earned good money.

One day, a childhood friend sent him a link to a Russian agency "looking for workers" and encouraged him to apply to work as a chef.

After his online application, Pelelekae started communicating on Telegram with a "Dimitri" who said he would earn more than \$2,000 a month and receive free flights and accommodation.

Pelelekae sent copies of his ID and passport to be vetted.

A man based in Kenya then joined the chat. He identified himself as “Controller”. He sent Pelelekae about \$150 via a Kenyan mobile money app to cover transport to the airport, food while in transit, and data. Pelelekae had told the recruiters about his South Africa ban and he was sent a flight ticket that routed him through Addis Ababa.

The day before his trip, Pelelekae was nervous – his recruiters had told him to delete his texts with them before heading to the airport. He didn’t have a visa, only a letter claiming he was visiting Russia for a vacation. The recruiters promised everything would work out. At the airport in Gaborone, officials eventually let him through after some back and forth.

En route, Pelelekae began a casual conversation with another Motswana traveller, who told him she lived in Poland. She was surprised that he was dressed so lightly while headed to Russia, where the cold can be brutal. She gave him two jerseys, as well as her phone number and Instagram handle, saying he should reach out to her if he needed help.

He would need it sooner than expected.

In Russia, Pelelekae travelled to St Petersburg with a man who had picked him up from the Moscow airport on his arrival. Together with 23 Kenyans and six South Africans, he then travelled by bus for nearly a week to a camp near Khabarovsk, towards the Russia-China border. Here, he briefly met “Dimitri”, whose friendly tone over the phone had

changed to a cold, business-like attitude. “Dimitri” curtly told Pelelekae that he was there to work and should follow all the instructions.

Each person was given a SIM card, forms for opening bank accounts, and a contract in Russian. The next day, they were taken for medical examinations.

The day before his trip, Pelelekae was nervous – his recruiters had told him to delete his texts with them before heading to the airport.

The doctors who examined them spoke English and Pelelekae overheard one tell the other that he was “too weak for the front lines”.

The day after, they were handed military uniforms and AK-47 guns.

The camp was unlike anything Pelelekae had ever experienced. Drones and other military aircraft constantly flew overhead. Soldiers in uniform roamed with guns.

“You were asked if you drink or smoke and were given alcohol and cigarettes, according to your preference,” he said. Someone explained the alcohol was to quell anxiety. It was then that Pelelekae decided to text the woman in Poland.

At one point, the recruits were brought back to St Petersburg, and Pelelekae saw it as his chance. Speaking to *The Continent*, he declined to reveal the details of his escape, citing security concerns. He did however list his Good Samaritans as: a group of Batswana studying in Russia;

the Motswana woman living in Poland; and another Motswana woman working at the Botswana consulate in Sweden. He said they facilitated his journey from St Petersburg to Moscow, put him up in a hotel, paid for his meals and pooled funds for his flight ticket back home.

“I will forever remain grateful to them for helping me. It is not every day that someone uses their personal resources to help someone they don’t even know,” he said.

Back home, Pelelekae rarely leaves the house and wears a face mask when he ventures out, fearful that someone might still be after him for deserting the camp.

“I went through a tough ordeal just because I wanted work and trusted

strangers,” he told *The Continent*. “I hope other young people can use my experience to learn to be more careful about opportunities that seem too good to be true.”

Many young people in Botswana are just as vulnerable as Pelelekae. Unemployment in the country has risen to 27%, according to recent survey data.

For six decades, the government and the public-private diamond mining company Debswana have been the biggest employers.

Both have retrenched significant proportions of their workforce in recent years because of falling demand for diamonds, which in 2024 accounted for about 80% of export revenue. ■



PHOTO: SERGEY BOBOK/AFP

Fodder: Ukrainian workers place the body of a Russian soldier into a bag in Kharkiv. More than 1,400 Africans have reportedly been signed up to fight for Russia since it invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

ANALYSIS

Gambia's price for Russia's war on Ukraine

Recruits were promised \$30,000 a year, Russian passports, and potential residence. They died within months of signing up.

MUSTAPHA K DARBOE IN BANJUL

MAMUD Sanyang scrolls through old Telegram and WhatsApp messages, rolling over texts and pictures of his brother Sainey. “We were so close that people thought we were twins.”

