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The Continent



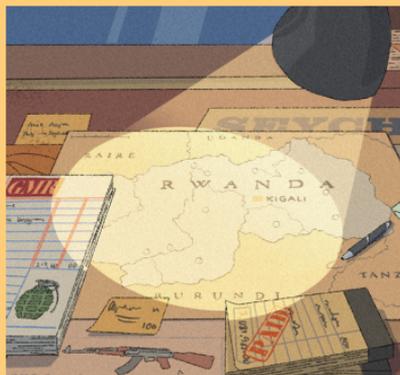
How to arm a genocide

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi

Inside:

- **The new Cold War:** Has South Africa finally picked a side? (p7)
- **Sudan:** Peace deal met with skepticism (p8)
- **Climate change:** Africa's billion-dollar price for EU plans (p9)
- **G4S:** Thabo Bester exposed the flaws in the world's largest private security company (p17)
- **Malawi:** The law protects disabled people. Few are listening (p20)
- **Books:** The importance of queer representation in Nigerian culture (p22)
- **Music:** Davido's on a different tempo on his comeback album (p24)

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Cover: It was the height of the Rwandan genocide, and nobody would sell arms to the genocidal government. Nobody legitimate, anyway. Enter Willem 'Ters' Ehlers, a white South African naval officer who was once in the innermost circle of the apartheid government. After South Africa was liberated, he saw an opportunity to make his millions by allegedly facilitating another crime against humanity – and got away with it. Until now. (p12)



Write for us

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CAPITALISM

UK court rules for Shell against people in Nigeria

Britain's Supreme Court this week upheld the ruling of its lower courts, saying it is too late for Nigerian communities to sue Shell over the 2011 leak of 40,000 barrels of crude oil. Shell, one of the worst polluters in history, argued that the nearly 28,000 residents of the Niger delta only had six years to sue it and it was now too late. The courts agreed. Shell this year reported \$40-billion in profits – the highest in its history.



Photo: Wiktor Szymanowicz/Future Publishing/Getty Images

SENEGAL

Cops injure dozens for preferring a school to a police station

A teenager was killed and dozens injured in Dakar protests which began in the community of Ngor, where residents protested state plans to build a new police station. They want a high school instead. The police's brutal response to the protest drove more young people to demonstrate against an increasingly "repressive state". The government and Ngor mayor have agreed to split the land and build both. But residents are still concerned that their high school will be close to a police station.

GUINEA

Activists released after two deaths in civil society protests

After an initial day of protests in which at least two people died, the government released three activists who were imprisoned in September 2021. Their release was one of the demands made by a civil society coalition, Forces Vives de Guinée, which called for street demonstrations between 10 and 25 May. The activists want the military junta to lift its ban on protests and get serious about transitioning to civilian rule. The protests have been halted until 15 May, as the two sides negotiate.



Photo:CAF
Online

FOOTBALL

Pon de replay (not)

South Africa's under-17 team suffered a humiliating 5-0 defeat to Senegal in this week's quarterfinals of the African Cup of Nations for boys. Memorably, South Africa raised a brouhaha and formal complaint to FIFA in 2017, after its men's national team lost a World Cup qualifier to Senegal (0-1). FIFA gave the referee a lifetime ban for match-fixing, and Bafana Bafana a second chance to lose bigger (0-2). Wednesday's beating left no room for brouhaha.

NIGERIA

Naija might happen to the Benin Bronzes return effort

In March, President Muhammadu Buhari decreed that the Benin Bronzes, artefacts that British soldiers stole from the kingdom of Benin in the 19th century, belong to the kingdom's current monarch. The decree blindsided the national museums' commission, which now seems to have halted negotiations to return them. This week, Nigeria's head of museums said that the return of 116 Benin Bronzes from Cambridge University is now on hold.

CAMEROON

Another journalist killed

Three Cameroonian journalists have been murdered since the start of the year. The latest one is Anye Nde Nsoh, who was killed on Sunday outside a bar in Bamenda, the capital of the restive Northwest region. The commander of a separatist group, Ambazonian Defense Council, which claims to have killed him, told the Committee to Protect Journalists that Nsoh was mistaken for a military commander. In the country's capital, Yaounde, radio presenters and commentators Jean-Jacques Ola Bebe and Arsène Salomon Mbani (Martinez) Zogo were killed earlier this year.

BURUNDI**Gitega is 100% solar powered in daytime**

The country's capital, Gitega, is powered only by solar energy during the day after Burundi doubled the capacity of its Mubuga solar farm. When it opened in 2021 as a 7.5MW power plant, it was the first solar energy source to be connected to the Burundian grid. The plant was built by Gigawatt Global, which also built the first utility-scale solar farm in Africa – a field in Rwanda which started generating power in 2014 and supplies about 4% of that country's electricity.

COMOROS-FRANCE**Talks over Mayotte start**

Comorian President Azali Assoumani met French leader Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday, to cool tensions over France's threat to deport Comorians from Mayotte. France retained control over Mayotte after Comorian independence. Nearly half the population are Comorians from the other three archipelago islands and France wants to forcefully remove them and raze their neighbourhoods. Assoumani's government has said it won't accept them either.



**Power ... but
for how long?**

Photo: Gallo
Images/Fani
Mahuntsi

SOUTH AFRICA**No light at the end of the Eskom tunnel**

South Africa's rolling power blackouts, which started in 2008, reached new depths with people going without power for up to 12 hours daily – broken into

three blocs a day. To generate this rarely-on power (half the grid is broken) the country burns so much coal that it is the biggest carbon polluter on the continent. As if to admit that supplying electricity is simply beyond its powers, the government is appealing a court ruling that said it has to give uninterrupted supply to hospitals, schools and police stations.

