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The Continent



**The women
who took
on their
traffickers
... and won**

Photo: Carielle Doe



Cover: Esther thought she was boarding a flight that would take her to a lucrative job in Dubai. Instead, she landed in Muscat, Oman, where she was beaten and sold into modern-day slavery. This is the incredible story of how Esther, and hundreds of other Liberian women, worked together to free themselves from human trafficking syndicates. (p13)

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Smoke and mirrors: Al-Shabaab fighters overran a Ugandan base last Friday, but by Monday all guns in Kampala were pointed at the LGBTIQ community after President Museveni enacted the country's grotesque anti-homosexuality law.

SPORTS

North Africa conquers the court again

Egyptian club Al Ahly SC have won the third iteration of the Basketball Africa League. Al Ahly beat Senegal's AS Douanes 80-65 in the final in Kigali last Saturday. So far, the winners of the continent's most exciting and prestigious basketball tournament have all been from North Africa, with Egypt's Zamalek SC taking the trophy in 2021 and Tunisia's US Monastir claiming the title in 2022. The 2023 season featured 12 clubs from Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tunisia, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda.

SOUTH AFRICA

All in all Vladimir Putin's just another wall in the BRICS

Foreign ministers from the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – gathered in Cape Town this week ahead of the presidential summit in August, also in South Africa. The talks were overshadowed by the question of whether Russia's President Vladimir Putin will attend in August. If so, will South African authorities arrest him? Putin has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes committed in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. South Africa previously ignored a warrant to arrest former Sudan leader Omar al-Bashir.

SENEGAL

Sonko found guilty of 'corrupting youth' – but not of rape

A court in Senegal has cleared opposition leader Ousmane Sonko of raping a woman who worked in a salon he visited, and sending her death

threats. The court instead convicted him of “corrupting youth” – debauching or encouraging the debauchery of a person under 21 – and gave him a two-year jail sentence. This could rule him out of elections in February. Sonko, who can appeal, and his supporters claim that the trial is politically motivated. Nine people have been killed in unrest sparked by the verdict. He has yet to be imprisoned.



Opposed:
Senegal's Sonko
may be barred
from running for
president. Photo:
AFP/Getty Images

TUNISIA

A crackdown of convenience

Tunisian prosecutors have opened an investigation into 21 political figures – all opponents of President Kaïs Saïed. They are being investigated for allegedly conspiring against the state. Since Saïed suspended Parliament in 2021, described as a “self-coup” to stay in power, Tunisia has become dangerous for Saïed’s critics. At this rate, he will soon run out of opponents to lock up.

MALI

Gold glitters in bold government forecast

Mining companies in Mali will produce 67.7 tonnes of gold this year, which is 6% more than had been expected, according to new government forecasts. Artisanal miners who are not affiliated with any major mining companies also produce about six tonnes of gold a year. Mali is one of Africa’s top five gold producers, and the precious metal accounts for 80% of exports.



GHANA

Artisanal miners' impossible choice: Arrest or death

Last weekend, dozens of artisanal miners entered a gold mine in Amwiam, in the Ashanti region. But disaster struck when the access route was suddenly closed off, and they found themselves trapped in the mine. After pressure from their families aboveground, the mine owners – South Africa's AngloGold – agreed to open the mine's main entrance to allow them to leave. But there was a catch: waiting for them were police and company security, who arrested anyone that emerged. After a days-long standoff – with food and water running perilously short – 86 miners eventually exited and were arrested.

BURKINA FASO

Refusal to negotiate maps out a path to mutual destruction

The insurgency in northern Burkina Faso will end on the battlefield and not at a negotiating table, the prime minister vowed this week. Apollinaire Kyélem de Tambèla told the transitional parliament that rather than negotiate, the junta – which took power in 2022 – will recruit another 50,000 civilians to fight alongside the national army, doubling the size of a civilian militia group. This tactic ended badly in Sudan, where a civilian militia morphed into a paramilitary force that is currently waging war with the army.

KENYA

Killer cops cut down civilian bystanders

Twelve people were killed by Kenyan police in late March, during cost-of-living protests called by opposition leader Raila Odinga. That is according to a new report by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, corroborating evidence in support of this claim. The rights bodies said that most of the people killed were not involved in the protests. According to the Police Reforms Working Group, at least 1,264 civilian deaths have been linked to police since 2017.

DRC

EAC's army renews its marching orders

The mandate of the East African Community Regional Force, which is currently deployed in the eastern DRC, has been renewed for six months. This is despite stinging criticism from Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi, who has accused the force of “cohabitation” with the rebels. East African leaders declined to give the force the authority to go on the offensive against the rebel M23 group, which is believed to have Rwandan backing.

