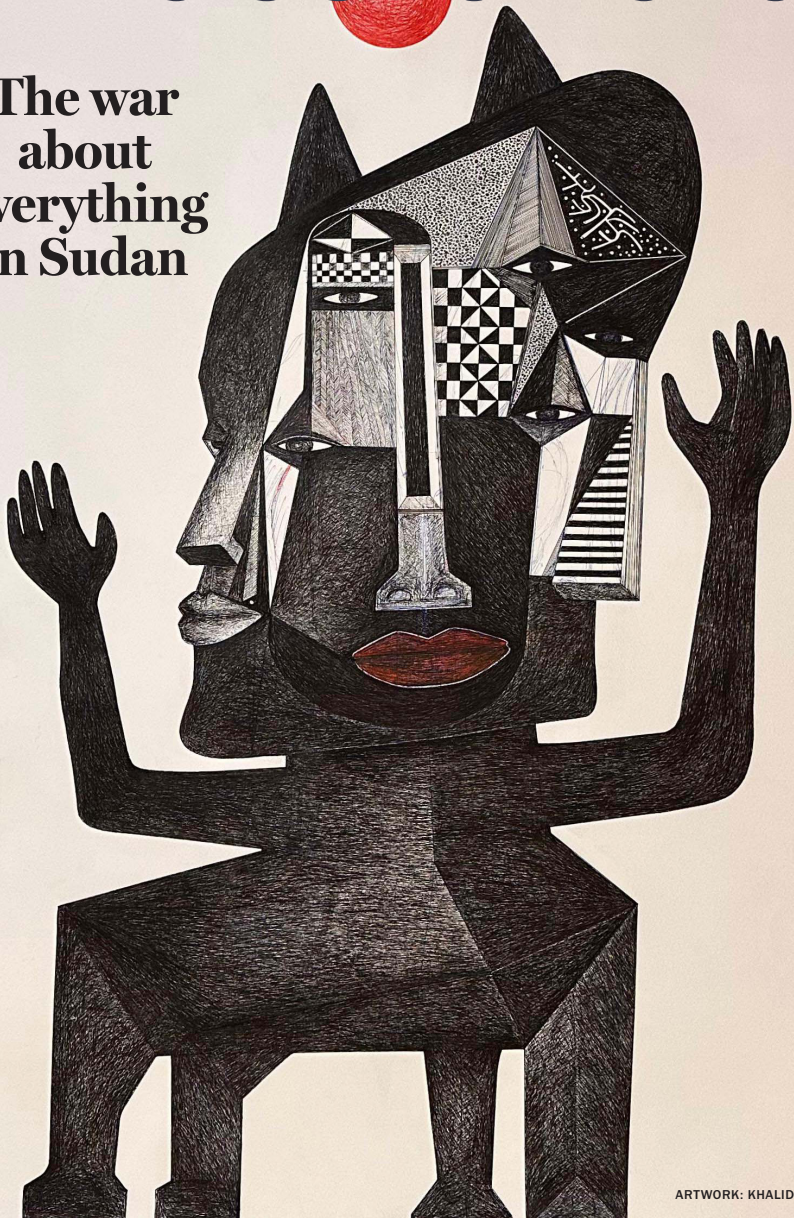


The Continent

The war
about
everything
in Sudan



ARTWORK: KHALID SHATTA



COVER The war in Sudan is often flattened with numbers, shorthand and labels that suggest it's both too much and too petty to resolve. Even the biggest recent international media effort to draw attention to it – a 10,000-word *Atlantic* cover story – called it “the war about nothing”, using both warlords and civilians as mere narrative devices in an argument for the liberal world order. Five Sudanese contributors to this issue offer a corrective: stories from the ground – their own and others’ – that invite us to see the contours of Sudan, while tackling the unenviable task of explaining what the war is about, *Read on Page 13*

Inside

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The Museum of Memory: Our world is littered with monuments. Some rewrite history. Others celebrate it. They all speak to power, or the lack thereof. This week we visit Bishoftu, Ethiopia, where a memorial honours the 157 people who died when Ethiopian Airlines Flight ET-302 crashed in March 2019. *Page 26*

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

ZAMBIA

Poisoned river so toxic it can melt human bones

An independent audit has found that a partial dam collapse at a Chinese state-owned mine in Zambia may have

released 1.5-million tonnes of toxic waste into the Kafue river. This is 30 times more than what was reported by the company and by the government itself. The spill has reportedly made the river so acidic it can dissolve human bones, according to *Semafor*.



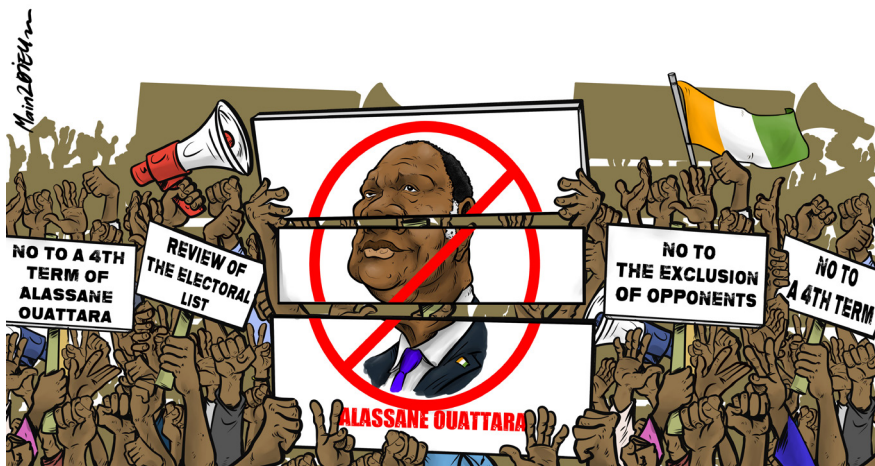
It's bigger than you think: With Africa misrepresented in the maps imposed on us, The Continent team has taken from the best of cartography and created a new world map.

