

The Continent

**Nigeria's
security is in
shambles**



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2025
CND



COVER Since the abduction of the Chibok girls in 2014, more than 1,700 school girls have been kidnapped by militant groups in Nigeria. This week, 26 girls were taken in Kebbi State in the northwest of the country. In the same week, 10 people were abducted from a church in Kwara State, and a top military general was killed by insurgents (p7). Yet these are not isolated incidents – Nigeria’s security situation has been spiralling for decades, on the back of chronic underfunding, poor coordination between state and local authorities, and corruption. The result is hydra-headed crisis – part criminal enterprise, part terrorism, and part vigilante response to the government’s own failings (p16)

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

NIGERIA

Judge balks at death sentence for Biafra leader

Separatist leader Nnamdi Kanu has been found guilty of terrorism and treason. He's been given four life sentences by a Nigerian court in Abuja at the end of a decade-long legal case. The prosecution had called for the death penalty but Judge James Omotosho said executions were now "frowned upon", the *BBC* reports. In his ruling, the judge said Kanu had made a series of broadcasts to incite violence as part of his



PHOTO: MARCO LONGARI/AFP

Inciteful: Separatist leader Nnamdi Kanu has been given four life sentences for treason.

campaign for a separate state in southeast Nigeria, known as Biafra.

KENYA

Ruto regime recruited troll army to fight youth

Kenyan authorities paid networks of online trolls to threaten and intimidate young protesters during the youth-led demonstrations of 2024 and 2025, a new Amnesty International report shows. State agencies also used surveillance and disinformation to target organisers of the protests, who used social media platforms to mobilise. Young women and LGBTQIA+ activists were disproportionately targeted with misogynistic and homophobic comments, as well as with pornographic deepfakes.

COTE D'IVOIRE

Epstein's greasy prints all over Big Brother deal

New documents show the late Jeffrey Epstein, a convicted paedophile, played a role in a deal between Israel and Côte d'Ivoire. Epstein helped former Israeli defence minister Ehud Barak pitch a plan in 2012 for mass surveillance of Ivorian phone and internet data, *DropSite* reveals. The proposal later evolved into a formal 2014 security agreement between the two countries. President Alassane Ouattara has since tightened his grip on power. Last month he won a fourth term in office, in defiance of constitutional term limits.



RWANDA

Arsenal calls full time on sportswashing

English Premier League club Arsenal has “mutually agreed” to conclude its six-year partnership with Visit Rwanda by June 2026. The partnership “had achieved its goals” of promoting tourism and conservation in Rwanda, the state-run *The New Times* reports. The agreement has faced growing scrutiny amid escalating violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rwanda has been accused of backing M23 rebels in the region, which President Paul Kagame denies. In February, the DRC appealed to Arsenal, Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich to end their “blood-stained” deals with Rwanda.

GUINEA-BISSAU

Voting kicks off this weekend

Guinea-Bissau votes on Sunday with President Umaro Sissoco Embaló facing a stronger-than-expected challenge from Fernando Dias. The latter has drawn large crowds with promises of security, reconciliation, and keeping the military out of politics. He is backed by former prime minister Domingos Simões Pereira, who narrowly lost to Embaló in 2019 but was disqualified this year for filing his papers late. Pereira’s exclusion means this is the first election without a candidate from the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde, breaking the party’s post-independence dominance.

SOMALIA

Into the e-visa breach

Somalia's Immigration and Citizenship Agency has confirmed that hackers breached its electronic visa system, exposing travellers' sensitive data. According to reporting by *Al Jazeera*, the admission follows warnings from the United States and United Kingdom, with the US Embassy estimating up to 35,000 people may be affected. The agency says it has launched an investigation; meanwhile, it quietly shifted the e-visa platform to a new website. Earlier, the agency's director-general had dismissed media reports of the hack as "co-ordinated misinformation campaigns" intended to undermine state institutions.

TANZANIA

Suluhu's kitchen cabinet: We are family

Tanzanian President Samia Suluhu Hassan has appointed her daughter and son-in-law to key government posts in a major cabinet reshuffle, *Daily Nation* reports. Wanu Hafidh Ameir becomes deputy minister of education and her husband, Mohamed Mchengera, is now minister of health. The changes include 27 ministers and 29 deputies, with seven senior officials replaced. The cabinet also features Ridhiwani Kikwete, son of former president Jakaya Kikwete, as minister of public service management and good governance.

PHOTO: ICC-CPI



War crime charges: Janjaweed commander Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman.

SUDAN

Life term sought for Darfur génocidaire

Prosecutors at the International Criminal Court are seeking a life sentence for senior Janjaweed commander Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman, *Reuters* reports. The commander, commonly known as Ali Kushayb, was convicted of 27 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur two decades ago. Defence lawyers, maintaining he is a victim of mistaken identity, want a maximum seven-year term with time served. Victims' representatives say such a sentence would be far too low, given the scale and brutality of the crimes.

ALGERIA

Forest infernos rip through provinces

More than 22 forest fires across eight of Algeria's provinces have been raging for the past week, *Africanews* reports, with the central Tipaza province experiencing the worst of them. The fires have been fanned by strong, dry southern winds that have caused temperatures to soar. Authorities from the Civil Defence say they have the outbreak under control. Algeria has suffered from drought for six years – last summer, the northern parts of the country experienced a record heatwave, with temperatures reaching 48°C.