SUDAN

Khartoum reignites as ceasefire fails

Heavy gunfire and aerial bombardment can once again be heard in Khartoum and other parts of the country, after the collapse of a ceasefire that was poorly observed to begin with. On Wednesday, the Sudan Armed Forces – which is waging a bitter war against the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary group – pulled out of talks. On the same day 18 people were killed and more than 100 injured in a rocket attack on a busy market in the capital.



ZIMBABWE

Better fly the flag or we'll stick you in jail

After a lengthy wait, Zimbabwe's government has finally announced an election date. The country will head to the polls on Wednesday 23 August. And

in a move that inspires little confidence in the country's democracy, Parliament this week passed a bill that will allow the state to punish citizens for being “unpatriotic”. The bill, which has yet to be signed into law by the president, has been enthusiastically welcomed by the ruling party. Critics describe it as an attack on freedom of expression and association.

Nigeria

Now take your medicine



Photo: Presidency

On Thursday, Bola Tinubu became *President* Bola Tinubu and Nigeria got its 16th head of state. But that wasn't the biggest news of the week.

Tinubu rolled up to the inauguration ceremony at Abuja's Eagle Square in a glossy black Mercedes-Maybach S-Class sedan. It takes 80 litres of petrol to fill up the tank of an S-Class.

At the beginning of this week, filling up the tank would have cost 14,800 naira (\$32), at the official pump price of 185 naira (\$0.40) per litre. By the end of the week, however, it cost up to 44,000 naira (\$95) to fill up exactly the same tank.

Tinubu has only himself to blame.

In his first major decision as president, Tinubu announced an end to the fuel subsidy which has kept petrol prices artificially low for decades. Nigeria spends more than \$860-million a month on this subsidy.

Even though the subsidy remains in place – at least until the end of the month – panicked motorists immediately began to stock up, as did the owners of the many, many generators which keep the lights on whenever the grid fails. Petrol prices nearly tripled in response.

From an economic perspective, Tinubu's decision is a no-brainer: the huge subsidies have hampered the government's ability to invest in other things like education, housing and infrastructure.

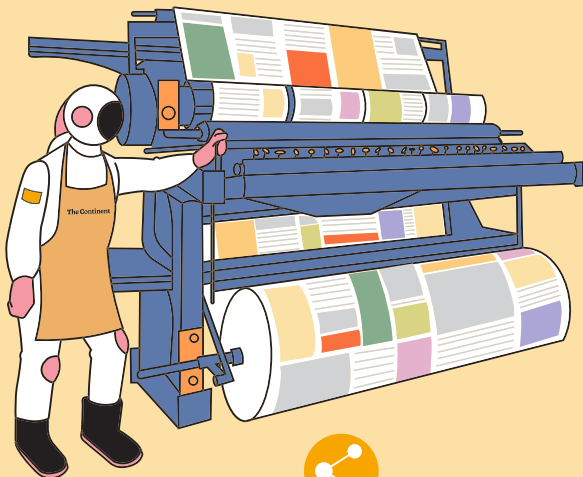
Politically, it could be a different story. The last time a Nigerian president tried to remove the fuel subsidy – Goodluck Jonathan in 2012 – he was met with nationwide strikes that crippled the country, forcing him to reverse course.

Tinubu can expect a similar reaction.

His saving grace may be the massive new oil refinery that was opened by his political ally and Africa's richest man, Aliko Dangote, last week. When fully operational, it is expected to supply all of Nigeria's petrol needs, which means the end to expensive imports – and lower prices at the pump. ■

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Ethiopia

Addis Ababa struggles to pay the price of progress

Why must motorists wait hours to refuel if there is plenty of petrol? For the answer, follow the money.

Samuel Getachew in Addis Ababa

Elias Alemu waited more than an hour to refuel his vehicle, a Toyota Vitz, at a petrol station near Bole International Airport. In recent months, long queues for petrol have become an unwelcome feature of daily life in Ethiopia's capital city. Cars and trucks snake for hundreds of metres along pavements and side streets, with impatient drivers facing lengthy waits for a turn at the pump.

There is no shortage of petrol. Instead, the delay has been introduced by a new payment policy instituted by the government in April. Motorists are no longer allowed to pay for petrol with cash. Instead, they must use one of two digital payment systems: Telebirr, a mobile money service offered by state-owned

Ethio Telecom; or a digital wallet operated by the state-owned Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE).