MAPS

Cartographers assemble! We're redrawing the map

The African Union has endorsed a campaign to replace the Mercator projection – which distorts Africa's size – with a map showing countries' true

proportions, *Reuters* reports. The 16th century projection enlarges regions near the poles and shrinks Africa. AU deputy chair Selma Haddadi said this fosters perceptions of Africa as “marginal”, shaping global policies. The Correct The Map campaign urges the adoption of the 2018 Equal Earth projection.



After Côte d'Ivoire's President Alassane Ouattara said he fancied being his own successor, thousands marched in Abidjan against his bid for a fourth term, demanding opposition leaders be added to the ballot.

CAMEROON

So how many dimes is a Macron mea culpa worth?

France's President Emmanuel Macron has acknowledged atrocities committed by French forces during and after Cameroon's independence struggle, *Business Insider Africa* reports. A new study details mass imprisonment, destruction of villages and the use of militias to suppress dissent between 1945 and 1971. Tens of thousands died and hundreds of thousands were held in camps. The admission comes amid growing calls for France to confront its colonial past. But Macron did not offer an apology or reparations, leaving the gesture symbolic at best, and largely empty.

RWANDA

Masai Ujiri all in on Kigali sports-washing

Former Toronto Raptors exec Masai Ujiri has opened Zaria Court, a \$26-million sports-themed hotel in Kigali, a move seen as part of Rwanda's "sports diplomacy" push. Ujiri's Zaria Group plans at least four more African properties anchored by sports and performance arenas. The 80-room hotel includes a 2,000-seat basketball and concert arena, football pitches, and other facilities, *Semafor* reports. Ujiri says the plans aim to serve Africa's growing sports and entertainment market while tapping into the continent's expanding hospitality industry.

MALI

Junta rounds up soldiers sick of Russian faves

At least 20 soldiers have been arrested in Mali over an alleged plot to destabilise the ruling junta. The arrested included General Abass Dembélé, a former governor, and a French national accused of working for France's intelligence services. The arrests come as discontent grows within Mali's military amid claims Russian mercenaries are getting preferential treatment over the country's troops. Malian sociologist Oumar Maiga told *AFP* the purge was "proof the officers are struggling to control the situation. There are grumbings within the army's ranks."

SOUTH AFRICA

Legal loophole won't let late Lungu linger longer

A South African court says Edgar Lungu must be buried in Zambia, despite his family's wishes. Lungu, who was Zambia's president from 2015 to 2021, died in South Africa on 5 June while receiving medical treatment. His family had hoped SA's legal framework would support a private burial in Johannesburg, as Zambia's government pushed for a state funeral in Lusaka. But the court said state rights outweighed family preferences. His family plans to appeal the ruling, according to the *BBC*.



PHOTO: AFP

Prime stake: Succès Masra was prime minister of Chad's transitional government from 1 January to 22 March 2024.

CHAD

Déby nemesis jailed for stirring up violence

Chad's former prime minister, opposition leader Succès Masra, has been sentenced to 20 years in prison for inciting violence through racist and xenophobic speech, *Al Jazeera* reports. Masra, who denies the charges, was accused together with 67 others of fuelling deadly clashes between farmers and herders in May. A vocal critic of President Mahamat Déby, Masra was exiled before in 2022, returned under amnesty, ran against Déby in 2024, and is now back in a cell – a move that critics see as Déby's attempt to curtail a formidable political opponent.

UGANDA

Court slams the lid on Kizza Besigye's bail bid

A judge has denied bail to opposition leader Kizza Besigye, who has been held for nearly nine months on treason charges, *AFP* reports. His lawyers argued he had exceeded the 180-day limit for pre-trial detention, but the judge ruled the count began in February, not November. Besigye was abducted from Kenya and initially charged in a military court. Rights groups and opposition figures say his detention is part of a wider crackdown ahead of Uganda's 2026 elections, as President Yoweri Museveni warms up for a seventh term.

CABO VERDE

No-frills airline grounds no-clothes captain

EasyJet has suspended a pilot after he was seen walking naked and drunk through a luxury hotel in Cabo Verde, according to the *BBC*. The incident took place at the five-star Meliá Dunas Beach Resort & Spa earlier this month. Guests reported seeing the unnamed captain roaming through reception and the spa. Although it was more than 36 hours before he was due to fly again, EasyJet grounded the pilot after complaints. The airline says an investigation is under way and that safety is its top priority. Clothing, it seems, is a close second.

SAHEL

Women take the brunt of spike in terror attacks

Insurgent activity is rising sharply in the Sahel region, worsening conditions for women and girls, United Nations officials told the body's Security Council this week. In military-ruled Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, more than a million girls are out of school due to violence, with 60% never having attended, the *AP* reports. Women face increased risks of sexual violence and loss of livelihoods. More than 400 attacks between April and July killed nearly 2,900 people. Extremist groups



PHOTO: OLYMPIA DE MAISMONT/AFP

Lost girls: Conflict in the Sahel is keeping over a million girls in the region out of school.

are also recruiting young people, while displacement and insecurity continue to surge across the region. ■

NEWS

KENYA

UK skips probe into its soldiers' grievous crimes

British forces in Kenya are accused of committing acts of murder, sexual violence and arson as recently as 2021.

MUKANZI MUSANGA IN NAIROBI

KENYAN MPs are outraged that senior officials of Batuk – the British Army Training Unit in Kenya – skipped a parliamentary hearing on alleged crimes by British soldiers in Nanyuki, Laikipia county, where the unit is stationed.

British soldiers are accused of murder, sexual violence, and other abuses – most notably the 2012 killing of 21-year-old Agnes Wanjiru. She was last seen with British soldiers before her mutilated body was found in a hotel septic tank. A Kenyan judge ruled she was killed by a British soldier.

“These violations have been happening for many years but the government is not willing to protect Kenyans,” said Kephher Ojijo, a lawyer representing Kenyans who sued the United Kingdom’s defence ministry over British soldiers abandoning children

who they had fathered in Nanyuki.