CLIMATE CRISIS

Thousands missing, hundreds dead in DRC flooding

Just days after flooding in Rwanda killed more 130 people, the villages of Bushushu and Nyamukubi in the DRC's South Kivu territory were hit by floods and mudslides that killed over 400 people. More than 1,500 are said to be missing and over 200 are in local hospitals with injuries, the BBC reports. However, two infants were rescued after surviving on floating debris in Lake Kivu for three days, giving the traumatised community a tiny bit of good news.



Waters of death: A swollen river makes this bridge impassable

TURKMENISTAN

Mega polluter spews greenhouse gases

Not often in the news, partly because its dictator doesn't embrace freedoms like publishing the truth, Turkmenistan now seems to be one of the world's worst polluters when it comes to easily avoidable greenhouse gas emissions. An investigation by *The Guardian* found that two of the country's gas fields leak methane at a rate similar to the entire greenhouse gas emissions of South Africa, and more than the United Kingdom. Gas field leaks are down to poor management and cost cutting, and are common in countries like Nigeria as well.

BOTSWANA

Bots' first Olympic medal goes on sale

The first Olympic medal that Botswana ever won is up for sale to the highest bidder. Amos Nijel, who won the silver medal in the 800m race in 2012, said that money from selling it could sustain him through a three-year ban from the sport. Nijel's ban, over the use of an experimental drug considered too dangerous for human use, started last week. He appears to have an offer of \$300,000 for the medal and reckons it could fetch much more than that after a documentary about him comes out.

South Africa

To Russia, with love

Pretoria's 'non-aligned' policy is looking shakier than ever

On 5 December 2022, a Russian vessel known to trade arms turned off its location transponder and docked in Simon's Town, the home of South Africa's navy. Over several hot, short summer nights, trucks unloaded containers from the quay to the *Lady R*. Two months later, it docked at a Russian port.

Because Simon's Town is on the curve of an otherwise mountainous peninsula, photographers were able to take pictures of everything, except the cargo. Local media and politicians asked the government to explain. No answers were forthcoming.

This week, the United States' ambassador to South Africa said his government had an answer to that question. The US was "confident" that weapons were loaded onto the *Lady R*.

South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, has not explicitly denied the claim. Instead, his government went on the offensive, saying "no evidence has been supplied to support these allegations".

South Africa, and its ruling African

National Congress, have a complicated history with the US. America supported the apartheid government. The ANC got its support from the Soviet Union, with those cadres going on to run the ANC-led government after liberation from apartheid. Modern Russia has kept up the relationship, even as the US became one of democratic South Africa's most significant trading partners.

South Africa regularly conducts military exercises with the United States, as well as with Russian forces – most recently in the Indian Ocean in February, on the anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with the participation of China's navy too.

The US was "confident" that weapons were loaded onto the *Lady R*.

That has placed huge pressure on President Cyril Ramaphosa's government, which says it is pursuing a "non-aligned" strategy – refusing to pick a side. Loading weapons onto the *Lady R* would not be consistent with that strategy, and South Africa could pay a very literal price. Some US politicians have already threatened South Africa's membership of Agoa, a crucial trade deal that gives African countries preferential access to that country's market. ■

Sudan

War and peace talks

Jeddah deal met with scepticism as fighting continues

Three weeks ago, a ship carrying 150 Sudanese evacuees arrived in Jeddah, a major coastal city in Saudi Arabia. They were fleeing the conflict that erupted in Sudan, suddenly and with great brutality, earlier in April. Since then, there has been a steady stream of boats making the 292-kilometre journey across the Red Sea from Port Sudan, taking thousands of people to safety – but also into a new life filled with uncertainty, amid grave fears for those left behind.

Last Saturday, representatives of the two warring factions – the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) on the one side, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on the other – also made the trip to Jeddah. They were there to negotiate a peace deal, at the behest of Saudi and US mediators. On Friday, a tentative “declaration of commitment to protect the civilians of Sudan” was announced.

According to the United States government, the agreement would “guide the conduct of the two forces to enable the

safe delivery of humanitarian assistance, the restoration of essential services, the withdrawal of forces from hospitals and clinics, and the respectful burial of the dead”.

Several previous ceasefire deals have been immediately broken by both sides. There is little to suggest that this time will be different.

So far, despite both sides claiming to be fighting in the interests of the people of Sudan, at least 604 of those people have been killed. Thousands more have been injured, while at least 700,000 people have been displaced.

At least 604 people have been killed, thousands injured and at least 700,000 displaced

Writing in the *Africa Report*, Sudanese politician Amgad Fareid Eltayeb – who served in the civilian government of Abdalla Hamdok, which was overthrown in a coup by the two generals who are now at war with each other – was highly critical of the Jeddah talks. He argued that by inviting only the SAF and the RSF, the talks legitimised them as the only political actors that matter. “The absence of any civilian voice at the table in Jeddah makes it another closed-door deal between the two parties who started the war,” he wrote. This “feeds their thirst for power”. ■

Climate

How Africa will pay for the EU's climate plan

The European Union wants to protect its industries and force other countries to pollute less. Africa, as ever, will be caught in the middle.

Sipho Kings

African countries could end up \$27-billion poorer, thanks to a new tariff that the European Union (EU) is introducing later this year.

In the EU, companies pay for each tonne of carbon that they pollute over a certain level. In the past (and still in most countries globally) there was no incentive for companies to invest in cleaner factories – keeping the planet habitable does not pay shareholders today. But this makes EU goods more expensive. So the bloc is phasing in a tariff, called a carbon border adjustment mechanism. This will make imported goods more expensive, with the proceeds going into an EU

innovation fund.

Theoretically, this will force overseas companies and countries to lower their carbon emissions.

Africa only contributes 4% of global emissions, while the EU is responsible for about a quarter since the Industrial Revolution kicked off in the 1700s. Africa is expected to lose 20% of its GDP by 2050 thanks to the heating planet.