This policy was trialled in Addis Ababa in April, and rolled out to the rest of the country in May. "Should any gas station be caught transacting fuel in cash after the deadline, they will be banned from the fuel supply," said Saharla Abdullahi, the head of the Petroleum and Energy Authority, in a statement.

Making digital payments is new territory for most Ethiopians. Setting up an account takes time and technical know-how, as does loading new payments. The system is buggy and often breaks down, leading to further delays.

"How come sending money through your phone takes so much time?" Alemu complained to *The Continent*, after taking another half an hour to make the payment.

A petrol attendant had similar gripes. "What can we do? People are taking their time to figure out how mobile money works. As are we."

Getting ahead of the game

The disruptive policy has its roots in the announcement, earlier this month, that the National Bank of Ethiopia has granted Kenyan telecoms operator Safaricom a licence to operate its pioneering, award-winning mobile money service M-Pesa.

When M-Pesa was introduced in



Pay up: M-Pesa has transformed Kenya's economy. But Telebirr has been bringing Ethiopia's capital to a halt. Photo: Eric Lafforgue/ArtInAllofUs/Corbis/Getty Images

Kenya in 2007, it revolutionised the Kenyan economy by making it easy to make payments with a mobile phone. The platform was simple and secure, and allowed people to store and transfer money without having to open a bank account. Over the years, would-be competitors have come and gone, but M-Pesa and Safaricom still account for 99.9% of Kenya's mobile money market.

In 2021, Safaricom obtained a licence to become only the second mobile operator in Ethiopia. Ethio Telecom had previously held a monopoly. Since launching in October last year, Safaricom has signed up 2.8-million customers (Ethio Telecom has 70-million). More are expected to follow once it rolls out M-Pesa in Ethiopia.

In an effort to get ahead of its new competition, Ethio Telecom – and its owner, the state – has been pushing its

own mobile money service hard. It's not just petrol stations that accept only digital money. From June, all public servants will be paid using Telebirr, and payment for most government services, like electricity, will be via digital payments.

Along with Telebirr and the CBE, another 17 different commercial banks have launched their own mobile money apps, but while this is forcing an unprecedented number of people to sign up for digital payment services, old habits die hard.

“What I'm seeing now is people have more trust in banks than non-bank institutions like Telebirr,” said Amanuel Mengistu, a trader and economics graduate. “People think depositing their money in non-banks institutions with mobile money apps is unsafe and fear they will face difficulty when withdrawing funds.” ■

Zimbabwe

Prisoner release triggers trauma from the years of the 'Green Bombers'

Authorities say that only 3% of pardoned prisoners commit crime again but for some Zimbabweans, the latest release of 4,200 inmates has sparked fears that the ruling party is building an off-book army of thugs

Jeffrey Moyo in Harare

In late May, Zimbabwe released more than 4,200 prisoners, a move that was hailed as good for decongesting its prisons which housed more than 22,000 inmates, well over their capacity of 17,000.

Most of the released prisoners are elderly, children, women imprisoned for nonviolent offences and the terminally ill or disabled. However, a portion of those who benefited from the presidential amnesty are people who were convicted for violent offences but had served at least 75% of their sentence.

Within the country and its diaspora, the release of the latter group triggered ominous speculation that the ruling party will use the grateful released prisoners to commit elections-related violence.

Haruzivishe Makomborero, an opposition activist who lives in exile, fears the ruling Zimbabwe African National

Union Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) regime is “taking notes from its ally, Russia.”

“Just like the Russian Wagner group is recruiting prisoners to fight in the invasion of Ukraine, Zanu-PF will use some of these prisoners for political violence in the coming elections,” Haruzivishe speculates, referring to the general elections slated for 23 August.

According to Shepherd Mpofu, the acting head of the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service, only 3% of people who benefited from previous amnesties became involved in crime again.

The concerns of those who share Makomborero's fears are perhaps best understood by remembering another episode in Zimbabwe's halting democratic experiment: the “Green Bombers”.

The Green Bombers were a youth brigade that played a pivotal role in ensuring that Zanu-PF won elections in the mid to late 2000s. The youth were



Stampede: Opposition supporters help a man injured in clashes with Zanu-PF militia in Kwekwe in February last year.
Photo: Z Auntony/AFP/Getty Images

trained to be militant by Zimbabwe's National Youth Service, which was introduced shortly after the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai, shocked Zanu-PF by winning 57 out of 120 parliamentary seats in the elections of 2000.

Graduates of the new National Youth Service went on a rampage, attacking opposition supporters, burning down their homes and even killing some.