ETHIOPIA

Health teams rush to quell Marburg outbreak

Three people in Ethiopia have died from Marburg virus, prompting urgent regional containment efforts, *The Telegraph* reports. Health officials have isolated more than 100 contacts and are monitoring them closely. South Sudan has also issued advisories. More suspected deaths are being investigated. Authorities first detected the haemorrhagic virus in the country's south last week and activated national emergency response centres. International teams from the World Health Organisation and Africa CDC are assisting with containment.

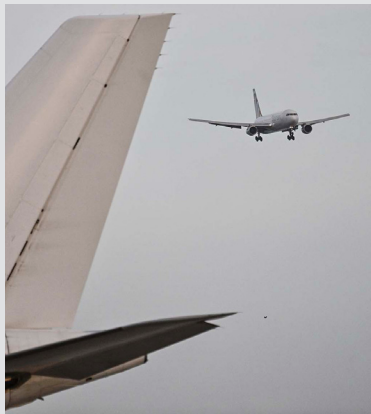


PHOTO: JUAN BARRETO/AFP

Human air-traffic: Eswatini has taken in 15 deportees from the United States so far.

ESWATINI

Yes we took US blood money, says minister

Eswatini has confirmed receiving more than \$5-million from the United States to accept migrants expelled under Washington's third-country deportation programme, *The Guardian* reports. Finance Minister Neal Rijkenberg admitted to Parliament that the payment was linked to US deportees, after Human Rights Watch revealed the deal. Eswatini has taken in 15 men so far, some labelled violent offenders by the US, and is holding them without charge in a maximum-security prison. Lawyers and civil-society groups have taken to court to challenge the detentions.

NEWS

NIGERIA

Top general executed in Islamic State catch-and-kill

‘Irreparable damage’ to Nigerian army morale, says analyst.

ABDULRASHEED HAMMAD IN ABUJA

MILITANTS FROM Islamic State West Africa Province say they captured and executed Nigerian Brigadier General Musa Uba after ambushing a military convoy in Borno State.

According to local media reports, the attack happened last week near Wajiroko village as troops were transporting military equipment. The Islamic State offshoot claimed responsibility for the ambush through its Amaq propaganda channel. The group said it had executed the brigade commander after interrogating him.

Nigeria’s army initially denied the claim, calling reports of Uba’s capture “fake narratives”. Spokesperson Onyechi Anele dismissed the abduction report, insisting the brigadier general had led his men through the ambush “with superior firepower”.

President Bola Tinubu has since confirmed the incident, sending his condolences to the military and praising the fallen soldiers and Uba for “paying the ultimate price” while defending the country.

The killing of a senior Nigerian army officer marks a new and troubling phase in the 16-year conflict against insurgents in the region. Uba, the commander of Task Force Brigade 25, is the highest-ranking officer the group is known to have captured and executed.

Until now, the group’s operations have largely focused on ambushes, raids on remote bases, attacks on military convoys, and assaults targeting lower-ranking personnel. These actions aimed to disrupt military logistics and seize weapons but they stopped short of directly targeting top command figures.

The killing marks a new and troubling phase in the 16-year conflict against insurgents.

Security expert Timothy Avele told *The Continent* the capture and killing of Uba has done “irreparable damage” to the military’s morale, adding that the incident has also affected public confidence.

In Avele’s view, the military high command “has to initiate a new engagement strategy immediately”. ■

CLIMATE

Hope percolates despite fossil foolishness

Oil bullies force COP30 to walk back plans for a roadmap that would phase out fossil fuel. But justice is back on the agenda.

CHRISTINE MUNGAI

TWO YEARS ago, negotiators at COP28 in Dubai agreed to “transition away from fossil fuels”. Now, that language has been dropped from the final proposal emerging from the COP30 summit in Belém, Brazil, underscoring deep divisions over the future of global energy.

The draft, released on Friday by the Brazilian presidency, removes proposals for a roadmap to phase out fossil fuels.

Negotiators from dozens of countries had pushed to retain these proposals. But resistance from Saudi Arabia and other major oil-producing countries prevailed.

Still, African negotiators leave the summit emphasising progress in other areas. During COP30, Lesotho, Nigeria, South Africa, and Togo joined a flagship initiative to strengthen national climate-finance planning. This would replace today’s project-by-project funding with co-ordinated, long-term investment strategies, packaged as grants, not loans.

Lavender Namdiero of African Futures Lab stressed this was not about charity – it was about justice. “Negotiators count



PHOTO: PABLO PORCUNCUILA /AFP

Co-sign: “The future belongs to the people.”

carbon, while communities are counting loss, grief, and unpaid care,” Namdiero told *The Continent*. “These are not abstractions: they are reparations issues.”

This framing carried into Africa’s broader demands at the summit: rapid, predictable adaptation finance delivered as grants; protection of forests; resilient food systems; and faster disbursements from the Loss and Damage Fund to communities already suffering climate-driven devastation.

Namdiero added: “Even when the word ‘reparations’ isn’t spoken, its meaning is present everywhere – in demands for dignity, protection, recognition, and repair.”

COP31 will be held in Türkiye and COP32 in Ethiopia. ■

CHAD

When the well runs dry

As the water evaporates in their overheated world, crop farmers and livestock herders are spilling blood instead.

MAHAMAT SALEH IN N'DJAMENA

AT LEAST 26 people were injured last week when a dispute about a well turned violent in Gskoro, a rural community north of Mao in western Chad. This confrontation was just the latest in a growing wave of deadly conflicts between farmers and herders over such water points, which serve as critical lifelines for both communities. Less than two weeks earlier, another fight over a well in a neighbouring province left about 30 people dead.

The violence has provoked criticism of the government. Senator Albert Pahimi Padacké accused authorities of ignoring repeated warnings, arguing the government “sees nothing and says nothing, showing ... blindness in the face of the people’s suffering.”