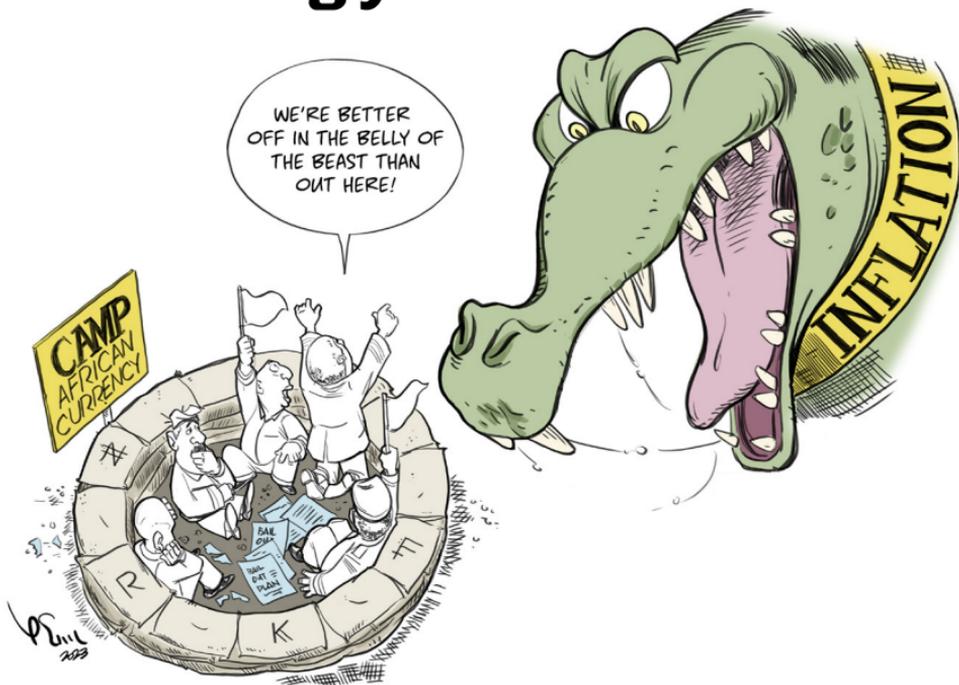
And the EU tariff will add up to \$27-billion to that, according to research this week from the Fiord Lalji Institute for Africa and the African Climate Foundation. “Implications for African countries of a carbon border adjustment mechanism in the EU” found that Africa will be hardest-hit, because a quarter of all its exports go north. The tariff will drop these by up to 6% and lose the continent over 1% of its GDP. Exports of metals will be hit hardest.

In a draft of the plan, the EU proposed sending the money it gets from the scheme to help developing countries do things like build cleaner power grids, so their exports would be cleaner. The idea was dropped. In climate negotiations, rich countries pledged \$100-billion a year for similar work. The money has not been forthcoming. ■

The African Climate Foundation is one of the funders of The Continent. It has no say in editorial decisions.

Inflation

Why Africa is not recovering yet



Inflation in much of Africa wasn't as bad last year as it was in rich countries. But this year, inflation – where everything costs more than it did before – has continued, although the richer countries are bringing theirs under control. Last year, rich countries had inflation in part because their governments pumped money into their economies to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic. In Africa, inflation was instead mainly driven by expensive imports, particularly of wheat and oil, the prices of which were driven up by Russia's war on Ukraine, and the profiteering that followed. Those African countries are now struggling because everything costs more and are turning to lenders like the International Monetary Fund. To get that money, they have to take painful steps to slow down inflation, like reducing the amount of money in circulation. For most Africans, this means buying imported goods that are now more expensive, but having less money to do it with.

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INVESTIGATION

One man, two crimes against humanity

Ters Ehlens was in the apartheid government's inner sanctum, at the forefront of its efforts to maintain white supremacy. But by 1994, when South Africa was celebrating its newfound democracy, he needed a new source of income – and found it in the killing fields of Rwanda

Niren Tolsi

During the last years of apartheid, Willem “Ters” Ehlers could feel the political tides turning. His boss, President PW Botha – who had vehemently defied all calls for reform – was under pressure. Botha’s days of leading his party, and the country, were numbered.

In 1989, PW Botha met Nelson Mandela in a secret meeting at his Tuynhuys office in Cape Town. Mandela was still in prison at the time. For apartheid stalwarts clinging on to their notions of white supremacy, it marked the beginning of the end.

The only photo of the meeting was taken by Ehlers.

The fall of apartheid was bad news for Ehlers. A commodore in the South African navy, he had risen fast to become Botha’s private secretary and aide-de-camp. He was part of the inner circle of an imperial president, which also included defence minister Magnus Malan and

apartheid assassin and super-spy Craig Williamson.

Ehlers wielded considerable influence, and would have had unparalleled insight into the increasingly paranoid and violent regime.

But as it crumbled, Ehlers was soon to be made redundant. What he did next is the subject of a damning new research report by the South African non-profit group Open Secrets, which was released in Johannesburg on Thursday.

Dangerous waters

In March 1993, a Greek-flagged ship called the *Malo* departed from Montenegro and set course for Somalia. Before it could get there, it was boarded and searched by authorities from the Seychelles. In the hold, they found an enormous cache of arms, including 2,500 AK-47s, 6,000 mortar rounds and 5,600 fragmentation grenades.

As Somalia was under a United Nations arms embargo at the time, the ship was



Inner circle:
Nelson Mandela
meets president
PW Botha in
Cape Town on 5
July 1989. Photo:
Ters Ehlers



Never forget: Photographs of some of the victims of the Rwandan genocide at the Kigali Genocide Memorial. Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP via Getty Images

seized and the arms were confiscated.

At first, the Seychelles government said that it wanted to destroy the weapons. But a year later, another, more lucrative option, presented itself – courtesy of Ehlers and his new associates.

In a move straight out of a Graham Greene novel set in the crumbling days of an authoritarian regime, Ehlers had “gone private” and reinvented himself as an arms dealer. He became part of what Human Rights Watch, in a 2000 report, described as an “old-boy network”, that spanned both national defence and private business in South Africa, and drew on experience gained in dodging arms embargoes.