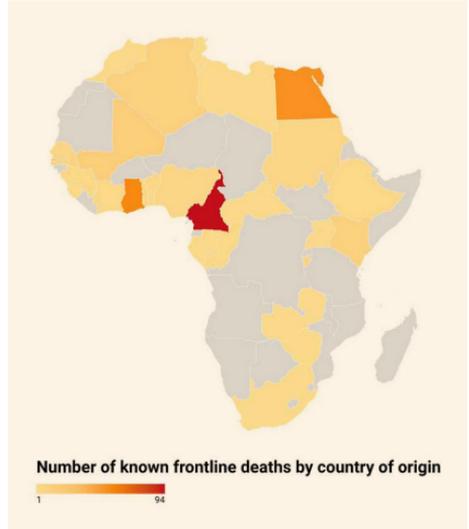
Sainey went silent in March 2025, while fighting for Russia in Ukraine. Until then, he had never gone a day in the previous six months without contacting Mamud.

The family contacted the Gambian embassy in Moscow, who asked the Russian foreign ministry for information. In July 2025, Moscow sent news that Sainey had died.

According to a leaked list published last month by investigative journalism organisation *Inpact*, the Russian army recognised Sainey as “killed in action” on 24 April, 2025. His family was not informed for more than two months.

Their ageing mother, who lives in Batabutu Kantora, a village two hours drive from the capital Banjul, still can't believe the news. She is hoping Sainey is a prisoner of war in Ukraine instead.

“She has been constantly visiting marabou [fortune tellers]. They are still



telling her that they have not seen his death. She is traumatised,” Mamud said.

Sainey's death is one of only 11 frontline deaths the Russian embassy has confirmed to the Gambian embassy in Moscow. The leaked list suggests 23 Gambians had died fighting for Russia in Ukraine by the end of 2025. That would be 40% of the 56 men known to have been recruited.

None of the dead had been in the Russian army for longer than 15 months. At least three died within two months of

signing their military contracts.

Even for the 11 deaths confirmed by both governments, Gambian authorities received only half of the money promised to the recruits in the event of their death, according to a Gambian diplomat. Recruits contracted with the Russian military were promised \$100,000 in death compensation, according to family members interviewed.

Mustapha Badgie was another Gambian recruit who appeared on the leaked list; Russia confirmed his death to the Gambian embassy.

His widow, Sarjo Sanneh, said her husband was working in Qatar as a driver before signing up. He was offered a \$30,000 contract (\$2,500 a month), a Russian passport, and a chance to relocate to Russia with his young family.

Seven months after signing the contract, on 16 June 2025, the Russian army listed Badgie among the battlefield dead. Sanneh had been communicating with her husband on Telegram, but she last heard from him on 11 May 2025. She was not officially notified of his death until that August, when the Gambian embassy in Moscow sent the news.

“I don’t think the people who recruit them are totally honest with them about the dangers. Otherwise, I don’t think he would have gone,” Badgie’s widow said.

It appears that the earliest recruitment of Gambians targeted people working as security guards, drivers, and similar blue-collar jobs in the Gulf. But by April 2025, recruiters’ tentacles were reaching into Gambia itself. That was how 47-year-old Bakary



Broken dream: *Mustapha Badgie signed up to fight for Russia in the hopes of relocating his family there. Seven months later, his wife was told he was dead.*

Sonko and 34-year-old Modou Touray, both former soldiers who served the Gambian presidency, were recruited. They signed their contracts on 26 April 2025, according to the leaked list. Both were listed as dead on 13 June 2025.

Gambian authorities say that they have not been able to identify the recruiting networks. ■

This story is published in partnership with *The Republic Gambia*

FEATURE

Bad medicine: Kenya's battle with fake drugs

Never mind a spoonful of sugar, what medicine in the country appears to need is a pinch of salt.

GITONGA NJERU IN NAIROBI

AARON Kimathi nearly lost his marketing job after a throat infection. It was severe but it wasn't the illness itself that landed him in trouble: it was the drugs he took for it.

After buying what he believed were antibiotics from a small pharmacy in Nairobi's Eastlands, he took them for six days – but the infection only spread. It got so bad that he was admitted to a local hospital for six days. Laboratory tests suggested the over-the-counter drugs he took contained an insufficient amount of the active ingredient.

Kimathi's ordeal points to a sprawling crisis in Kenya's healthcare system: substandard or counterfeit drugs.