The Batuk agreement, signed in 1964, granted British soldiers diplomatic immunity while in Kenya. The immunity was scrapped in 2016. In 2023, the National Assembly’s defence and foreign relations committee began investigating the abuses, including claims that Batuk caused the 2021 Lolldaiga Conservancy fire, which destroyed 12,000 acres of wildlife habitat at Mount Kenya’s foothills.

Committee members say UK officials deliberately ignored summonses. The British High Commission, however, said on Wednesday that UK government agencies had not received a formal invitation to the proceedings.

Ojijo dismissed the legislators’ outrage as “theatrics”, saying they “will not do anything to the soldiers because they are still afraid of the UK government – even after independence”.

In the child-abandonment case Ojijo and his clients filed in UK courts, a judge recently ordered the British defence ministry to trace and disclose the identity of soldiers who sired children in Nanyuki. Some of those abandoned children are now adults whose paternity entitles them to British citizenship.

The UK government also agreed to compensate 228 Nanyuki residents maimed or bereaved by explosions from British army munitions. ■

DRC

M23 no-show puts all-out war back on the menu

PROSPER HERI NGORORA IN GOMA

A PRELIMINARY peace agreement in July between Kigali and Kinshasa has failed to halt fighting between M23 rebels and the Congolese army in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's east. After the United States brokered the agreement in principle, peace talks were meant to resume in Doha on 8 August.

They did not.

The Rwanda-backed rebel group refused to attend, saying Kinshasa had undermined the process by not releasing M23 prisoners. "There will be no sixth round of talks in Doha without the release of our people," Benjamin Mbonimpa, head of the M23 delegation, told *The Continent*. He claimed M23 has freed more than 1,000 Congolese soldiers and dependents.

Kinshasa accuses M23 of "flagrant violation" of the Doha commitments, saying the group recently killed 300 civilians. The United Nations high commissioner for human rights corroborated this claim last week, calling the violence between 9 and 21 July in Rutshuru, North Kivu, "one of the largest documented death tolls in such



PHOTO: JOSEPH MWISHA/AFP

POW: An M23 fighter guards DRC soldiers captured in the rebels' takeover of Goma in May.

attacks since M23's resurgence in 2022".

The stalled process raises doubts that Kigali and Kinshasa will sign a binding version of the US deal on 18 August as planned – or that it will lead to peace if signed. "Every day, I hear the army and M23 leaders have made peace," said Ineza Marie, a fruit trader in Goma, which M23 seized in January. "Then the cannon fire starts up again."

In lieu of attending the talks at the weekend, M23 clashed with Wazalendo, a Kinshasa-allied militia. The latest reports say M23 captured several villages in South Kivu's Walungu district and that fighting also broke out north of Bukavu.

"The signals are red," said Goma resident Gentil Mulume, who fears a return to all-out war is inevitable. ■

SOUTH AFRICA

Cash in or ash out? Scarcity is the nail in Mzansi's coffins

With burial plots in short supply amid a boom in 'un-African' funeral subscriptions, the cost of dying is now a burning issue.

CHRIS MAKHAYE IN DURBAN

THE BURIAL business in South Africa is booming, with private "memorial parks" pricing space by the square metre as municipal cemeteries run out of plots.

At Lala Kahle Private Cemetery west of Durban, burial plots start at R5,000 (\$280). In contrast, a municipal burial plot in Johannesburg would cost R2,250.

About half a million people die every year in South Africa. Durban, Tshwane, and Cape Town have all reported a shortage of burial space.

Some funeral parlours offer monthly

payments to secure future burial plots, a service marketed as "affordable dignity". Traditional leaders call this "un-African" and spiritually dangerous.

"Paying policies to buy graves goes against African tradition," said Inkosi Thanduyise Mzimela, the former chairperson of the Ingonyama Trust. "It commodifies death."

Funeral costs drive the high cost of dying higher yet: The country ranks fourth in the world in funeral costs relative to average income, with the average burial costing R26,875 – about 28% of annual median income.

Factoring in cultural rites like slaughtering a cow to honour the ancestors and feed mourners, an "after tears" celebration, and transport, families could spend well over R50,000.

Cemetery associations say cremation – still taboo in many African cultures – may become a necessity. But resistance is strong. "You don't burn the body of someone who must become an ancestor," said Zandile Mthethwa, 73, from Umlazi township. ■



PHOTO: PAUL BOTES/THE CONTINENT

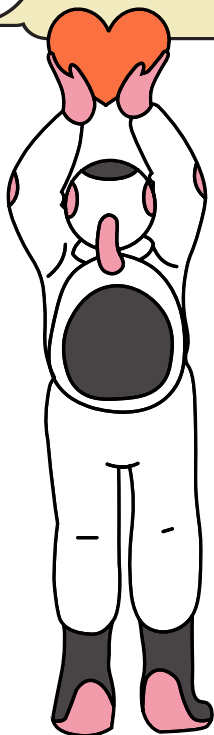
Six figures under: Expensive cemetery burials are non-negotiable in many South African cultures.

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FEATURE

Growin', growin' like a baobab tree

Life for a woman in West Africa is shorter than most. In Benin, Togo, Sierra Leone and Gambia, **Sylvia Arthur** spoke to 100 women who defied the odds to live long, and prosper.



No more man, no cry: Salamatu Bangura of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

PHOTOS: SETH AVUSUGLO/AWOHOWA/NGS

FOR 10 YEARS, Salamatu Bangura's husband beat her almost daily. The last time, she couldn't walk for three days.

"That was the last straw," says the small-scale trader in Freetown, Sierra Leone. She left him, and believes this saved her life: "I have no husband but I am happier. I finally have peace of mind."

Bangura, 64, is part of a growing but rare group: West African women who

live to see old age. At 59, their average life expectancy is the lowest in the world – 16 years below the global average, six years below Africa's average.

Complications from pregnancy and childbirth remain the leading cause of death – one in three girls becomes a mother before age 18. Gender-based violence, child marriage, and female genital mutilation remain widespread,

each harming women's health. Infectious diseases such as HIV and malaria also take their toll.