In 1990, one of Ehler’s first new positions included taking over as

managing director of a sanctions-busting front company for the apartheid state, the Seychelles-based GMR. It was named after Giovanni Mario Ricci, an Italian who started the company with the infamous spy Williamson. Ricci was a close friend and advisor of Seychellois President France-Albert René. Ehlers, for his part, claims to have been close to the presidents of Cote d’Ivoire, Malawi, Uganda, Zaire and Zimbabwe.

Between them, Ricci and Ehlers convinced the government not to destroy the *Malos*’ dangerous cargo, but to sell it. And they had a buyer in mind.

Arming a genocide

Over a period of 100 days in 1994, beginning on 7 April, the Rwandan

government of the time instigated the slaughter of almost one-million minority Tutsis, moderate Hutus and Twa. Two-million would be displaced. Many, many more were maimed, raped and traumatised.

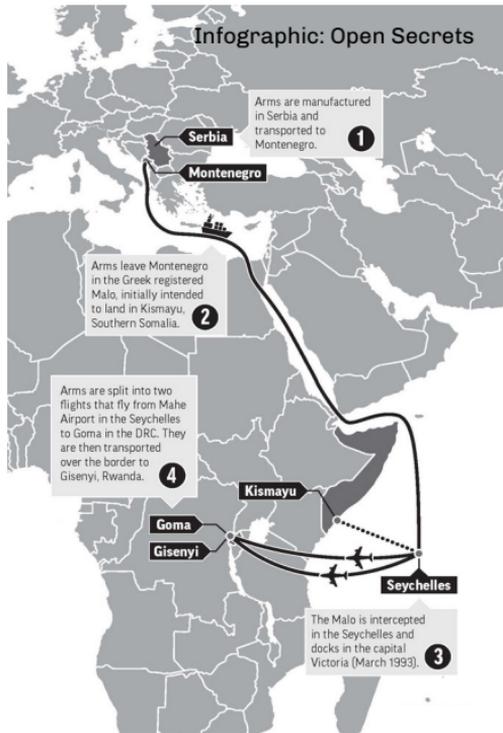
While much of the violence was coordinated on radio stations and involved the Interahamwe – the youth wing of the ruling party – it also included neighbours killing neighbours, priests murdering congregants and massacres perpetrated by the government’s army. Machetes and small arms, including rifles, were the weapons of choice in the killing.

Some of those guns had been made in apartheid South Africa, which had supplied an estimated \$32-million worth of arms and military equipment to the Rwanda government between 1990 and 1993. At the time, South Africa had the world’s tenth-largest arms manufacturing industry.

But as the genocide continued, obtaining more guns became more difficult for its perpetrators. In May 1994, the United Nations Security Council imposed an arms embargo, making it illegal to sell or supply arms to Rwanda.

This did not stop Ehlers, as Open Secrets details meticulously in *The Secretary: How Middlemen and Corporations Armed the Rwandan Genocide*. The report pieces together media interviews, police and witness testimonies, and declassified records, and concludes that Ehlers played a central role in getting guns from the *Malo* into the killing fields of Rwanda.

This is how it worked. On 4 June 1994,



Colonel Théoneste Bagosora – a Rwandan military officer described by the historian Gérard Prunier as the “general organiser” of the genocide – flew from Johannesburg to the Seychelles. He used the nom de plume ‘Mr Camille’, and Ehlers flew with him.

Together, they negotiated a deal with the Seychelles government to purchase the weapons and send them by plane to Goma, in the east of what was then known as Zaire.

Two such flights took place: on 16-17 June and 18-19 June, a period when the bloodletting in Rwanda had not yet abated.

According to another Human Rights Watch report in 1995, the government



Enemy of humanity: Former Rwanda army Colonel Théoneste Bagosora (right), the mastermind of the 1994 genocide, was sentenced to life in prison. Photo: Tony Karumba/AFP via Getty Images

of Zaire issued an end-user certificate in respect of the arms, but on arrival in Goma, they were handed over for the use of Rwandan government forces in Gisenyi across the border.

Payment for the weapons was made to the Central Bank of the Seychelles, to an account it held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. In total, \$330,000 was deposited there in two separate payments – both made on 17 June 1994 from a Swiss bank account belonging to Ehlers.

A subsequent United Nations investigation into the funding of the genocide found that Ehlers himself

received in excess of \$1.3-million for brokering the deal.

Bitter fruits

Bagosora was charged and convicted of crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and, after spending the rest of his life in prison, died in September 2021. The 75-year-old Ehlers, meanwhile, was tracked down to a comfortable suburban home in the leafy Waterkloof suburb of Pretoria, scenes of murder and rape in Rwanda merely a fragment of a far-away history.

Speaking to Open Secrets, Ehlers described himself as merely a fixer, whose job was to smooth relations and trade between South Africa and countries like Uganda and the Seychelles. He said that he was adept at operating in Africa because he “had contacts” and understood that “when you sell goods in Africa, you have to receive the payment first”.

He said that he never knew that the guns on the *Malo* would end up in Rwanda; that he believed they were going to stay in Zaire. Besides, he said, in his estimation the weapons would have only reached Rwanda “when the fight was already over”.

“Obviously I feel very bitter. Inside my heart cries. Inside I know that I am not that person,” Ehlers said.