Further south, fighting between farming and herding communities earlier this month in Babalao killed four people and displaced several others who were forced to flee to nearby villages. Senior provincial officials travelled to the affected area shortly afterwards to reinforce security and encourage residents to return.



PHOTO: AMAURY HAUCHARD/AFP

Precious cargo: A trader leads his cart, carrying water supplies, to Ouaddai in eastern Chad.

That same day, a separate clash was reported in Ngoura, southern Chad, which left 33 people dead. That confrontation, also sparked by competing claims to an old well, left dozens of people injured. Some of them were taken to hospitals in the capital, N'Djamena.

These incidents share a common trigger: increasingly strained access to land and water. Analysts warn that as rainfall becomes more erratic and pastoral routes narrow, disputes over basic resources are escalating faster than authorities can mediate them. Local leaders are urging the government to prioritise long-term water management and boost security in the area to prevent further violence. ■

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GHANA

The cedi is back in business! (Do not ask why and do not say how)

Mahama's gold monopoly is stabilising the economy by cannibalising the environment.

DELALI ADOGLA-BESSA AND OBREMPONG YAW AMPOFO IN TARKWA

GHANA'S gold trade – long a lucrative if chaotic business – changed seven months ago when President John Mahama's government created GoldBod. This parastatal is now the only legal exporter of artisanally mined gold in the country.

In trading towns like Tarkwa in southwest Ghana, its impact has been immediate. "We can go a month without buying any gold here," Lord Koomson* told *The Continent*. In the past, his business thrived in the old, unregulated system.

Koomson's struggle proves a common suspicion: much of the unlicensed mining in Ghana, known as "galamsey", looked artisanal but was actually funded by organised foreign syndicates. "The

Indians helped a lot of the buyers," Koomson said. "But all of a sudden, the state said foreigners should not be involved in the gold trade, so they had to leave with their money."

Without that funding, buyers like Komsoon who purchased gold from both illegal and illegal miners have struggled to stay afloat.

To ask or not to ask

Even though the GoldBod monopoly disrupted a part of that chain, transactions largely continue much as before. *The Continent* observed one such transaction: a miner brought in a few grams of a mercury-gold amalgam ball. It was heated to expel the mercury and weighed before price negotiations began.



PHOTO: REUTERS/ZOHRA BENSMIRA

Ore what? An artisanal miner hauls rocks from an unlicensed mine at Nsuaem Top in Ghana.

No questions were asked about its source.

Buyers who want to remain eligible to sell to GoldBod must record the source of the gold, but compliance is uneven. Koomson admitted he often cuts corners when he's desperate and that traders who ask questions only gain a bad reputation with their suppliers in the town. "When you bring the gold, I am supposed to note where the gold is coming from and the supplier's national identification number but I sometimes make up the data," he said.

Another Tarkwa buyer, Andy Boateng* keeps his business steady with his "don't ask, don't tell" approach. "If I ask too many questions, suppliers won't set foot in here again. Even if you steal gold, this is a gold-buying office. I am not going to investigate where you got it from," he admitted. He's just as indiscriminate with who he sells to. "I sell to anybody who brings money," he told *The Continent*.

Even though it hasn't eradicated illicit gold trade, GoldBod is delivering one major result: rescuing Ghana's economy from freefall. The agency exported more than 81,000kg of gold from artisanal miners by the end of October, taking advantage of historically high gold prices. This earned the country \$8-billion and stabilised the local currency. The Ghanaian cedi, which was ranked as the world's worst-performing currency under the previous administration, has gained more than 20% against the dollar this year.

An ounce of gold sold for \$1,400 more this year compared to 2024, driven by

wealthy investors and central banks who are wary of lending money to the United States government and view gold as the safer option.

Ghana's government is leaning into that boom and appears to have accepted the environmental ruin inherent in small-scale mining, at least in the short term. "It's our land that is being destroyed, so let us get the benefit of it, instead of foreign traders," Mahama said in September.

"It's our land that is being destroyed, so let us get the benefit of it, instead of foreign traders."

This trade-off alarms environmental activists like lawyer Awula Serwah, co-ordinator of the Eco-Conscious Citizens environmentalist group. "When you add everything up, it is not worth it at all," Serwah said. "The health [costs] will far surpass whatever gains they have made from continuing with illegal mining."

GoldBod insists that it is not buying from illegal miners. But as the traders in Tarkwa show, documents are easily falsified with no consequence. The agency promises stricter tracing controls, without offering details on exactly how this will be implemented. "Rest assured that every gram of gold will be traced," Goldbod spokesperson Prince Minkah told *The Continent*. ■

*Names have been changed because the sources requested anonymity to allow them to speak freely

FEATURE

Be kind, unwind: VHS tapes are weaving magic

Discarded video cassettes can be woven into something beautiful. The same can't be said for memory sticks.



ALL PHOTOS: PIERRA NYARUAI

PIERRA NYARUAI IN NAKURU

AT GIOTO dumpsite on the outskirts of Nakuru, Rahab Njeri and her colleagues – Grace Nyambura and her cousin, also named Grace Nyambura – bend over a mound of waste. They are sorting through a bale of discarded items in search of old VHS cassettes. The women are weavers who will make kiondos from

the black magnetic tape in the cassettes.

Traditionally, Kenya's kiondos – hand-woven bags – are made from sisal. But the VHS tapes that reach Gioto from decluttered homes, donation drives, and second-hand mitumba “miscellaneous” bales now supply an unlikely substitute. The bales, sourced locally or imported, contain all manner of unsorted items that retailers spill onto open racks,

hoping buyers will spot something valuable. Most do not. They become dead stock – another word for trash – and eventually end up here.