In the past three years, the country's medicines regulator, the Pharmacy and Poisons Board (PPB), has ordered at least 94 drug recalls. In about 21% of these, the recalled batches failed assay tests that check which chemicals are in a drug and if they are present in the correct amounts. Physical defects were even more common: tablets changing colour, syrups which had visible contaminants, capsules that crumbled

to reveal their contents, and so on.

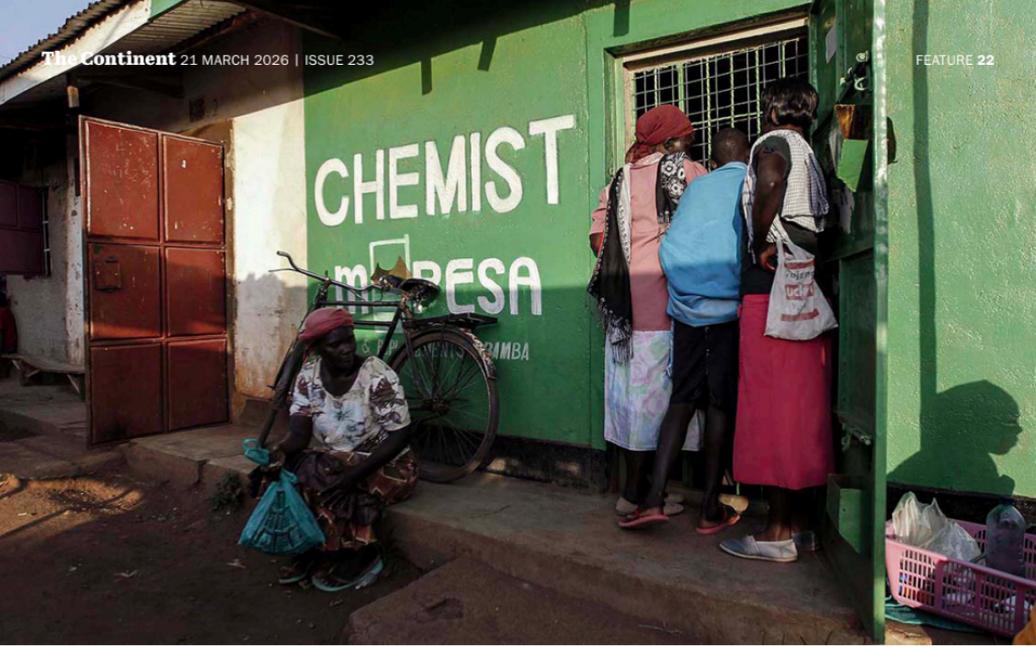
Part of Kenya's problem is its reliance on imported medicine. Some 52% of the recalls were for drugs made by manufacturers in other countries.

Regulators have a harder time tracking imported medicines. Their point of entry, Mombasa port, is frequently the first point of vulnerability. Investigators say that importers of counterfeit and substandard medicines exploit the port's weak inspection capacity to slip them through alongside legitimate cargo.

In the past three years, the country's medicines regulator, the Pharmacy and Poisons Board, has ordered at least 94 drug recalls.

"Sometimes the drugs are declared as transit goods headed to another country, then diverted into local markets," said a senior police officer at Muthaiga Police Station, who requested anonymity because he is not authorised to speak for the police force publicly.

Oversight at entry points is supposed



Placebo defect: Customers queue at a hole-in-the-wall apothecary in Nyang'oma Kogelo, west of Nairobi.

PHOTO: THOMAS MUKOYA/REUTERS

to be shared between agencies including the Kenya Revenue Authority and the PPB. “If even one checkpoint fails, the consignment moves forward. After that, it becomes much harder to trace,” said the police officer.

“We conduct post-market surveillance daily and product recalls when necessary. However, the supply chain is complicated and often requires multi-agency co-ordination,” said Dr Christabel Khaemba, head of pharmacovigilance at the PPB.

In that supply chain, the counterfeit and substandard versions might even disappear faster into patients’ arms and mouths because they are cheaper.

“Street-level chemists buy from whoever offers cheaper stock,” said Phillipa Karanja, a Nairobi vendor.

“People want cheap drugs,” said John

Mwaura, a vendor who sells painkillers from a stall along River Road in Nairobi. “If I sell expensive ones, they walk away.”