After its exhaustive investigation, Open Secrets concluded that Ehlers ought to be held to account for his actions, and will submit a docket containing all relevant evidence to South Africa’s National Prosecuting Authority. ■

South Africa



Audacious escape:
Thabo Bester is
back in jail. Photo:
Gallo Images/
Freddie Käpp

A rapist and murderer escaped prison. G4S is finally held accountable

A faked death and dramatic prison escape in South Africa have focused attention on the world's biggest private security company. But G4S has a problematic history across the continent, writes **Ruth Hopkins**

In May 2022, Thabo Bester, a convicted rapist and murderer, escaped from a privately run prison in South Africa by setting a corpse alight and faking his death. The audacious jail break was exposed nearly a year later and became

a Netflix-level drama that dominated headlines for weeks. Social media was abuzz, while news networks competed for the next scoop about Bester and his lover and alleged accomplice, Dr Nandipha Magudumana. The Bonnie-and-Clyde

saga drew attention away from G4S, the multinational for-profit company running the prison in the country's judicial capital Mangaung, from which Bester escaped.

G4S is the world's biggest private security company. In 2021 Allied Universal, a privately funded American security contractor, bought the British G4S. That merger created an even larger security giant. Allied employs 800,000 people worldwide, with an annual revenue of about \$20-billion.

G4S has a long history in South Africa – its first prison there opened in 2001, and the company signed a 25-year contract worth \$814-million. In May, the South African government said it would terminate the contract to operate the prison Bester escaped from.

It is not the first time the Mangaung prison has failed to live up to expectations.

In 2012, the Wits Justice Project in South Africa investigated prisoners' claims that they were being electroshocked and beaten up, some murdered and others forcibly injected with anti-psychotic drugs. In October 2013, the then minister of correctional services, Sbu Ndebele, ordered the Department of Correctional Services to take control of the prison, establishing a task team that was supposed to investigate the human rights violations. But evidence the investigation team had collected went missing and the department refused to release the final report. It returned control of the prison back to G4S in August 2014 without explanation.

Now the South African government has taken a first step in holding the

company accountable by terminating the Mangaung prison contract. G4S must vacate it within 90 days. This does not mean, however, that the global private security giant will leave the country. Approximately 15,000 people work for G4S in South Africa, providing security not just at Mangaung prison but also at various mines, airports and banks.

Who protects the guards?

G4S claims it is Africa's biggest private employer. The company is active in 26 African countries, employing more than 120,000 workers. In Africa, where unemployment and poverty are a reality, strikes and discontent among the G4S workforce are common.

Before the government initially took control of Mangaung prison in 2013, employees demonstrated outside the prison building, carrying banners with the text: "We are not slaves. Stop treating us like rubbish. Please save us from this private monster." They complained about salaries and a lack of safety measures.

In 2018, South African G4S workers filed a complaint alleging they had not received a cent of the dividends they were supposed to earn through a 13% stake in the company. In 2021, a black empowerment commission decided G4S should pay just over \$1-million to the workers. That money was transferred to a trust but the beneficiaries were never paid.

In 2007, the NGO War on Want published a report titled *Who Protects the Guards*, detailing how G4S treated its employees in Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa. Black South African

workers were often called derogatory names and the company allowed “whites only” toilets. In Malawi, G4S workers were paid poverty wages. In Mozambique guards said they were not given a single day of paid leave.

G4S in the rest of Africa

There is little evidence that the company has cleaned up its act in recent years.

In Kenya, G4S was also plagued by strikes, with workers saying their salaries had been illegally cut. In Nigeria, G4S is mainly present in the oil rich Niger Delta, where multinational oil companies have for years fuelled strife, conflict and civil unrest. There it provides security for these oil companies and has fostered “a culture of maximising profit at the expense of workers’ internationally recognised labour rights,” journalist Ibiba Don Pedro reports.

G4S workers who were hired to provide security for Chevron testified to a “divide and rule culture” that saw some workers earn more than others without a valid reason. Salaries were also illegally slashed and employees who unionised were treated with hostility. Workers have been battling in court since 2011 over an outstanding unpaid leaving gratuity. This consists of two months full salary and was negotiated in 2009, but the company refused to pay. The union representing workers estimated the fee owed by G4S was approximately \$6-million.

In Malawi, not much has changed since War on Want established that G4S workers were paid poverty wages. Journalist Gregory Gondwe reported that injured



'Private monster': G4S has come under fire over its management of the Mangaung Correctional Centre.

workers were not compensated and some were even dismissed. An employee who worked for G4S for 17 years claimed he earned the equivalent of \$40 a month, which is below the minimum wage in Malawi. Workers also claim regulations concerning overtime, days off and pension are regularly violated.

A G4S spokesperson told *The Continent* that the Mangaung Correctional Centre has had a strong track record over the past 22 years, adding that G4S is committed to investment in South Africa “but it remains G4S’s firm intention to discontinue all investment in correctional services in South Africa”. Speaking of protests in Kenya and Malawi, they said: “We actively encourage our employees to be members of a trade union and fully support them in their membership.” They dismissed the complaints of workers in Nigeria, saying they had been paid in full. ■

Too often disability means poverty, indignity and invisibility

Ten years after Malawi outlawed discrimination against people with disabilities, the government's inclusion efforts are lackadaisical and old stigmas are still rife

Selina Boma in Lilongwe

At road intersections in Malawi's capital Lilongwe, Chifundo darts back and forth between pedestrians and motorists, begging for handouts. His father, a blind man, tells *The Continent* "if they don't beg, they don't eat". Chifundo's mother is also blind and the couple, like many disabled Malawians, live on the marginalised and impoverished fringes of society.

Chifundo and his younger siblings do not attend school because their parents can't afford it. "If someone could help me with the capital, I can start a grocery business to support my family and my children can go to school," his father says.

The last census, in 2008, put the country's disability prevalence at 3.8% in a population of more than 19-million people. A 2018 national survey found disability in about 12% of children older than five. If both figures are accurate, younger Malawians have a higher incidence of disability than the

general population.

But disability services are hardly expanding.

Malawi only has 207 special-needs resource centres. The education ministry estimates that over 3,000 are required. Without schools that have assistive technology and trained assistants to support disabled learners, their school outcomes are poorer than able-bodied children. This traps them in a cycle of poverty and gives them fewer options in life.