The tapes represent a technology that has outlived its usefulness in its original form. The VCRs that once played them are long gone, replaced by DVDs, then streaming services. But the tapes themselves persist, their plastic casings and magnetic film designed to last far longer than their cultural relevance.

The owner of one VHS shop on Nakuru's Kanu Street lets *The Continent* see hundreds of tapes gathering dust on shelves of his once popular video library. "I loved this shop. I ran it from the late 1980s all through the 2000s," says the owner, who didn't want to give his full name. "Now, I try to sell off [the

tapes] but no one wants them anymore. I don't want to throw them out just yet."

Meticulous work

Njeri and her colleagues have been crocheting since the year 2000. "We were taught by our mothers, using wooden crochet sticks and plastic bags. We just want to raise our children without begging or stealing," says Njeri.

However, Kenya's ban on single-use plastic in 2017 resulted in a shortage of their source material. They struggled until they discovered they could make bags from the film in old VHS tapes. The durability of the magnetic tape and slight sheen give the bags a distinctive appearance. Sometimes they weave in a discarded ribbon to give the bag's pattern contrast.





The work is meticulous, as VHS tapes are complex e-waste artefacts. Each cassette comprises a plastic casing housing the magnetic tape, as well as metal springs, screws, and felt pads. The tape must be carefully extracted from its casing, cut to workable lengths, and woven with other materials to create the bag's structure.

**Sometimes they weave
in a discarded ribbon
to give the bag's pattern
some contrast.**

Yet even as Goto's artisans repurpose the tape, the plastic casings and metal components remain, persisting in landfills for centuries and leaching chemicals into soil and water.

The women sell each bag for 500 Kenyan shillings (\$3.85). "We have been

considering going to local craft markets, but most of them charge a vending fee and we cannot afford those logistical costs," Njeri says.

Instead, they sell the bags directly to customers. Even that was a price that they fought to establish after years of exploitation. For a while, a middleman purchased their kiondos for 250 shillings and they heard he was reselling them in Nairobi at double the price. Online, similar products are retailing as upcycled handbags for as much as \$45.

Despite their hardship, the women here have created a network of mutual support in a place most people think of only as a dumpsite. But as yesterday's essential gadgets become today's waste, Goto's upcyclers now face a rising tide of devices too complex to dismantle and too toxic to reclaim. ■

REPORT

The kids are not all right: Inside Nigeria's security crisis

A decade on from Chibok more children are being kidnapped than ever before – except now it's strictly business.



PHOTO: AFP/BOKO HARAM

Taken: When Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in April 2014, the group claimed it had done so for ideological reasons, a violent rejection of Western education in Nigeria.

**ABDULRASHEED HAMMAD IN ABUJA
AND HUSSAIN WAHAB IN OYO**

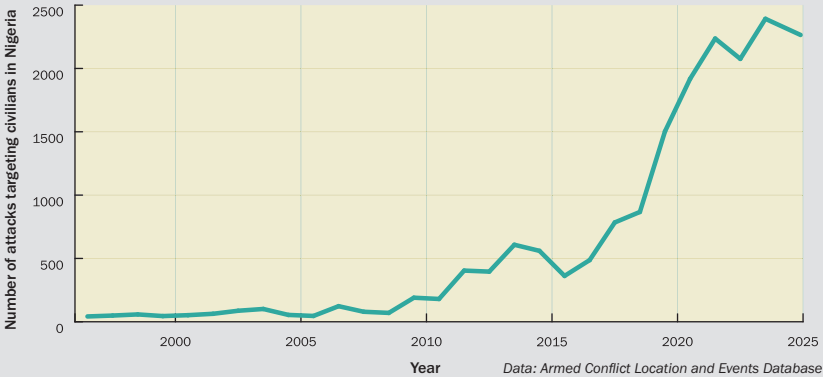
IN THE early hours of Monday morning, armed men stormed a secondary school in Maga town, in Kebbi State. They killed two security workers, forced their way into one of the school's hostels, and abducted at least 26 students.

The Nigerian army had received

intelligence of a possible attack. Yazid Abubakar Fakai, a relative to four of the abducted girls, told *The Continent* that soldiers visited the school the evening before the attack, took photographs, and remained on the premises until midnight. The bandits struck at about 4am, just hours after the soldiers left.

The Kebbi kidnapping happened the day after Nigerian Brigadier General

Civilians are increasingly under attack from various armed groups in Nigeria



Musa Uba was killed in an ambush, news that shocked the nation and went viral on social media. Less than 48 hours after the ambush, bandits killed three people and abducted at least 10 worshippers in Kwara State.

Yet, those 72 hours were not unusual in terms of Nigeria’s security situation. So far this year, Nigerians have experienced more than 2,300 attacks on civilians, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location and Events Database. That is an average of 50 attacks a week.

The security situation has been spiralling for decades, as Nigeria’s security apparatus became chronically underfunded, poorly co-ordinated between federal and state authorities, and significantly corrupt.

‘Soft targets’

Many of the violent actors in Nigeria work for local criminal enterprises, for whom abduction – like at the school in

Maga – has become a business strategy.

This is a shift from the factors that drove earlier mass abductions, including the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014, which gained international attention. At that time, the Boko Haram insurgents kidnapping schoolgirls were ideologically opposed to the pursuit of Western education.

Today’s kidnappers simply see schoolchildren as soft targets. Since Chibok, more than 1,700 girls have been abducted from their schools. Most of those taken in recent years were hostages held for ransom, according to security think-tank Enact.