Increasing local manufacturing might not be a panacea either. Locally made drugs were over-represented in the recalls, accounting for 30% of Kenya’s drug supply, but 48% of the recalls.

Regulators also appear to have few deterrent options beyond occasional recalls. Prosecution of people implicated in drug scams often falters because the burden of proof is high, according to public prosecutors.

“You must prove the drug is falsified, trace its origin, and link it directly to the accused,” said Renson Ogonga, Kenya’s director of public prosecutions. “Defence lawyers exploit any procedural gap if the case gets to court with inadequate evidence.” ■

PHOTO ESSAY



On the hunt

The Sloughi hounds that help put food on Algerian tables were once heralded in hieroglyphics.

WORDS AND PHOTOS: FETHI SAHRAOUI

A GROUP OF passionate hunters gathers outside Algiers on weekends – and sometimes on weekdays – accompanied by their beloved Sloughi dogs.

The Sloughi, also called an “Arabian Greyhound”, is a hunting and racing breed widely found around the Mediterranean basin. The breed is particularly associated with North Africa and Spain. Their lineage goes back millennia: similarly slender dogs with drooped

ears appear in Algerian Neolithic rock paintings, tomb paintings, and Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Hunters sometimes pair their Sloughies with Taros, a smaller and slower breed of dog similar to a terrier, whose role is to flush the prey out of its burrow. The visual adventure of the hunt is heightened by its dense and intense soundscape. The hunters shout to unsettle the quarry – hare, foxes, and occasionally wild boar. ■









DATA

The struggle is real

YESTERDAY WAS International Day of Happiness (20 March). Afrobarometer doesn't ask respondents directly about their level of contentment but we do enquire about their living conditions. The results are sobering.

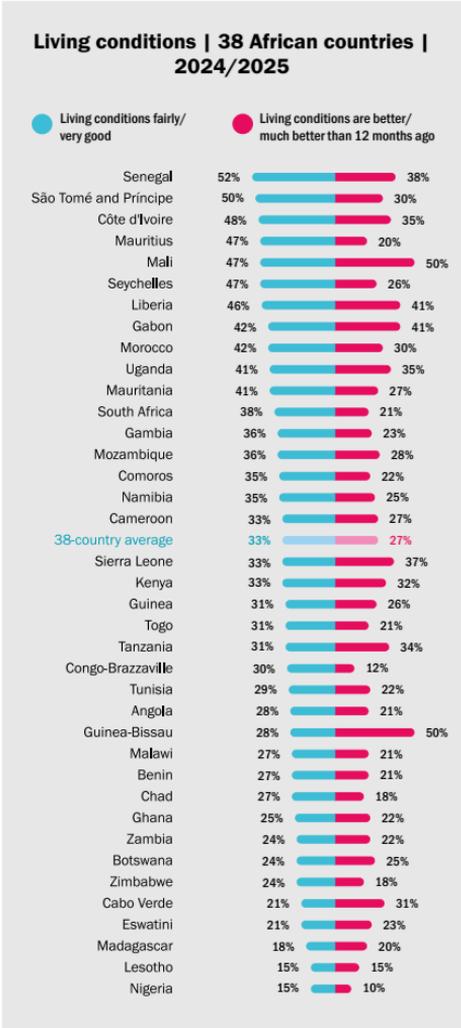
Across 38 African countries surveyed in the past two years, only one-third (33%) of citizens rate their living conditions as "fairly good" or "very good." That share has remained roughly the same across 28 countries for which we have data stretching back a decade.

On average, in the 38-country data set, nearly half (49%) of Africans report poor living conditions, and just 27% say they are "better" or "much better" than 12 months earlier.

Senegal (52%) is the only country where a majority say their lives are going well.

In contrast, merely 15% of Nigerians and Basotho feel the same. In Guinea-Bissau, half (50%) report improvements, though only 28% rate their conditions positively.

Money can't buy happiness, but maybe poverty can take it away. Only 20% of the poorest Africans report good living conditions, compared to 57% among the well-off. ■

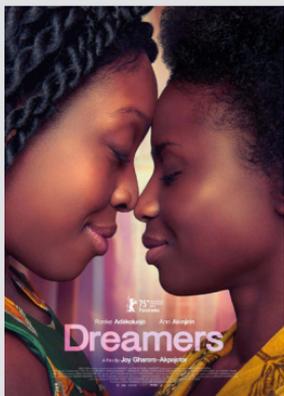


Source: Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.