Mwai Banda, who has hearing difficulties and albinism, says she wishes she had never been born. "Throughout my life my parents and siblings have been the first to ostracise me." Banda took and failed Malawi's school certificate of education. When she asked to retake the test, her parents refused, claiming it was pointless because no company would employ a person with impaired hearing, even if they were educated.

Child rights advocate Memory Chisenga says that families' mistreatment



Abandoned:
Disabled people
don't get proper
care in Malawi.
 Photo: Carl Court/
 Getty Images

of disabled children is driven by the prevalent belief that disability is a familial curse. It brings stigma not just to the disabled person but their family members too, causing resentment.

Rather than responding with empathy, government officials discuss disability in a manner that blames the victims.

Speaking of disabled children turned beggars and disabled parents like Chifundo's, who rely on their begging children for a livelihood, Fred Simwaka, an officer at the social welfare ministry, says: "It is really hard for the ministry to help these kids and families as most of them are used to handouts. If they are given funds, they will use it to solve short-term problems and they will continue begging and using children with disabilities to be their source of income."

Chikondi Chimala, the education ministry's spokesperson, says the ministry cannot make decisions to support

children with disabilities because their parents hide them and it does not have reliable statistics on how many are out of school.

**Rather than stepping
 in with empathy for all,
 government officials
 speak about disability
 in a manner that blames
 the victims.**

Malawi outlawed discrimination against people with disabilities in 2012. But this has not changed how people treat the disabled. Child rights advocate Chisenga says society needs "to change the way" it sees adults and children with disabilities. "These kids need to be in school and the government has the duty of care to ensure they have the same opportunities as other children." ■

Bittersweet stories of queer Nigerian love

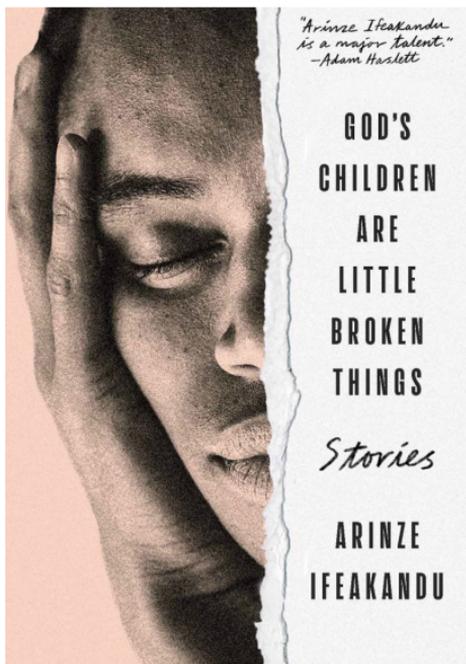
When love is criminalised, relationships can seem futile, and happy endings impossible. Arinze Ifeakandu used to write as if this was an incontrovertible truth. Now he has more hope.

Dika Ofoma

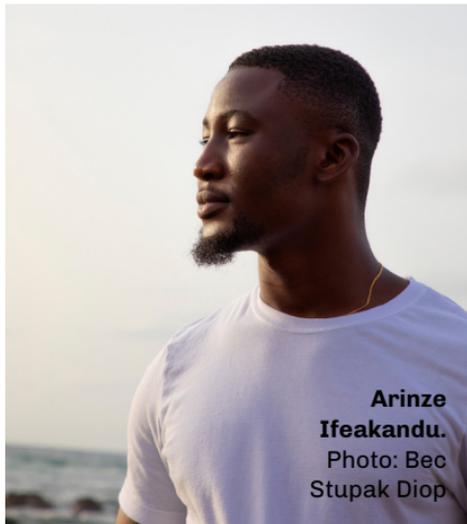
God's Children Are Little Broken Things by Arinze Ifeakandu, a tender love story of two young male students, Kamsi and Lotanna, was shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2017. Last year, it was expanded into a collection with eight other short stories, all exploring the lives of queer men navigating relationships in a society that considers homosexuality taboo.

Besides the delicate writing, the beautiful prose, and the insightful observations of same-sex relationships in Nigeria, a similarity of the stories is their sad, melancholic endings. The relationships, no matter how beautiful they may have started, end with the men parting ways when the story concludes. Each one affirms the futility many have associated with queer relationships in countries where homosexuality is criminalised (in Nigeria, the jail term is up to 14 years). Happy endings for such relationships seem impossible.

But Ifeakandu believes that happy



endings are possible, even in societies like Nigeria. Talking to *The Continent* via phone from Enugu in the country's south-east, he says the bitter endings of his stories are reflections of his state of mind when he wrote them. "I was doing my Master's at the time and felt content with



**Arinze
Ifeakandu.**
Photo: Bec
Stupak Diop

my friendships. But there was something missing and there was a bit of sadness in my life.”

And his mind imagined places where things could be different: “I kept thinking if I lived in a freer society, a society that did not proscribe my very existence, making it almost impossible to have meaningful and wholesome connections with other boys like me, that my life would be easier, and that love would be more positive and more filling.”

It took Ifeakandu leaving the country and returning for visits to gain a better perspective. He observed that some queer people were “making it work” despite the difficulties. “So I think if I wrote some of those stories today, the outcome may be different.”

In 2017 there weren’t many Nigerian writers writing stories with queer characters. In popular representations of gay men in the country’s media, especially in Nollywood, their existence was to serve

as a cautionary tale. The crude depictions saw gay men as degenerates of society — using diabolic means to groom other men into homosexuality. But in Ifeakandu’s tales, they are just men who fall in love and have to deal with the complexities that come with navigating a relationship they know their families and society would not approve of.

Ifeakandu, like most young Nigerian men, did not grow up with representations of queer desires in popular images. His storytelling is born from a desire to correct that. “I remember I began to write queer stories because I wanted to see the kind of love I dreamed of. I was almost by myself when it came to being queer as a young boy. So for me, there was a sort of loneliness.”