In February 2018, 110 girls were taken from a school in Dapchi, Yobe State; more than 300 were abducted from Jangebe, Zamfara State in 2021. Other high-profile cases have been reported in Kaduna, Kebbi, and Niger states. Several incidents involved dozens to hundreds of girls abducted at once.

Girls in rural boarding schools are seen as even softer targets. The schools are often located in remote areas, guarded by unarmed or lightly armed night guards. The grim logic of the kidnappers relies on the fact that mass kidnappings of children spark outrage and deep communal heartache, pushing families and communities to raise large ransom payouts.

An Enact study outlines how the enterprise works. When captives are taken, the kidnappers quickly open ransom talks using burner phones and encrypted channels. In desperation, families pool money, sell belongings, or seek community contributions to meet the demands. In some cases, government agencies or trusted intermediaries step in to negotiate,

although this is rarely acknowledged publicly. Payments are typically made through informal networks: cash drop-offs, hawala transfers, or third-party couriers for anonymity and safety.

A moving target

Nigeria's insecurity situation is also becoming more complicated. More groups are joining the fray and old ones are morphing into deadlier entities, at the intersection of criminal enterprise, terrorism, and flawed responses to the government's own shortcomings.

The police and military are chronically understaffed and underequipped. They struggle to maintain presence or respond rapidly in vast rural areas where attacks are common. Local communities, unable to rely on the



PHOTO: KOLA SULAIMON/AFP

You're on your own: Understaffed police and military are ill-equipped to respond to kidnappings in the rural expanses targeted by opportunistic criminal and insurgent groups.



Lessons learned:

Classrooms are being emptied not just by the hostage-takers themselves, but by families unwilling to gamble on the hope that their children will be safe at school.

PHOTO: KOLA SULAIMON/AFP

official security forces, sometimes turn to vigilante self-defence groups, which has contributed to escalating violence in the country.

Long standing inter-community conflicts are also evolving into situations of violence for its own sake. Fulani groups, which initially made news only as actors in farmer-herder clashes, have coalesced into militia and sometimes merged into larger violent networks whose warfare is akin to organised crime. Yet, even before these mergers, the Global Terrorism Index ranked Fulani militia high among the deadliest non-state armed groups in the world.

The locus of violence is also evolving. Some of the Sahel's most active insurgent groups have spread into Nigeria's northwest. These include the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and factions of Boko Haram known collectively as the Islamic State West Africa Province.

In the northwest region kidnapping incidents surged between 2023 and 2025, reaching 716 recorded events.

Residents are so alarmed that some call for the Nigerian army – itself responsible for a significant amount of violence against civilians – to be given even more leeway in dealing with armed groups in this region. Colonel Abdullahi Gwandu, the chief security officer at Usmanu Danfodiyo University (formerly the University of Sokoto), told *The Continent* the northwest army division should be granted “full authority and resources” to crush armed groups before they strike.

Currently, the national army struggles to respond effectively. A Nigeria military unit that pursued Monday's abductors in Kebbi was ambushed. Several soldiers were injured and the kidnappers got away with all but two of the girls they had taken.

But the deeper solutions lie off the battlefield, says education expert Shadi Sabeh, who argues for curbing corruption in security spending to restore public confidence in government forces. He also calls for more investment into creating jobs and improving agriculture to reduce recruitment into banditry. ■

INVESTIGATION

NGO accused of mismanaging Chad's oldest national park

African Parks runs conservation sites all over the continent. Former staff describe the organisation's operations as a 'shitshow' of toxic mismanagement and lawlessness.

OLIVIER VAN BEEMEN

DAVID* was bewildered when he arrived at the staff base in Zakouma National Park earlier this year. His residence was a camp where Chadian workers slept outside on the ground and relieved themselves in the bushes because there were not enough toilets. He slept in a tent in which temperatures rose to 40°C

or 50°C. Chad's best-preserved nature reserve didn't resemble one of the "stunning conservation success stories in Africa", as *The New York Times* had once described it.

As he settled into the role, David's dismay grew. He says the vehicle fleet and equipment were poorly maintained or outdated. Rangers' motorcycles and equipment for monitoring critically

PHOTO: ZAKOUMA NATIONAL PARK



endangered black rhinos were often broken or malfunctioning.

Zakouma National Park is managed by African Parks, a South Africa-based NGO that runs 23 conservation reserves in 13 African countries. The organisation dismissed these complaints, saying the “facilities in Zakouma exceed comparable standards across Africa”. It also said breakdowns in its vehicle fleet were not “beyond the norm” and that it reviewed the functionality of wildlife-monitoring equipment every month.

In contrast, Chad’s government, which has a long-term conservation management contract with the NGO, did not think African Parks was running a tight ship. On 6 October, it expelled the organisation for alleged mismanagement and fraud.

But the N’Djamena government did not account for African Parks’s international allies. Its board includes former Ethiopian prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn and Britain’s Prince Harry. A week after the expulsion, the European Union ambassador to Chad threatened to withdraw \$23-million in conservation aid to the country. The EU provided more than a third of the \$67-million that African Parks says it has spent on Zakouma since 2010. The government made a U-turn and renewed the African Parks partnership on 17 October “in a spirit of dialogue and co-operation”.

Smoking guns

Interviews with six former African Parks staff – five of them managers –

confirm Chad had reason for concern. A former manager described African Parks’s management of Zakouma as “a shitshow”. All of them requested anonymity, fearing retaliation. Some filed formal complaints to African Parks headquarters in May and June, before they were fired or did not have their contracts renewed.