Munashe Manzanga, a 34-year-old who fled to the United States, was among the brigade's victims. He says that in June 2008 a band of Green Bombers, led by a youth officer, and a war veteran he recognised, held him hostage for not carrying a Zanu-PF card. "They force-marched me to a night vigil, beat me and other opposition activists in what they called a re-education exercise and forced

me to sing Zanu-PF songs," he recalls.

After the incident, Manzanga says he fled from his rural home Mberengwa in Zimbabwe's south and hid for weeks in Zvishavane in the country's Midlands province before managing to escape abroad.

Attacks on opposition supporters like Manzanga by Green Bombers, named after the military-style fatigues they wore and because the term is generally used to refer to the green bottlefly, were widely reported by human rights groups and the media throughout the 2000s. Officially, the National Youth Service which produced the Green Bombers was disbanded in 2007 but its ghosts have haunted Zimbabwe since.

"In 2019 I was attacked by well-known Zanu-PF members of the National Youth Service. They ambushed me as I was returning home from town and kidnapped and tortured me asking about the whereabouts of [social and economic justice activist and unionist] Tatenda Mombeyarara," says Adkins Mtetwa, a Zimbabwean human rights activist now living in the United Kingdom.

He concurs with those who see the prison amnesty as a ruse to recruit new "Green Bombers" for the ruling party.

"The latest release of criminals just before elections by President Mnangagwa is for people like me and more in my community, a sign that there will be more violence in the coming election," says Mtetwa.

The released prisoners will live under this shadow of suspicion at least until the elections pass. ■



INVESTIGATION

Breaking the chains

After being trafficked to Oman, a group of Liberian women decided to take matters into their own hands.

Photo: Carielle Doe

Prue Clarke and Anthony Stephens in Monrovia

Times were tough for 22-year-old Esther at the end of 2021. Her father was a pastor, and she was living in his church compound in Liberia's capital, Monrovia. She had no job, no education and few prospects. The pandemic and global economic turmoil had hit her father's parishioners hard. He could no longer send his six children to school. Esther spent her days doing odd jobs and dreaming of a different life.

When Esther's friend Princess came to her with an overseas job offer, she thought her dreams had come true.

"She told me she was travelling to Dubai and her uncle had a job opportunity there," says Esther, sitting at a table in the church with her mother and father.

Esther's father Michael was suspicious. He demanded to speak with Princess's uncle, a man named Samuel Chan Chan, who promised Michael the job was legitimate. Esther would work in a printing press in Dubai making \$500 a month. That was a princely sum to a Liberian family where GDP per capita is \$630 a year and schoolteachers make \$150 a month. Michael agreed.

"I was happy to help my family, my brothers, my sisters," Esther says. Esther and Michael are not their real names. We are hiding their identity to protect them from reprisals.

Chan Chan told the family they needed to pay \$500 to his wife Eve, based in Monrovia, and get a passport and a Covid-19 test. The family scraped

the money together. Then one night in December, Esther and her parents got into a taxi, drove to the airport and said a teary goodbye.

Inside the airport, Samuel's brother Arthur, a national security agent, whisked Esther past security checkpoints where agents are trained to spot potential trafficking victims. Arthur demanded \$75 for his services.

Alarm bells started for Esther before she got on the plane. The visa Arthur had given her was for Oman, not the United Arab Emirates. When she landed, an Omani woman demanded she hand over her passport. Wary, Esther refused at first, but she eventually gave in. Over the next few hours, the reality of her situation became clear.

Esther was taken to an office filled with women from different parts of the world: Bangladesh, the Philippines and many African countries. It was an agency supplying domestic servants to Omani households. In a scene alarmingly reminiscent of the African slave trades of old, Omanis came in to inspect the women and haggle over price. Asians – considered harder workers – cost more. Africans the least.

It was here that Esther says she "first learned about this thing called 'human trafficking'".

Modern slavery

Typical modern slavery scams in the Middle East are orchestrated by agents who sell domestic servant contracts to households. In Oman, the households pay a \$1,500 fee to the agent as well as the cost

The screenshot shows a user profile for Samuel Chan Chan (@samuelchanchan) with 3 comments, 0 upvotes, 0 followers, and 0 following. A blue 'Follow' button is visible. Below the profile is an orange banner for Adobe Illustrator stating 'Students save over 70% on Creative Cloud.' To the right, a discussion titled 'Qatar Maid Visa - Sponsoring a housemaid in Doha, Qatar' is shown with 105 comments. The discussion includes three replies from Samuel Chan Chan, all dated 6 years ago, where he offers to find housemaids in Liberia for a fee. The replies are partially obscured by a watermark.