In *Where the Heart Sleeps*, a middle-aged queer man who’s had to participate in a heterosexual marriage and raise a family finds love with a young man much later in life. The story focuses on the effect on his family of his decision to follow his desires. And this is another boundary being pushed — stories of queer men rarely consider those who are advanced in age. These are men who lived in a world even less accepting of homosexuality, and societal pressure pushed them into marriage to women. Men of that generation face a particular kind of loneliness.

Stories like this have given Ifeakandu great success. But it’s not the critical acclaim that gives him a sense of fulfilment. It’s “people from across the world sending me messages saying they found company in the stories”. ■

Davido seeks upliftment through dance

The artist's latest album packs some uptempo sounds, but lacks a cutting edge



Wilfred Okiche

Nigerian superstar Davido makes a hotly anticipated return to performing and promoting new music with *Timeless*, his fourth studio album.

Davido has been in the forefront of artists spreading the message of Nigerian pop music to an ever-expanding global audience. He suffered personal tragedy late last year when his toddler son died. But people who have come to *Timeless* looking

for the usually expressive Davido – he once made a hit out of a thinly veiled record dissing Burna Boy – to share some of his grief in his music might be surprised by his insistence on seeking upliftment with ebullient dance tunes.

Timeless' lead single, *Unavailable*, feels like Davido's riposte to fans who have felt entitled to some kind of emotional performance from him. In a few words and a repetitive chant that practically screams massive hit, Davido makes it clear that regardless of the apparent transparency with which he carries himself publicly, he remains entitled to his privacy.

Recorded alongside South African act Musa Keys, *Unavailable* is in retrospect the ideal comeback song as it also gives a taste of what the rest of *Timeless* is about. Davido is attuned to what is hot, what is of the moment, and packs the record with lively uptempo tracks that are designed to send people to the dancefloor.

The overall sound of *Timeless* is the speaker-thumping, bass-shifting marriage between Afrobeats and amapiano that has been fruitful for many a popstar from the west to the south of the continent.

Yet even charisma isn't enough to stave off the monotony of sound that begins to creep into the listening experience. It is quite clear that *Timeless* does not have the curiosity of *A Good Time*, Davido's most sonically interesting body of work. Where he used to be at the cutting edge, deciding which direction pop music should go with records like *Aye*, *If* and *Fall*, on *Timeless*, he is playing catch-up. ■

Zambia's debt crisis not easy to solve

China holds the key as private creditors continue to frustrate President Hichilema's restructuring plans

Marisa Lourenço

Debt restructuring deals are never easy to negotiate. But in Zambia's case, the excitement that accompanied President Hakainde Hichilema's electoral victory in August 2021 came with confidence that the country's economic woes would soon be behind it. The kwacha surged to become the best-performing currency in sub-Saharan Africa in 2022, and mining firms tentatively re-engaged, having distanced themselves from the Edgar Lungu administration, from 2015 to 2021.

The International Monetary Fund even disbursed \$1.3-billion in special drawing rights and opened an office in the capital Lusaka. This is after repeatedly denying support to the previous administration – even during the coronavirus pandemic, when almost all low-income countries received debt relief.

But now it has been more than two years since the Zambian government

defaulted on its debt repayments. And only in recent weeks have murmurings that creditors will agree to make a deal carried weight – which, it should be emphasised, is different from an actual deal. That may only materialise in the second half of this year.

In early 2021, Zambia agreed to be a guinea pig for a new approach to tackle sovereign debt – the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatment, introduced at the end of 2020. The framework, in coordinating responses to sovereign debt problems, seeks to bring together members of the Paris Club – a group of established donor governments and Brazil, its only emerging-market member – with creditors outside of it. This includes governments like China, Kuwait, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which have increased their lending to low-income countries, and private creditors, which often make up a significant portion of loans provided.

The plan is for the framework to be followed by an IMF-supported reform programme. Countries that have defaulted are at high risk of doing so again, with restructuring deals providing only short-term relief and failing to consider how a country will recover to later service that same debt. IMF programmes help, so the logic goes, because not only do they provide emergency funding, but encourage responsible spending.

It's a nice idea, but getting private creditors to participate is tricky, because they lack the inclination to negotiate



Debt woes:
President Hakainde Hichilema hopes for a deal. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP via Getty Images

under the same terms as bilateral lenders. Typically, repayment of government loans can be deferred without too much fuss, but private creditors prefer to recoup their loans sooner, even at a loss (known as a haircut). Unfortunately, the framework lacks a mechanism to force reluctant parties to the table.

And this is the problem Zambia is facing. A chunk of its debt is owed to private creditors, and not all parties will cooperate. Without a deal, it cannot unlock the promised IMF-support reform programme of \$1.4-billion. It also cannot untangle itself from the framework.

Given that most of Zambia's private creditors are Chinese, a way out is for China to assume responsibility for their loans and then to negotiate those alongside its own debt with bilateral creditors. This is likely what the IMF is

putting pressure on China to do.

It is easy to criticise Hichilema's handling of the debt crisis. In fairness, he is dealing with a problem he did not create. His pivot towards the US may seem odd at this juncture, but his administration maintains positive relations with China. It received Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei at State House in March, and a Chinese consortium will spend \$650-million to upgrade a road.

Meanwhile, participating in the framework was not his doing. And while austerity measures mean less government support for struggling Zambians, it is the quickest way to clinch further IMF support, itself the quickest way to relieve cash flow problems. ■

Marisa Lourenço is a political analyst in Johannesburg, South Africa

THE QUIZ

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10

"Cullinan Diamond? No, I'm the Star of Africa."