The internal complaints, reviewed for this investigation, describe extensive management failures and a hostile work environment in Zakouma. “Since I’ve been working here, it’s pretty much always been a mess. But the past nine months have been nothing short of dramatic,” said former manager Robin*.

The most serious allegations are related to poaching incidents, which began last November. By March, 12 giraffes, at least 12 buffalo and two black rhinos had been killed. Local authorities arrested two wildlife trackers employed by African Parks and held them in prison for two weeks. Their photo, captioned “alleged poachers”, remains online.

The former employees say African Parks set the trackers up for failure.

“They couldn’t communicate because both their walkie-talkies and the satellite connection were faulty. The management knew about this but did nothing,” says former manager Franck*. African Parks did not hire a lawyer to represent its detained employees.

The NGO dismissed Zakouma’s head of conservation, a biologist, after the poaching incidents. But the decision left some of its workers perplexed. “He served as a scapegoat,” says Robin, who



PHOTO: AFRICAN PARKS

argues that when management failures lead to poaching, the park director and the head of law enforcement bear ultimate responsibility.

The park's director, Frenchman Cyril Péliissier, appears to have been particularly divisive. "The unpredictable director considered the park his kingdom, with the head of law enforcement below him, faithfully carrying out his orders," says Louis*, another former manager.

Internal complaints even blamed Péliissier for the second major tragedy in Zakouma in the past 12 months: a plane crash that killed a South African pilot and a Chadian conservationist. Staffers said Péliissier regularly pressured pilots to fly, even in poor health and bad weather. In one of the internal complaints, a whistleblower reported witnessing the director say, "it will be your fault if a rhino is poached",

to dismiss a pilot's hesitancy.

Another allegation is that ivory went missing from African Parks' warehouse in Zakouma. Two former insiders said an inventory conducted by six people on 11 June found 15 tusks were missing. They provided messages from one of the auditors to back up this claim. But none of the auditors was from the Chadian government as should be the case. African Parks maintains that "there is no discrepancy in our ivory records in Zakouma National Park."

Zakouma just the latest flashpoint

"I see African Parks as a state within a state. You're on some kind of an island with a military structure," said Louis. This assessment echoes wider criticism that African Parks manages nature reserves using a "fortress conservation" model. Critics say it uses force to keep nearby communities out of the nature



Dangerous game:
Rangers patrol Zakouma National Park, on alert for signs of poacher activity in the reserve.

PHOTO: MARCO LONGARI/AFP

reserves it manages, even when they have historical claims to some of the gazetted land.

The NGO vigorously dismissed this characterisation in a statement, saying “64% of the areas it manages have people living in them and 90% of them allow some access to resources within, in line with local laws”. The NGO also said only four of 23 parks it managed were fully fenced and this was purely to prevent human-wildlife conflict.

In May, however, African Parks admitted that some of its staff committed violations against the Baka people who live near Odzala-Kokoua National Park in the Republic of the Congo, which it has managed for 15 years. This came after British human rights lawyers – hired by African Parks in reaction to a report by Survival International – investigated 21 separate incidents of alleged abuse. These included physical and sexual abuses such as rape, torture, unlawful killing, and arbitrary arrests

and detention. African Parks didn’t disclose which of the allegations had been proven or how many people they affected. The full report was submitted to its board and remains confidential.

Across Africa, the NGO manages more than 20-million hectares of land. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, and Malawi, many sources, including victims and alleged perpetrators, say human rights abuses have happened within areas managed by African Parks.

“In the park, there’s no room for human rights,” said a former African Parks ranger from the DRC. ■

**The names of former African Parks employees in this story are withheld to protect them from reprisals but are known to the editors of The Continent.*

The Zakouma findings in this story were first published by Follow the Money, an investigative outlet based in the Netherlands

PHOTO ESSAY

Resounding victory

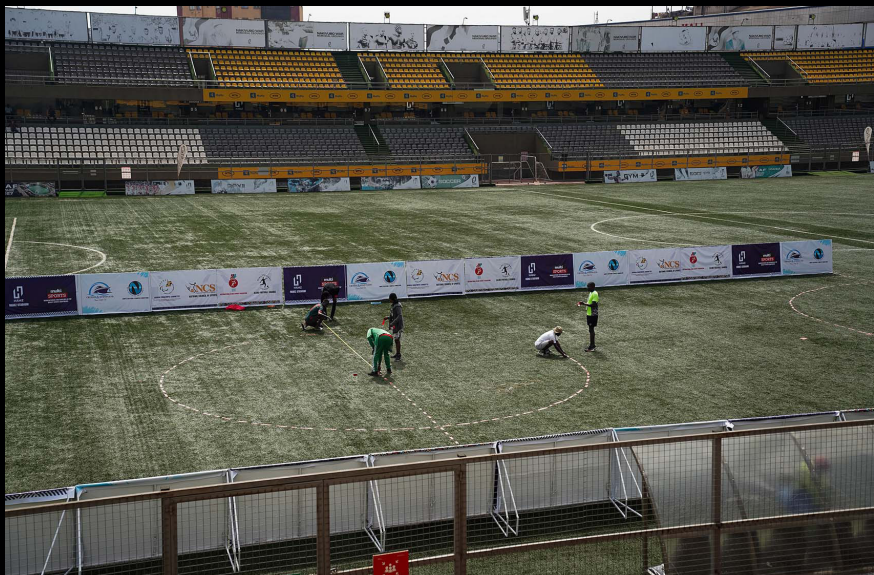
ALL PHOTOS: AMMAR YASSIR

FIVE years ago, South Sudan did not even have a blind football team. Last month – in their first international tournament ever – the team became champions of the African Blind Football Championship Division Two, after defeating hosts Uganda in the final. The win earns them promotion to Division One and puts them within reach of qualifying for the 2028 Paralympic Games in Los Angeles.