The women who live beyond these odds have no magic formula for longevity, but many are challenging stereotypes, reclaiming opportunities denied to them, and seeking a simple, self-sufficient life rooted in their own values rather than societal expectations.

Catherine Apanga, 63, a retired Togolese computer programmer, believes lifestyle change is key: she has lost friends to preventable illnesses. "With old age, we've come to realise that there's a whole culture around nutrition: you need to drink lots of water, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, and exercise."

Childhood hardship could easily have taken Ajaratou Louise Jobe's life early. As a teen, she worked odd jobs to survive. "God made me a hustler; I've always had people who relied on me," she says. "I did not play with my life. I didn't have time." Jobe credits adaptability for her longevity. At 71, she still runs a fashion business and engages in local politics, which keeps her mentally active.

Catherine Gagnanto, 65, a former teacher from Grand-Popo, Benin, says social connection is her secret. She keeps in touch with lifelong friends on WhatsApp. "Now that we're retired, we like to spend time together."

Living longer is one thing. Living well is another. When things are going well, old age is just... life.

"I don't see myself as old," says Edwige Akakpo, 65, a former lab



Going strong: Edwige Akakpo of Lomé in Togo.

technician. "People think when you're older, you're done. But as long as you have strength, it's not over yet."

Hardship changes the equation.

Kossiwa Dablaka, in her 70s, washes dishes in Lomé for \$25 a month. Two years ago, her daughter died, leaving two children, aged eight and 11. "I'm the only one looking after them," she says. "I have no choice but to work."

Many older women in West Africa share this struggle – outliving peers and descendants while caring for dependants without social safety nets.

Africa's older population is projected to triple in coming decades, making its challenge is twofold: reduce early deaths and prepare for longer lives.

A new African Union protocol on the rights of older persons, in force since last year, calls for better healthcare and social protection. So far, only 15 of the AU's 55 member states have ratified it – but advocates see it as a good start. ■

The National Geographic Society supported Sylvia Arthur's research

DEBATE



PHOTOS: EBRAHIM HAMID/AFP

Is the Sudan war really ‘about nothing’?

AN AMERICAN journalist recently stirred controversy with a cover story in *The Atlantic* magazine framing the war in Sudan as “about nothing”. In the piece, the conflict’s drivers are deemed so inconsequential that Sudan becomes a backdrop for a tangential argument:

“The end of the liberal world order is a phrase that gets thrown around a lot in conference rooms and university lecture halls in places like Washington and Brussels. But in al-Ahamdda, this theoretical idea has become reality. The liberal world order has already ended in Sudan, and there isn’t anything to replace it.”

We asked Sudanese people to explain what the war is about.

In response, journalists and researchers pitched reported analyses; community organisers and ordinary citizens sent in personal essays. One submission was a report, rich in detail, that stretched to nine pages long.

What emerges is clear: there is no such thing as a war about nothing.

Sudan’s conflict is in fact no longer a single war, but a series of fragmented contests over just about everything – gold, identity, agricultural land, social philosophies, you name it.

Here are five of those perspectives, edited for brevity and clarity.

DEBATE

Foreign interests drive local dynamics

The who, why, and means of the war.

EISA DAFALLAH

AFTER TWO years of fighting, Sudan's conflict has moved beyond a simple Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) vs Rapid Support Forces (RSF) binary. The country is now a patchwork of overlapping military, administrative, and economic zones, where local dynamics intersect with regional interests and financial imperatives.

The SAF controls the north – Northern and River Nile states – plus Khartoum, Port Sudan, the Red Sea coast, and parts of North and South Kordofan. In these areas, it operates government ministries, the main seaport, and airports.

The RSF and allied militias control about 45% of Sudan, down from nearly 70% in the early months of the war. RSF-controlled areas include most of Darfur, except for North Darfur's capital El Fasher, which has been under siege since May 2024 but is still holding out.

Some rural pockets fall under tribal authority, where local leaders provide protection in exchange for loyalty or resources, independent of either the SAF or the RSF.

Analysts agree that foreign economic interests now drive the war.

External backers took over directing



PHOTO: SATELLITE IMAGE ©2023 MAXAR TECHNOLOGIES/AFP

***Up in the air:** A satellite overview of El Obeid airport in Sudan, just one week after the military power struggle fell into all-out war in April 2023.*

the conflict's trajectory within the first three months of fighting, says Sudanese journalist Haider Abdelkarim.

This undermined the United States-backed Jeddah talks launched on 6 May 2023. The process leaned on "the quartet" – the US, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – to act as "big brothers" persuading both sides toward peace.

But the UAE was no indifferent "big brother".

Political analyst Eman Kamal al-Din says Emiratis have been active participants in the war, pursuing and protecting their own economic interests, particularly gold mining and agricultural lands in Al-Fashaga, the border area with Ethiopia in eastern Sudan. She argues that peace negotiations should target the UAE directly, since the RSF has acted largely as its proxy force and is being replaced by mercenaries from Niger and Colombia in current battles.

Official data shows that in 2024, 100% of Sudan's declared gold exports went to Egypt.

The moment may be ripe: the UAE-linked side has suffered heavy losses without achieving its goals, says Kamal al-Din. Before the war, most Sudanese gold was exported to the UAE. During the war, SAF-controlled mines remained productive but the army redirected gold away from UAE markets.

War disrupted mining in RSF-controlled areas to a greater extent because it was mostly artisanal.

Egypt has benefitted from this shift. In May 2023, a month into the war in Sudan, Egypt abolished all customs duties and taxes on gold imports, making it the prime destination for both official and smuggled Sudanese gold.

Official data shows that in 2024, 100% of Sudan's declared gold exports went to Egypt. Chatham House research estimates more than 100kg of gold a day has been smuggled there during the war.

Three main gold-producing states in Sudan – Northern, River Nile, and Red Sea – border Egypt and remain under SAF control. The latter has not acted to curb the smuggling, given its interest in redirecting exports from the UAE.