- 1_ What is the main river of the Nairobi River Basin?
- 2_ What is Zimbabwe's most populous city?
- 3_ Which country is the Cullinan Diamond, also known as the "Star of Africa", from?
- 4_ Kamerun was which European empire's colony?
- 5_ What is the largest Egyptian pyramid called?
- 6_ Which country does Napoli football player Victor Osimhen represent?
- 7_ After Didier Drogba, who was named captain of the Ivorian national football team?
- 8_ What is the capital city of Gambia?
- 9_ What is Sierra Leone's official language?
- 10_ The Kalahari (pictured) is Africa's third largest desert. True or false?

HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

It is only May, dear readers, and already we are feeling the need for a holiday. A long one, untroubled by the threat of conflict or civil war, and where the only revolution in sight is the slow rotation of the cocktail umbrella in my piña colada.

What would a holiday look like for our overworked and underpaid leaders? What do they do when they need to take a break from breaking things? After all, it's not easy pretending to care all the time; or dealing with an ungrateful populace that is constantly demanding basic services (a terrible name, by the way: if they were so basic, why are they so hard to provide?). Nevermind those pesky journalists with their never-ending questions.

Personally, I like to imagine our dear leaders all taking a holiday together, so that they can swap war stories – literal war stories, in some cases – with people who can actually relate. Maybe they could go for a retreat at the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa. I'm thinking days spent playing jolly games like “chase the human rights activist” and nights spent toasting marshmallows over the bonfire of potentially incriminating documents.

Or perhaps they could take a little cruise along this continent's glorious coastline. Might I suggest the *Lady R*, the Russian ship that docked recently in South Africa? It comes with sea views and its own supply of weapons and ammunition. Just don't ask where the guns came from.

But our leaders don't take holidays.

They are a hard-working bunch, and when they travel it is almost always for work purposes – although, as always, it can be hard to tell whether they are working for us or working for themselves. As novelist Dinaw Mengistu once wrote, “there is nothing more restless than men in power”.

Take Nigeria's President-Elect, Bola Tinubu, who

this week has flown to Europe for a “working visit”. According to his office, he will also use the trip to “finetune the transition plans and programmes, and his policy options with some of his key aides without unnecessary pressures and distractions”.

Just maybe, if Nigeria is too full of “unnecessary pressure and distractions”, he should not have put himself forward

No rest for the wicked



CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Samira Sawlani

as its president.

Tinubu's soon-to-be predecessor Muhammadu Buhari is also in Europe, although the residents of the small island nation that he is visiting may object to that geographical categorisation. President Buhari used the opportunity of Chazza's coronation last week to get some dental work done, because apparently there are no dentists in Nigeria. None. Zero. He has had to extend his stay in the United Kingdom by a week to complete the work. At least he'll have something to smile about when he leaves office in a few weeks.

There is no rest either for our indefatigable Coupdashians, who are as busy as ever. As usual, we can barely keep up. Mali's military government has announced that a referendum on adopting a new constitution will be held next month, which may eventually pave the way for civilian rule.

And in Guinea, civil society-led demonstrations against the generals – demanding a release of all political prisoners, the return to civilian rule and the lifting of a ban on political protests – were met with a violent response. Organisers say that seven people were killed. Three detained opposition leaders, who had been held for months without trial, have now been released.

While some are choosing not to take breaks, others can't catch one. Over 400 people have been confirmed dead in the Democratic Republic of Congo following flooding in South Kivu province. The United Nations says more than 5,000



Life's a beach: Nigeria boasts some of the world's most beautiful coastline, but its leaders would rather escape to Europe. Photo: Okun Folu

people are still missing while 1,200 homes have been destroyed. The government declared a national day of mourning.

And the events in Sudan over the last few weeks are what can best be described as a living nightmare. Two warring armies are fighting for power, and civilians are collateral damage. Every day, Sudanese are sharing stories of loss, sadness, grief and anger. In circumstances like these, there can be no holiday; there is no escape.

But there are also stories of hope and kindness: the organising of mutual aid, the neighbourhood resistance committees providing supplies and supporting people to leave, the many people in the diaspora raising awareness about what is going on. While there is little rest, these provide moments of respite. ■

Nothing golden about Eswatini's royal rule

Africa's last absolute monarchy turns 50 this year, but it also marks half a century of repression

Mlamuli Gumedze

Fifty years ago King Sobhuza II, father to the current king of Eswatini, abolished the constitution and vested all power in himself. In his infamous 1973 decree, all political parties were banned, trade unions dissolved and politically motivated gatherings prohibited. The people of Eswatini have been fighting for their freedom ever since.

As the country prepares to hold parliamentary elections in September, against a backdrop of economic decline and a political crisis, once again political parties will not be allowed to stand. There is every chance of violence before and at the polls. An obstinate king who fears organised political opposition and has sought to demonise his critics as “dagga [cannabis] smokers”, has not listened to calls for dialogue from the masses and the international community

but instead recently invested in weapons and armoured vehicles.

One of the main reasons for the political crisis is the refusal of King Mswati III to put his country before his own personal interests. While 70% of his subjects live in poverty, the king has bought his wives 19 custom-made Rolls-Royces and owns two private jets. The public anger this has generated has not given the king pause for thought. Instead, he has responded with brutal repression, with over 70 civilians killed and over 200 injured. Many more remain incarcerated, including two members of Parliament.

Mswati's brutal approach is one reason that young people have moved beyond seeking incremental improvements, the position of some older reformists, to demand the abolition of the monarchy.

“We organise for the overthrow of the regime,” says Mafafa Mabuza, president of the Ngwane National Liberatory Congress Youth League. As the battle lines are prepared, more bloodshed is inevitable unless the international community acts to restrain the last absolute monarch in Africa. ■



Mlamuli Gumedze is a youth activist and was formerly the president of the Swaziland National Union of Students. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa

THE BIG PICTURE

Fired up: Kenyan police during riots in Nairobi on 2 May as the opposition defied a police ban and staged new demonstrations over the cost of living crisis and last year's election results in which William Ruto won the presidency.

Photo: Luis Tato/AFP via Getty Images



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