Blind football is a five-a-side game

played with a ball fitted with jingles so players can track its movement by sound. Outfield players, all of whom are blindfolded to ensure fairness, shout “voy” – Spanish for “I’m going” – to avoid collisions and signal their runs. Goalkeepers may be partially or fully sighted, and teams rely heavily on verbal guidance from the coach, a designated guide, and the goalkeeper.

Spectators must stay silent during play so athletes can hear the ball, the field, and each other. ■



Referees mark out the field with boundaries and orientation guides at Hamz Stadium in Kampala ahead of the international blind football championships in Uganda last month.



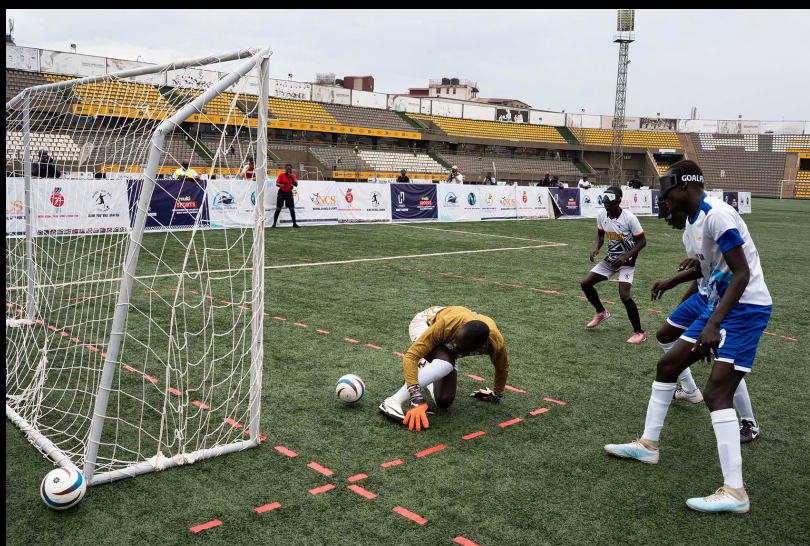
Players in repose in South Sudan's changing room, ahead of their first match against Uganda.



South Sudan's substitution line-up warms up with the assistant coach during a half-time break.



Martin Ladu, the captain of the South Sudanese side, receives a yellow card during the final in Kampala on 29 October.



Uganda goalkeeper Musaasizi Moses wards off a shot at goal during the final.



South Sudan players lift their captain as he raises the trophy in celebration after winning this year's final, which has launched them into African Blind Football's first division.



South Sudan's keeper, Charles 'Bepo' Sokiri, touches grass after the game. Bepo was named best goalkeeper of the championship.

DATA

Africans want a better seat at the table

THE G20 Summit is being held in Johannesburg, South Africa this weekend. It’s the first time an African country is hosting the world’s main forum for economic co-operation.

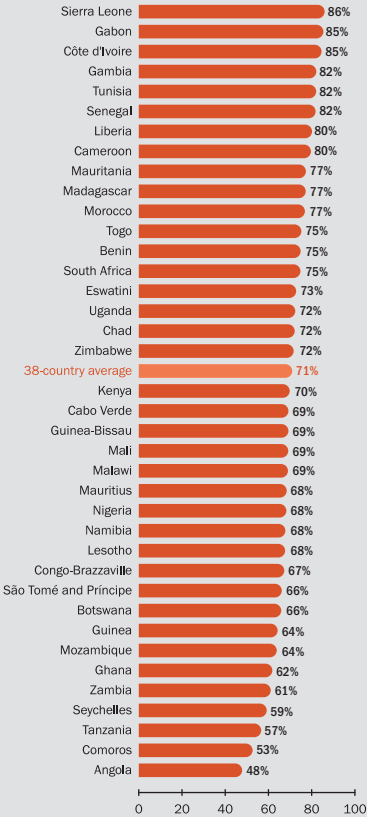
Do Africans think their voices are being heard in multilateral institutions? Across 38 countries we surveyed since the start of 2024, seven in 10 citizens (71%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that African countries should have greater influence in global bodies such as the United Nations.

The proportion of people with this sentiment ranges from fewer than half of Angolans (48%) to more than four fifths of Sierra Leoneans (86%), Gabonese (85%), Ivorians (85%), Gambians (82%), Tunisians (82%), and Senegalese (82%).

Modest majorities believe their country’s needs and interests are adequately recognised by the African Union (56%) and regional organisations (52%). Similar shares think their country is being positively influenced by the AU (55%) and regional blocs (54%).

Meanwhile, most Africans support non-alignment in the Russia-Ukraine war: Among the 70% who have heard of the conflict, 72% want their country to remain neutral. ■

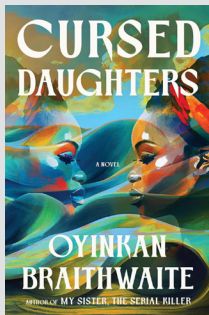
African countries should have more influence in international bodies | 38 African countries | 2024/2025





BOOK REVIEW

BY JACQUELINE NYATHI



Womanhood, in all its glory and shade

A spectacular novel of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters – and the legacies they bequeath.

A WOMAN sees a man when he comes to her village and she has to have him – so she does. Her father belatedly protects her virtue (or colludes with her) by forcing the man to marry her. Unfortunately, the man is already married and his wife puts a blood curse on the woman – and all her future female

descendants. Generations later, does the curse still hold?