Trafficking: Samuel Chan Chan advertises his services in finding Liberian workers.

of return flights. Households typically pay the servants \$200 a month. The working hours are long, and there are no days off. The contract lasts for two years.

The challenge for agents is that no one is interested in taking that deal – they have to be deceived into doing so. The agents enlist people like Samuel Chan Chan to lure the women with promises of decent jobs and opportunities to study. After they arrive, they are forced into accepting the contract. When the women want out, they are told the only way to get their passports back is to repay the entire fee.

Chan Chan did not need much encouragement to sell out his fellow Liberians. His online history shows that after winning a fellowship to the Arab Africa Summit in Egypt in 2018 he started offering his services on forums recruiting workers in the Middle East.

“I have more than 20 maids in Liberia i need employer for than (sic),” he wrote in one post.

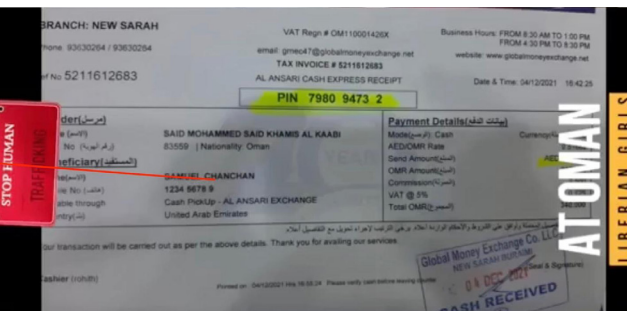
By 2021 he had relocated to Dubai and made connections with Omani agents including Al Ayadi Al Amina Housemaid

Supply, whose business card was obtained by one of the trafficked women. Liberian authorities say more than 350 Liberian women were lured to Oman by the ring in 2021 and early 2022. Chan Chan did not respond to requests for comment sent through Facebook Messenger.

Esther found herself working in a house with 10 bedrooms and eight bathrooms, with 15 people living in it. Only the mother spoke enough English to communicate with her. Esther says she had to wake at 4am, prepare breakfast, get the children ready for school and then clean all day and cook. The family ate first and she got what was left over.

“And when they eat the food and there is not enough, they will not give you food to eat,” she says. She often went to bed at midnight. She was not allowed outside the compound and got no days off.

After a couple of weeks, Esther refused to work. The agent moved her to another house, then another. At one point he beat her and broke her finger. She shows her crooked left ring finger that is healing at an angle. Eventually the agent had



Cruel commission:
A receipt appearing to show Samuel Chan Chan received cash from an Omani labour agent. Source: New Narratives

Esther arrested on a fake charge that she had stolen his phone. She says she was imprisoned in a dark cell with no light for 10 weeks. Five other African women in the jail were beaten and starved. She claims one, from Tanzania, died.

“It was like hell in the prison,” she says, struggling to contain her emotion. “Too much hell.”

Esther’s story echoes that of five other returned trafficking victims we spoke with in this investigation. One says she was raped. All were beaten.

Esther told her agent she wanted to speak with Chan Chan. That’s when she learned the truth. “He said he bought me for \$3,000 from Samuel Chan Chan,” she recalls. “He said you can go home but first you have to pay me the \$3,000.”

Strategic escape

In Monrovia Esther’s parents were desperate. Sporadic phone calls from their daughter terrified them. The traffickers were also calling, threatening to kill Esther if they didn’t pay her fee. Michael called everyone who might help. Police, government officials, other families and Chan Chan. Over and over again.

He shakes his head at the memory. “To have a child go there to try to help the family. For her to see it and say, ‘Because of our poor condition I’m going to go and find something to help,’ and then to end up in jail. It was very painful.”

For most of the millions of victims of trafficking this is where it ends. Desperate poverty brought them there in the first place. Some families will stretch themselves to breaking point to borrow the money to free victims from the contract. But most are trapped, at the mercy of agents. Even when the contract ends many agents pressure victims into another.

But the Liberian women in Oman were not willing to give up. Some had sneaked in Liberian SIM cards – hidden from the agents – and started contacting family and each other. They formed a WhatsApp group. A friend suggested they make a video.

“We were sent here by some guys who call themselves ‘agency,’” says a woman on the video, surrounded by Esther and five other women. “They lied to us. We never knew it was all about this human trafficking issue.”

Her speech is intercut with videos of a woman fighting two Arab men trying to hold her. Other shots show women crying as they sweep floors.