FILM REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



As if there could be joy in injustice

In this drama about love and immigration, disparate emotions dance together.

IN *DREAMERS*, Joy Gharoro-Akpojotor's debut feature, a Nigerian woman, Isio (Ronkẹ Adékolúẹjo) is held at a deportation centre in the United Kingdom. She's detained there while officials decide if she is indeed a lesbian whose life would be in danger if she were

sent back to Nigeria. In this often hostile place, Isio finds a shared sisterhood with some of the inmates.

When her roommate Farah (Ann Akinjirin) becomes a potential love interest, Isio begins to reconcile with the trauma of her past as she dares to dream of a future.

"I did not want a bleak film about poor, tragic immigrants, because I feel like everyone has seen that," Gharoro-Akpojotor told *The Continent*. "I wanted to create a film where we're watching two women fall in love and it is magic."

Dreamers is loosely autobiographical: Gharoro-Akpojotor is openly queer and was born in Nigeria before moving to the UK when she was a teenager. She claimed asylum on account of her sexuality and after years of uncertainty was approved at age 25. Although she wasn't detained, she went to therapy to process that years-long anxiety.

But her journey wasn't always bleak. "I had friends who kept me going and it was hopeful," Gharoro-Akpojotor says. "There was joy involved, and laughter." So she chose to make a film that spoke to the joy she felt.

Dreamers deals with heavy themes like forced separation, displacement, and sexual abuse but still carries a levity and sense of freedom that comes from lived experience, as well as Gharoro-Akpojotor's own dynamic visual sensibility. This includes the surreal

PHOTO: FILM STILL, *DREAMERS*

imagery of a masquerade that plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Gharoro-Akpojotor was scared of masquerades as a child. She uses one here in an artistic choice to show that trauma and fear can manifest physically.

“I did not want a bleak film about poor, tragic immigrants ... I wanted to create a film where we’re watching two women fall in love and it is magic.”

The commitment to joy was also part and parcel of the film’s production process. The cast and crew were encouraged to laugh, sing, and have fun. They kept a fun playlist on rotation throughout the four-week shoot. Every Friday was Jollof Friday. And there was

a wellbeing coordinator on set.

“Working with Joy is working with your friend, guide, light, and leader,” Adékoluẹjo says. “But also, somebody who is very artistically driven. That is a gift unlike any other.”

Ann Akinjirin concurs: “Her set is a collective collaborative experience. I would work with Joy every year for the rest of my career.”

Some critics may perceive the film as timely because immigration is frequently portrayed as a hot-button issue in global news. In reality it took Gharoro-Akpojoto 10 years to make and she would like viewers to sit with it for slower reflection than news cycles allow.

“I hope we can make people dig deeper beyond the headlines and online commentary into what the system is and maybe we can start to change it,” she says. ■

The Quiz

- 1 The Ogooué River also called Nazareth River (pictured), is the principal river of what country?
- 2 The first Afcon took place in what year?
- 3 Which country hosted the tournament?
- 4 What colour are the stars on Cabo Verde's flag?
- 5 Which country's first president was also known as the "Zik of Africa"?
- 6 Tiga dégué is the national dish of which country?
- 7 Mzuzu and Zomba are cities in which country?
- 8 Name the South African artist who released *Vuli Ndlela* in 1997.
- 9 Which East African city did Walter Rodney teach in?
- 10 Belgium's Leopold II once named a DRC city after himself. What's it called now?



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

"As body-of-water names go, 'Ogooué' is clearly the star of the show. 'Nazareth' is more of a walk-on role."

Big Pic

Coming in to land: A Congolese Muslim woman helps her children get off a motorcycle taxi to attend Eid al-Fitr prayers, marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan, in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo, on Friday.

PHOTO: JOSPIN MWISHA/AFP



The Continent is a member of the Press Council of South Africa. This means we adhere to its Code of Ethics. It also means that there's an independent body you can reach out to with a complaint about our reporting. That process is on their website – www.presscouncil.org.za.

**all protocol
observed.**

publisher of The Continent *and* The Friday Paper

The Continent is published by All Protocol Observed, a not-for-profit based in South Africa. Our home is dedicated to creating a space for African journalists to do quality journalism, which we then get to you wherever you are. For suggestions, queries, complaints, or to make a donation, please contact us at read@thecontinent.org.