The characters in Oyinkan Braithwaite's *Cursed Daughters* are vividly drawn, bold women. They are sometimes stubborn and wrong-headed (is that the curse again, or just how they are?), but relatable in their longing for love. These women are confused, unwise, bereaved, and passionate. Mostly, they're just doing their best. If they sometimes turn to the spiritual world in desperation (most of the novel's dark humour comes through the seemingly unhinged mamalawo), it's because events in their lives are sufficiently spooky. Where else can a mere human turn?

If this all sounds like some light fun, there's more to it. There's a dark thread running through the novel, as one character takes her own life. Braithwaite plumbs the depths of this character's thoughts during her depressive episodes in a way that feels very real. Reading these passages requires care: please be warned if you struggle with your own mental health.

Braithwaite's debut novel, *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, was impressive. The writing was eloquent and her work original, but in the end I found the story just ... good enough. *Cursed Daughters*, however, is glorious – a contender for my African novel of the year. ■

The Quiz

- 1 In which country can you visit the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove (pictured)?
- 2 Bassirou Diomaye Faye is president of which country?
- 3 For which national football team does Achraf Hakimi play?
- 4 What is the official currency of the DRC?
- 5 Which country is currently hosting the G20 Summit?
- 6 How many colours are there in Ethiopia's flag?
- 7 Which musical artist released *Jailer* and *Fire on the Mountain* in 2007?
- 8 What is the capital of Comoros?
- 9 Ousmane Sonko is the prime minister of which country?
- 10 What is the Central African Republic's former name?



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

"Aş a grove aficionado I actually *can* see the forest for the trees."

PHOTO: STEFAN HEUNIS/AFP

COMMENT

We're in a brave new world – even if our leaders are not

Starting this week, our guest columnist forges for hope in the underbrush of African politics



L. MUTHONI WANYEKI

IAN KHAMA, former president of Botswana, didn't mince his words when he slammed the recent performative, sham elections in Cameroon and Tanzania. "It is totally unacceptable when an African leader, to stay in power, will resort to killing his or her own people ... [and] will rig an election," he said, describing Tanzania's Samia Suluhu Hassan as "an illegitimate president".

In Cameroon, elections were held on 12 October. Paul Biya, the world's oldest president, claimed victory with 55% of the vote. That extended the 92-year-old's tenure for an eighth term. He reportedly had to send life-size puppets of him and his wife on the campaign trail because he was too frail to attend in person.

The country erupted in protest, predictably repressed by the security services. The violence adds another element to the insecurity already prevalent in Cameroon. There is ongoing Anglophone armed resistance in the northwest and southwest in the region separatists call Ambazonia, not to mention insecurity caused by Boko Haram in the north.

In Tanzania, the incumbent ran with no credible challenger. The main opposition leader was in jail on a treason charge, which his party describes as politically motivated. Turnout was low – observers noted voting lines of zero to only a dozen people. That did not stop reported ballot-stuffing by the ruling party, with the electoral commission announcing Suluhu had won with 98% of votes cast in her favour.

Then, unprecedented in Tanzania, protests erupted. Demonstrators targeted property linked to ruling party officials and celebrities seen as mouthpieces for the incumbent.

The security services struck back. Footage and photos leaking out of the country – despite an internet shutdown and phones being searched and purged of evidence – are shocking. Multiple reports describe mass graves being dug at night in public cemeteries, with staff coerced into the grisly work, and of cement factories and incinerators being used to dispose of bodies.

It is impossible to verify the number of deaths yet (the United Nations says the death toll is at least in the hundreds; civil society groups put it even higher).



Fist come, fist serve:
Atop a moving car in Yaoundé, Cameroon, a man roars his support of opposition candidate Issa Tchiroma, ahead of elections that returned 92-year-old Paul Biya to the presidency for an eighth term.

PHOTO: MARCO LONGARI/AFP

But the truth will always out and what is already in the public domain suffices. What's clear is that both elections were shams and that the protests are being shut down in a brutal fashion.

The emperors have no clothes. These electoral performances are incapable of establishing what they are supposed to: the social contract, through which citizens consent to surrender some personal sovereignty in exchange for collective sovereignty. That collective sovereignty is meant to be exercised by the executive in the public interest to deliver public goods and services and to act as the referee in the private market.

These past two years have seen protests by young men and women across the continent. Kenya. Mozambique. Morocco. Madagascar, where the entry into the fray of the security services, Sudan 2019-style, even sent the president into exile.

These protests have to do with anger – rage – at our broken social contracts. In Mozambique, Cameroon, and Tanzania, they came to a head to

say that electoral theatre will not cut it anymore. As a means of establishing the social contract, that's done. Over. Passé. In Kenya, Morocco, Madagascar, their message was that they expect actual delivery on the social contract. Occupying political office merely to gouge from the public purse without delivering public benefits is also done.

The young protesters also point to something that should have been obvious. The generation gap between the leaders and the led – most stark in Cameroon – will not be tolerated much longer. The expectations and worldview of the people they lead are increasingly incomprehensible to the leaders.

But the irony, satirical humour, and wit of young people across the continent don't only allow us to laugh at our leaders' absurdities: they provide hope. Gen Z is so far ahead. We are already in a brave new world. Our leaders simply do not get that yet. ■

Dr L. Muthoni Wanyeki is a Kenyan political scientist

Big Pic

Drip or drown: Models get ready backstage during Gambia International Fashion Week in Banjul last week. The annual creative showcase was established in 2023 by acclaimed Gambian designer Ismaila Jallow.

PHOTO: MUHAMADOU BITTAYE/AFP



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