The video also shows a payment slip Esther found showing that Chan Chan had received money from the agent, an Omani named Said Mohammed Said Khamis Al Kaabi.

Oman has laws against the mistreatment of domestic workers but they are rarely enforced, according to people who have helped victims to escape. An African woman claiming she was deceived into a contract is never believed. Authorities only act when the woman can prove physical violence, which is rare.

Omani authorities did not respond to a request for comment.

The video and the women's desperate calls from Oman made it to Liberian news-

papers, Facebook and radio talkshows. Parents demanded the government act.

The Liberian government also faced pressure from a different source. After years on and off the United States Congress's Trafficking in Persons WatchList, the administration of President George Weah faced a cut in badly needed American aid if it didn't step up efforts to combat trafficking. The US provides more than half of Liberia's \$200-million annual foreign aid, equal to 12% of the annual budget.

Diplomatic communiques were sent to the Omani government. Oman agreed to stop granting visas to Liberians.

The women found two key allies: an African working undercover in Oman to help trafficking victims, whose identity cannot yet be revealed; and Ward Reddick, a Canadian citizen who had taken it upon



Safely home:
Esther cuddles
the daughter
she had to leave
behind when she
went to work
in Oman. Photo:
Carielle Doe

himself to help African trafficking victims after a Ugandan friend had been caught in a scam. The pair worked with a Liberian consular officer in Dubai who was given full authority to help the women.

The group set up safehouses. But the women still had to escape the agents. The first women to escape jumped over the walls of the compounds where they were working. Two told *The Continent* that they spent three terrifying weeks hiding in the streets of Muscat, eating out of trash cans before other victims connected them with Reddick.

As time went on, the consular official, communicating secretly with Esther and the other women through WhatsApp, sent cars to collect them. He issued travel documents.

Omani authorities let them go.

Painful liberation

Six months after the first women left they started to arrive home. Officials with Liberia's Anti-Trafficking Unit say more than 250 of the estimated 350 have returned.

The outcome is unprecedented, according to Drew Engel, the anti-trafficking adviser at the US Embassy in Monrovia. "I've never heard of anything this size, a group sort of mobilising, organising, however, they managed to do it. I've never heard of anything quite like this in my probably 15 to 20 years of being involved in countering trafficking-in-persons cases."

Reddick hopes the women's solidarity through the long fight inspires others. "One of the worst parts of being a victim

of modern slavery is the isolation," he says in a call from his home in Vancouver. "It's the belief that you're truly, absolutely alone, and that nobody cares. Even your family may not be willing to put up the money to bring you home. That's when they can really go downhill. The women bolstered each other's hope, in a really positive way. They never felt alone. They never felt isolated. And in some small way, that is a bit of control over your life."

"The women bolstered each other's hope, in a really positive way. They never felt alone. They never felt isolated. And in some small way, that is a bit of control over your life."

Eight months after she left home, Esther landed in Monrovia. In the family's compound, tears spring to Esther's mother's eyes at the memory of seeing her daughter emerge, finally, from the airport.

"Tears of joy," says her father Michael, smiling. "I was so happy. I did not shed tears but I was deeply, deeply thankful to God. It was a very, very joyful day for us."

A Liberian court has asked police to issue an international arrest warrant for Samuel Chan Chan, who is believed to be in the Middle East.

His brother Arthur is serving a 25-year prison sentence after being convicted for trafficking earlier this year. It's the longest sentence ever given for trafficking in Liberia. In 2021 the Liberian legislature made the minimum sentence for



Bring her home:
Esther's father went to great lengths to keep in touch with his daughter during her ordeal in Oman.
Photo: Carielle Doe

trafficking 20 years.

Esther was one of two women who testified against Arthur. He was ordered to pay her \$6,000 in restitution. The money would change her life, but she has little hope of ever seeing it. Though Arthur is estimated to have made more than \$26,000 for his part in the scam, authorities have done nothing to seize his assets while he appeals his conviction.

Esther is looking forward to seeing Samuel in the dock. "He [Arthur] is not the one I wanted to see in jail."

Engel says the outcome is an important example for governments across Africa of what can happen when a government is motivated to stop trafficking. But in the end, he says, credit goes to the women.

"The victims, complaints in the media and WhatsApp groups became very

powerful tools to raise awareness about the situation and make it rather untenable for employers and agencies and others to keep many of these women in Oman against their will," Engel says.

For Esther and the other returnees, life is no easier than it was when they left. But they are grateful to be home. They are now united in fighting for psychosocial support, job training and justice.