Abdelkarim says the path to peace is to pressure these foreign players – primarily the UAE and Egypt – to bring their Sudanese allies to the table. ■

Eisa Dafallah is a Sudanese journalist

EDITOR'S NOTE:

How gold funds the war

Gold hasn't always dominated Sudan's politics. Fifteen years ago, 90% of foreign exchange came from oil, but three quarters of reserves lay in South Sudan, which gained independence in 2011. The loss plunged Sudan – still under US terror listing and trade sanctions – into crisis, pushing many people into artisanal gold mining, notes researcher Sara de Simone of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies. A major find at Jebel Amer sparked a violent scramble. Omar al-Bashir's regime deployed the Janjaweed (later RSF) to seize control, and RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, came to dominate gold exports, becoming a billionaire warlord. Today, those gold flows – and the powers they fund – can block or enable peace.

How the RSF looted the capital

I watched as Khartoum was destroyed overnight.

MOE KANDAKA

I AM NOT a journalist, just an ordinary, apolitical Sudanese citizen. The war I saw was not about ideology – just money, power, and the survival of armed men at the cost of our lives.

I returned to Sudan from Sweden during the fragile power-sharing between the army and civilians after the 2019 revolution that removed Omar al-Bashir. New protests were calling for “no military” in politics. The October 2021 coup changed Khartoum overnight – checkpoints appeared and tensions rose. The balance between the SAF and the RSF, which had jointly removed the civilians, was clearly unstable.

April 2023 was Ramadan. Khartoum nights were lively as they always are in that holy month. On 13 April I crossed the Al Mansheiya Bridge to Bahri and encountered multiple RSF roadblocks – a rare and ominous sight. Soldiers searched my bag and scrolled through my phone. Two days later, war began.

Gunfire erupted, jets roared overhead, RSF troops flooded Khartoum and Bahri, and the SAF was penned in, in Omdurman, splitting our tri-city capital.

Markets closed. And life stopped.

A week into the war, phones *sometimes* worked. Calling up childhood friends – children of former officials in the al-Bashir government – I learned that many had quietly left for Türkiye or Qatar before fighting began. They’d apparently been warned, but other citizens received no such warning.

At first, RSF fighters looted factories, malls, and banks, handing out some of the cash in Bahri. Even I had cash handed to me by RSF militiamen. In a collapsing economy, some people welcomed their bizarre mix of intimidation and generosity.

Then the looting expanded. They took large vehicles – Toyota Hilux and Land Rover trucks – from richer parts of town, presumably to ferry fighters and goods between Khartoum and their Darfur base. They targeted personal money, gold, and homes. Stories of sexual violence and kidnappings spread. Any pretence of political purpose was gone.

I stayed for two months. When I left it was with fear, loss, and the knowledge that a functioning city can be destroyed overnight.

The violence spread – villages in Darfur destroyed, highways in Kordofan blocked, ports contested. It’s no longer one war but many, all happening at the same time, feeding into each other. In all of them, the same pattern: armed groups taking, punishing, and controlling. ■

The author, who is living in a country close to Sudan, is writing under a pseudonym for security reasons

Diary in Khartoum

RSF came for everything during the siege, as we did all we could to keep medical services going.

KHALED AL-WALEED ABDULRAHMAN

I AM 29. Before the war, I worked with a child-protection organisation. On 15 April 2023 – the first day of the war – I was at my grandmother's house near the Sports City military camp, where the first shots were fired. My parents, trapped in

a blockade near Khartoum Airport, saw our home hit by two shells before fleeing. They reached us only after three days. Four days later, my family left for Egypt by bus. I stayed in my grandmother's house, under siege in RSF territory, for a year and a half.

Each day began at 6am, when I was woken by gunfire marking RSF shift changes. I checked the streets, showered, and went to the neighbours' house. Three brothers lived there – Omar, Ahmed, and Musab. We shared their kitchen to manage wartime shortages. Power outages made fridges redundant, so each morning we agreed on who would risk going to the central market, controlled by the RSF and often



PHOTO: AFP

Life here is over: Sudanese civilians evacuate southern Khartoum in May 2023, a month after the war erupted, leaving the capital a desolate war zone subject to desperate shortages of food and basic supplies.

targeted by SAF airstrikes. Whoever went – usually Omar or Musab – never stayed for more than 10 minutes.

After tea, I would walk to the Omar Bin Al-Khattab Health Centre. It was only two blocks away but I had to pass seven or eight RSF checkpoints. I learned to never show fear, to deter the soldiers' harassment.

The centre had eight doctors and a group of youth as its war-time board of directors. We ran dental, psychiatric, pediatric, radiology, and prenatal services; a small operating room; and outreach for besieged families. We used to receive donations via Khartoum Emergency Response Room channels, local pharmacies, and expatriates in our neighbourhood. But when the power and internet connectivity were cut, support stopped.

There were constant challenges: doctors and volunteers struggled to reach work, airstrikes threatened us daily, fuel shortages hampered drug refrigeration and surgical equipment sterilisation, and RSF soldiers tried to steal our generator several times.

Initially we treated only civilians, but later RSF patients arrived, usually after morning battles. We treated them equally to avoid conflict; sometimes they brought medicines in return. Our drug supply relied on board members taking personal risks, co-ordinating with emergency rooms and pharmacy owners, and even requesting supplies from the RSF, which had seized medicines early in the war.

The centre closed at 4.30pm, except

for emergencies. My evenings alternated between "Starlink days", when I caught up with family and friends online, and "football days".

After maghrib in the evenings, I would return to my neighbour's house, where I stored my phone for safety. They were a family and I lived alone so RSF members often targeted my house, sometimes twice a day, particularly since we had four cars there.

I lived alone so RSF members often targeted my house, sometimes twice a day, particularly since we had four cars there.

We ate dinner, our only meal, under blackout to the sound of drones and shelling. RSF fighters sometimes targeted me specifically because I am from northern Sudan. Once, one came over, made small talk, then fired shots into the air before leaving. I learned to read each situation to see if the right response was confrontation or dialogue.