Esther has been threatened for testifying. Though the government has not provided her with protection, she is not stopping. She wants other women to know that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. ■

This story was a collaboration with New Narratives. Expenses were covered by the International Women in Media Foundation.



They're young, famous and dialling it in

In its second season, the star-studded series is boisterous, bingeable and ... unconvincing?

Wilfred Okiche

Netflix struck gold last year when a venture into the celebrity reality television arena led to *Young, Famous & African*, a ridiculously entertaining marketing of youth, wealth and excess.

Created by Forbes Africa's Peace Hyde, *Young, Famous & African* is something of a socio-cultural experiment. It assembles some of the continent's most famous

people, places them in Johannesburg's most luxurious corner and trusts them to let the sparks fly.

South African actress Khanyi Mbau, Tanzanian pop star Diamond Platnumz and Nigerian power couple 2Baba and Annie Idibia are some of the recognisable figures invited for the ride. Their mandate? To create enough drama to get audiences invested in their fabulous lives. The more scandalous, the better.

Most of the principal cast return for the second season. Newcomers like South African media personality Bonang Matheba and up-and-coming Ghanaian dancehall artist Fantana up the star power. But more is not always better: the show sags from the sophomore bloat, even as it remains compulsively watchable.

More episodes mean bigger egos to deal with and bigger personalities to manage. There is plenty of backbiting, loads of gossip and the displays of consumptive wealth are even more obscene. But there is also little by way of genuine high stakes drama. Nothing as compelling as the complicated marital dynamic between the Idibias that gave the first season most of its heft.

The protagonists talk about being best of friends, but lack the chemistry to support this. When they aren't being guarded, they appear to be vamping it up for the cameras. No one seems quite real, and save for breakthrough flashes of honesty, they come across as contracted players executing their obligations for our entertainment. ■

In praise of pilau

Barack Oduor

My first dish of Kenyan pilau was at a wedding. I was 11 years old. It was finger-licking good, and I kept asking my mother to recreate it at home. But this is an exceptional dish, for exceptional circumstances, and it was only served for special occasions and celebrations.

It was only much later, when I moved to Mombasa and would frequent the Swahili restaurants by the sea, that I was able to eat pilau more regularly. Spicy rice. Tender meat. The aroma of cumin, green cardamom, black peppercorn, cloves, and cinnamon, heightened by the cool Indian Ocean breeze. How can plain rice compete with this?

The history of pilau rice is the history of Kenya itself: a mix of local ingredients with the spices and techniques brought by Arab and Portuguese traders during the pre-colonial period. It points to the heavy influence of external cultures on our own culture. Even the name itself is derived from another rice dish, *pulaw*, that was popular in 16th-century Persia.

The recipe is deceptively simple. Long-grain rice is the preferred choice when making Swahili-style pilau, due to its fluffy nature. It is also naturally fragrant

and absorbs the flavour from spices and broth more easily. Cook this with ground pilau masala and spice-diced beef, chicken, lamb or goat, adding plenty of garlic and ginger. Then, in go the whole spices and ghee, butter or cooking oil.

Planning to visit Kenya? Then add pilau to the local delicacies you're going to sample for a wonderful experience. ■



Last week we sampled mopane worms in Zimbabwe, this week it is pilau from Kenya. We want to hear about your favourite food and what makes it so special. Let us know by sending an email to letters@thecontinent.org. \$100 for the winning letter.

THE QUIZ

0-3

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

4-7

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

8-10

"Colonisers legit called the country Volta – then lost power!"

Photo: Gonzalo Guajardo/
Vilalta Studio



1_ The Lideta Market (pictured) is in the capital of which country? [Hint: It was awarded the Unesco Prix Versailles for world's best shopping centre.]

2_ Which country is Ama Ata Aidoo, author of *Changes, Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*, from?

3_ The Republic of Upper Volta was a self-governing colony within the French Community from 1958 to 1984. What is the country called today?

4_ Which country did Djibouti gain independence from?

5_ In which year did George Weah become

president: 2014, 2016 or 2018?

6_ "46664" was the name of a HIV/Aids awareness campaign held in honour of which former president? [Hint: It was also his prisoner number during his incarceration.]

7_ Former president Abdoulaye Wade served as president of which country from 2000 to 2012?

8_ Who succeeded him in 2012?

9_ Buganda is a kingdom within which country?

10_ True or false: "Mauritanian" is the demonym for people from Mauritius.

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

On #BeatPlasticPollution, Africans want more

This year World Environment Day (5 June) focuses on a movement in which Africa is playing a leadership role: #BeatPlasticPollution. At least 34 African countries have taken major steps, through bans or heavy taxes, to reduce the torrent of plastics that will wind up in their rivers and oceans, their land – and their bodies.