Sleep rarely came before 3am. In the long hours before dawn prayer, I lay awake, staring at the stars, wondering: When will this nightmare end? When will I see my family? Should I leave or keep helping my neighbours? The morning gunfire from the RSF outpost always brought the same answer: another day under siege. ■

The author, who is still in Sudan, is writing under a pseudonym for security reasons

Us vs them – in a good way

‘Stay with Gisma’ is one woman’s attempt to alleviate famine.

MAHASIN DAHAB

THE WAR in Sudan is often reduced to numbers – 12-million people displaced – or shorthand – “two generals fighting for power”. Then there are the labels – “forgotten”, “nihilistic”, and “war about nothing”. This framing oversimplifies the actors at its centre and erases the people in its path. In North Darfur’s capital, El Fasher, residents who are organising to survive an ongoing 14-month RSF siege defy such flattening.

The SAF and the RSF have fought 227 battles for control of El Fasher, the last Darfur city outside RSF hands. That is no accident. If the RSF prevails, Sudan’s map could be redrawn along ethnic lines. Historically, El Fasher embraced all tribes, its sultans gathering traders of all ethnicities whose wares connected Sudan from north to south and east to

west into the Sahel. A banner at the city’s gate welcomes visitors as “friends and guests”.

For the first year after war erupted in April 2023, North Darfur existed in a balance between “no war, no peace” as religious leaders, journalists, activists, and its elders and mediation committee tried to maintain a fragile neutrality.

When that balance collapsed in April 2024, life for Gisma Ahmed Khamis and her family changed overnight. Echoes of artillery and the smell of arsine gas “became the new norm”, she says. They fled to Zamzam camp outside the city.

Khamis, a former university student, became an organiser. She recalls meeting a mother of five feeding her children animal fodder and a young orphan whose only request was a pair of slippers. These moments sparked “Stay with Gisma”, an initiative for orphans and children with disabilities.

The organisation provides them with food, clothing, and psychological first aid. Using Facebook, Khamis mobilised Sudan’s diaspora to fund community kitchens. She braved the market on foot or by donkey for supplies to cook with other women for dozens of families.

The volunteers paid dearly.

On 11 April 2025, RSF attacked Zamzam camp, filming the assault for its propaganda. Khamis and her family hid for two days in a trench with little food



Cut short: ‘Stay with Gisma’ was a rare lifeline for orphans and children with disabilities.

or water. Between 11 and 13 April, 50 helpers – including Relief International staff – were tortured and killed.

With RSF fighters searching for her by name, Khamis escaped to Uganda's Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, travelling in a niqab to hide her face. "If my face were not hidden, I would have died a long time ago," she says.

Many in El Fasher refuse to leave. Mohammed Ismaeil lives in Daraga Oula, where Zaghawa men are prime RSF targets. He has buried 57 relatives, including his father. Ismaeil, who is in his late 20s and a father himself, says each loss strengthens his resolve to protect his home, despite dwindling food, relentless shelling, and severed lifelines.

Like Khamis, Ismaeil describes daily terror: the constant thud of artillery; the cries of the wounded; and heavy, silent grief after each clash. For him, this is Darfur's worst war – not for its scale but for the isolation and silence around it. Staying, he says, is an act of defiance: a refusal to be erased, a stand against genocide, and a way to preserve dignity.

Ismaeil also blames neighbouring African states for aiding the siege. He says mercenaries from Chad, Libya, Niger, and even Colombia fight alongside the RSF, backed by the UAE.

The siege itself is a starvation tactic. Prices for essentials are now 10 times higher than in the rest of Darfur. RSF forces and their allies block food, water, and goods, while killing, extorting, and exploiting civilians. It has forced a mass exodus toward Tawila in North Darfur – yet conditions are dire even there.



Locked in: Mohammed Ismaeil has buried 57 relatives since the war began. He refuses to leave.

The world has largely turned away. In 2025, Sudan's humanitarian needs were assessed to be \$4.3-billion, which would reach 20-million people, but international support given thus far is only 10% of that amount. Still – contrary to the recent claim in *The Atlantic* that Americans, and international law, organisations and diplomats, have been "replaced by nothing" – civilians have stepped in to provide care, structure, and hope even as they negotiate their own grief and survival. ■

Mahasin Dahab is a feminist and decolonial researcher supporting humanitarian responses to the war in Sudan

Us vs them – in the bad way

Who gets to be Sudanese?

RAHIEM SHADAD

OSLO-BASED Norwegian-Sudanese artist Khalid Shatta watches from afar as war deepens Sudan's divides. "This conflict has polarised communities and reignited questions about 'What is Sudan?' and 'Who is Sudanese?'"

For Shatta, these are not abstract questions – they have shaped his life.

Shatta grew up in Khartoum Bahri, the northern city in Sudan's tri-city capital. But he was born in 1989 in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan, more than 500km southwest of Khartoum.

"I remember being about 10 years old and asking my mother if I was Wad Arab or Wad Afriki – an Arab's son or an African's son. She looked at me and said, 'Khalid, with a nose like yours, no one could ever mistake you for an Arab.'"

This sharp identity divide between "Arab" and "African" Sudanese stems partly from colonial policy. In 1922 the British introduced the Closed Districts Law, restricting movement and exchange between Arab-controlled regions in the north, central, and east and "African" regions in the south, southeast, and west. It reinforced ethnic divisions despite many communities being multi-ethnic. British-spurred development concentrated economic and educational opportunities in Khartoum, dominated by Muslim Arabs.

For the Nuba, like Shatta's father, opportunities were scarce. A musician, he found work in the Sudanese Army's *Silah Al Mousiq*a (weapon of music), the military band. He died when Shatta was young and the family moved to Khartoum. "His passing broke our family. Poverty hit us. I had to drop out of school after the third grade because my family couldn't afford it," Shatta says.

In El Haj Yousif, one of Khartoum's slums, Shatta and his seven siblings slept on the floor under a *birish* – a mat made from palm leaves. Soon, he was on the street. Child homelessness is common among ethnic minorities, driven by political and socioeconomic exclusion.

For decades, marginalised groups have resisted the government in Khartoum, which inherited the structure and systems of this oppression and intentional neglect from the colonial government.

The Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) ultimately cleaved South Sudan away from Khartoum's control.

In the Nuba Mountains, armed conflict continues under Abdelaziz Adam al-Hilu's SPLM-North faction, which joined the parallel government of RSF leader Hemedti. They intend to govern western Sudan parallel to the government coalescing around the SAF in Khartoum.

Reaching for common ground

Shatta's life changed when a Canadian charity brought him in off the streets, and he was taken in by the family of a friend from the privileged Arab Ja'alín community. Living in Khartoum's Al-Mamoura neighborhood, he re-enrolled in school and met renowned painter Hussein Gamaan, who recognised his talent and encouraged him to enter the arts programme at the Sudan University of Science and Technology.

Within a few years, Shatta was exhibiting alongside Gamaan in Khartoum. But as the 2011 South Sudan referendum approached and clashes erupted between the SAF and SPLM-North, Shatta came under suspicion for frequently travelling to his hometown in South Kordofan for photography.

The National Intelligence and Security Service accused him of exposing government violations, spying, and supporting SPLM-North. When agents came to his mother's home, Shatta fled.

Leaving most of his art behind, he took a bus to Juba, passing himself off as South Sudanese for months. Then, news came that one of his earlier works had won a Unesco competition in Paris. He travelled to France to receive the award and then to Oslo in late 2011, where he applied for political asylum.

"Talking to other asylum seekers from all over the world helped me realise how much our stories overlapped. We were all carrying trauma, navigating systems, and trying to find a sense of belonging."

Shatta graduated from Prosjektskolen Kunstscole's two-year arts programme



Khalid Shatta's art explores identity and resilience.

and now views his art as both Norwegian and Sudanese. Using ink and acrylics, he explores indigenous systems of knowledge and belonging. "I became fascinated by the similarities in the emotions behind these acts of seeking."

At a time when his first country is tearing itself apart over identity, Shatta has made a deliberate choice to show his latest exhibition to a displaced Sudanese community, in collaboration with another displaced Sudanese artist.

His *Gods in Action* exhibition at the Kamene Cultural and Research Center in Nairobi, is a deeply personal exploration of identity, indigeneity, spirituality, and resilience. His intricate ballpen drawings share the space with sculptures and installations by Heraa Hassan, who has lived in Nairobi for a year since fleeing the war in Sudan.

"I hope to show that there are larger, unifying concepts that can still create common ground for connection." ■

Rahiem Shadad is a Sudanese cultural researcher and curator based in Nairobi

PHOTO ESSAY

Boys to men: Bloodless cuts and ancient wisdom

PHOTOS: MUHAMADOU BITTAYE/AFP

IN THIOBON, a village in Senegal's Casamance region, crowds cheer as men perform feats of bravery like cutting your body without drawing blood. This is Futampaf – a traditional ceremony, that gathers the Jola people of Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau to initiate

boys into manhood. The rites, practised since the 12th century, prepare initiates to enter the sacred forest on a spiritual journey to receive ancestral wisdom, deepen their respect for women and elders, and take on new responsibilities in the community. ■









LIMITED SERIES

The Museum of Memory

HOW WE CHOOSE TO REMEMBER

CURATED BY SHOLA LAWAL
ART DIRECTION BY WYNONA MUTISI



PHOTO: ARON SIMENEH/ELMI CONSTRUCTION

ET-302 Memorial Park

BISHOFTU, ETHIOPIA

A PLACE OF “remembrance and healing”. This is how Ethiopian architecture firm Alebel Desta describes the memorial park honouring the 157 people who died when Ethiopian Airlines Flight ET-302 crashed in March 2019.

The memorial is located at Bishoftu, the site of the crash. Its circular arrangements weave concrete paths into gardens of stone. From above it resembles the insides of a mechanical clock, with four raised concrete structures, painted an earthy orange, forming its focal point.

They represent the four continents – Africa, Europe, North America, and Asia – from which people killed in the crash originated. Bronze plaques list the names of the victims and each structure

features an opening that resembles an aeroplane window.

Alebel Desta won an international competition to design the memorial, which was commissioned in 2022 and completed in early 2025. It views the park as a space for grieving families to reflect and process the immense loss of their loved ones, who died after the Nairobi-bound plane plunged into the ground some 62km from Bole International Airport, Addis Ababa.

The crash occurred at 8.38am on 10 March 2019 – just six minutes after takeoff. All 157 passengers and crew were killed. Many of them were NGO workers heading to Kenya for a United Nations conference; others were simply returning home from their travels.

The central piece in the park marks

the site at which the plane hit the ground at a speed of 1,100km/h, creating a wide crater. *The Burial Ground* lies about 10 feet away. This is an intentionally empty space surrounded by metal, depicting the absence of those people whose lives were lost. Opposite that is the *Healing Monument*, a metal sheet punched with holes in a nod to airplane detailing. There is also an amphitheatre, where families and visitors can sit and reflect. Paths surrounding the structures track the plane's route before it nosedived.

Bishoftu is about an hour from Addis Ababa. The park is surrounded by a breathtaking, mountainous landscape and visitors can also take in nearby tourist attractions, such as crater lakes and birdwatching zones.

Boeing, the US company that built the airplane, has been faulted in several quarters for the crash. Flight ET-302 was a new Boeing 737 Max 8 jet model and, before the tragedy in Ethiopia, the same model had recorded another fatal accident in Indonesia. Many critics argue this previous crash should have prompted Boeing and the United States Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) to ground the planes, investigate, and prevent another mass loss of life.

Less than six months earlier, Indonesia's Lion Air Flight 610 crashed into the Java Sea 13 minutes after takeoff, killing all 189 people on board.

An Indonesian investigation into the crash found a software update to the 737 Max's flight control system had caused the airplane to push its nose down repeatedly. The update was a stabilising mechanism intended to counter the Max's tendency to tilt its nose upwards in flight.

Boeing bosses said the company had intentionally kept the installation of the update from airlines because it believed it was a minor change that did not require additional pilot training, which would have meant additional costs for airlines.

Boeing bosses said if informed, the airlines would have been obliged to implement pilot training. By not informing them, they avoided this.

ET-302 crashed just months later. Several national aviation regulation agencies had banned the model after the first crash but the FAA had dragged its feet, claiming not to have found issues with Boeing. It was only after the ET-302 incident that the regulatory body grounded and investigated the jet.

Boeing, which has apologised for its mechanical errors, has not only suffered massive reputational damage, but still faces a range of charges. It has offered to pay \$1.1-billion in penalties and settlements, and to increase safety measures, although a final deal has yet to be reached. ■

Illustration note by Ethiopian illustrator Tigist Nigussie: *We mourn, we suffer, we learn, we keep going, but we remember. Like our wins, our losses make up history. We build structures that create memories and others that preserve them. And in Bishoftu, instead of a farm, memories of the 157 lives that ended here stand tall.*



ET-302 MEMORIAL PARK

ILLUSTRATION: TIGIST NIGUSSIE

DATA

Going green? No, the green is going...

FROM deforestation to desertification and pollution of the land, water, and air, different communities across Africa face distinct environmental challenges. Often, many at the same time.

Between late 2021 and mid-2023, we asked citizens across 39 African countries to name the top environmental issue in their community.

Across the continent, the most oft-cited problem is trash disposal (27%), led by Botswana (67%) and Seychelles (55%). Twenty countries identify the disposal of plastics and other rubbish as the most urgent priority.

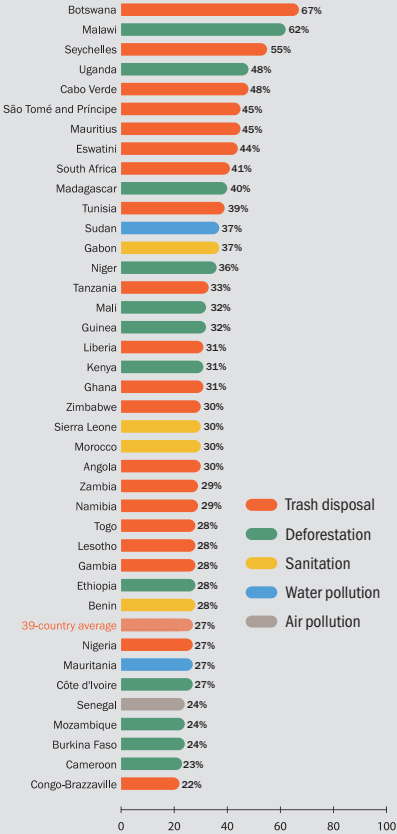
Next on the list are deforestation (19%), water pollution (17%), sanitation (17%), and air pollution (11%). Only 6% say that their community faces no ecological challenges of any kind.

More than six in 10 Malawians (62%) pinpoint deforestation as their foremost concern while nearly half (48%) of Ugandans agree.

Managing effluent is the biggest issue in Gabon (37%), Morocco (30%), Sierra Leone (30%), and Benin (28%).

Sudanese (37%) and Mauritians (27%) are most worried about dirty water, while people in Senegal are the only ones who list smog as the most pressing issue (24%). ■

Most important environmental issue in the community | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



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



REVIEW

WILFRED OKICHE



How do you survive Lagos?

Nigeria's largest city dares us to dream, then shatters our reality.

IN AFOLABI Olalekan's debut feature *Freedom Way*, the lives of 11 Lagosians converge and diverge when a reckless, anti-poor government policy comes into effect almost overnight.

Hollywood's 2004 Oscar-winning *Crash* might have aged poorly, but it is clearly the inspiration for *Freedom Way*. Only, instead of race relations in Los Angeles, it's police brutality in high-density Lagos that comes into focus.

Freedom Way debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival. It won top prize at the Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Awards and was written and produced

by Blessing Uzzi. Its title references a popular street that has become a magnet for young people thanks to its booming nightlife.

Trouble is, there are no safe spaces for young people in Lagos. Wherever they gather, police swoop in. Not to protect, but to harm and extort.

Freedom Way is matter-of-fact about presenting its premise, which it draws from recent news headlines. Kudos to cast and crew for approaching the story with sensitivity. Tech bros, okada riders, corrupt police officers, and shady businessmen share space in this concrete jungle. While some have it better than others, the film makes it clear that this level of dysfunction leaves no one untouched.

At a tight 88 minutes, Olalekan recognises what's at stake and remains disciplined with his storytelling. The pacing is brisk, the ensemble performances credible, and the film is visually smart without recourse towards excess or vanity. If this style has any drawbacks, it is that the writing eventually begins to show cracks: the coincidences pile up and by the end there is a lukewarm reach for sentiment.

Except this is not a story about sentiment – not for the millions of young people who still live this reality, nor for those who lost their lives during the 2020 nationwide #EndSARS protests against police brutality. ■

The Quiz

- 1 What is Gambia's official language?
- 2 Which country did Cabo Verde gain independence from in 1975?
- 3 The Cameroon Line refers to an alignment of what landmarks?
- 4 What are people from São Tomé and Príncipe called?
- 5 True or false: Lake Tanganyika is not one of the African Great Lakes.
- 6 Deadvlei (*pictured*), the famous clay pan, is in which country?
- 7 Nyala and Omdurman are cities in which country?
- 8 The birr is which country's currency?
- 9 Name the Senegalese artist who released *7 Seconds* in 1994.
- 10 François Lougah, Bailly Spinto and Ernesto Djédjé are musicians from which country?



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

"Know Senegalese singers? You so clever. But knowing their guest artists? That's the cherry on top."

PHOTO: VW PICS/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Big Pic

Reins off, fire: Moroccan horsemen fire their rifles in a simulated cavalry charge in El Jadida on 11 August. The tradition, Tbourida, began in the 16th century, inspired by ancestral Arab-Amazigh traditions.

PHOTO: ABDEL MAJID BZIOUAT/AFP



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