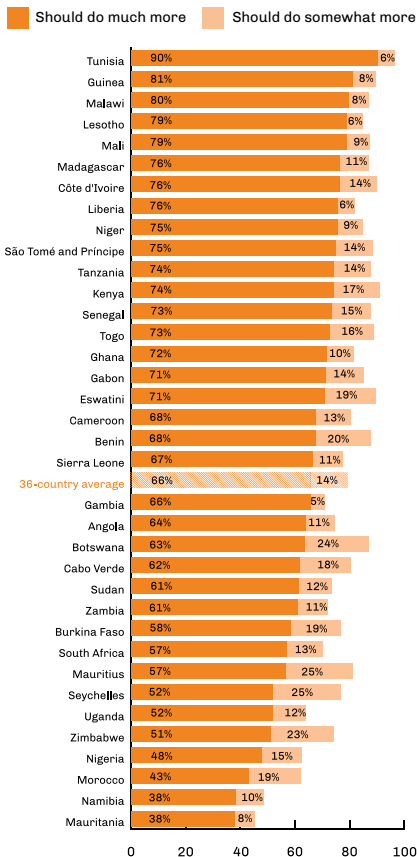
Their citizens want even more action. According to Afrobarometer surveys in 36 countries in 2021/2022, two thirds (66%) of Africans say pollution is a serious problem in their communities, including 39% who say it's "very serious."

And more than three quarters (77%) say plastic bags are a major source of pollution, including strong majorities in every surveyed country except Zimbabwe.

Remarkably, eight in 10 citizens (79%) say their government should increase its efforts to limit pollution and protect the environment. Fully two thirds (66%) – including majorities in 32 countries – want to see "much more" action on this issue. Only one in 20 respondents (5%) thinks the government should do less.

Substantial numbers (but still minorities) are satisfied with state efforts in four countries: Mauritania (45%), Namibia (35%), Morocco (35%), and Nigeria (24%). But they're the exceptions. ■

Should government do more or less to protect the environment? | 36 African countries | 2021/2022



Source: Afrobarometer, 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.

Why a court in New York is deciding the future of African debt

Private companies are buying the debt of countries at knockdown prices, then taking the countries to court to force them to pay the full price



Charles Ebikeme

In 2007, Donegal International – a private company registered in the British Virgin Islands – sued Zambia for \$55-million. Donegal could do this after it bought the debt that Zambia owed Romania. That debt was \$15-million, in 1979, given to Zambia to buy agricultural machinery. Donegal paid Romania

\$3.28-million for the debt. With the permission of a British court, the company was then able to enforce the claim on an investment it never even made.

In 2022, a suit was filed in the New York federal court against Sri Lanka because it had defaulted on its debt for the first time in its history.

Over the years, many lawsuits have been brought by private entities

against sovereign nations. According to the African Development Bank, 25 judgments in favour of private funds have yielded nearly \$1-billion in payouts. These payments by indebted developing countries could otherwise have gone to education, health services, or other national projects.

The debt often starts with countries looking to invest in public services, like roads and power stations. They can go through international bodies such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. Or they can borrow money from private entities by issuing sovereign bonds. These can be traded by investors over time — meaning a country's debt can eventually be bought and sold. It then ends up on what is called a secondary market.

Speaking to *The Continent*, Attiya Waris, a professor at the University of Nairobi and a UN independent expert on foreign debt, said these markets do not have the regulation that government debt would usually have. So anything goes.

And when an investor buys up that debt, there is no international debt court to regulate their claims if a country does not pay up. This is what happened to Zambia and the lawsuit from Donegal International.

Ben Grossman-Cohen, director of campaigns at Oxfam America told *The Continent* that investors sell their debt when countries look like they might struggle to pay it back. The new buyers pay “pennies on the dollar” but then use the New York legal system to get the full amount back.

Nigeria, a country that in 2022 spent

over 80% of its revenue to pay its debt, is calling for fairer international tax rules. Similarly, in March of this year, the 55th session of the Economic Commission for Africa – which brings together African finance ministers – called on the international financial community to change how it does business. This included fairer clauses for countries that can't pay their debt. They also called for “comprehensive legislation” against vulture funds in the United States and United Kingdom that try to profit off the debt. These are funds that buy up the debt of poor countries, cheaply, and then sue them to make a big profit.

The way the New York legal system works, much like that in London, makes it difficult for indebted countries to pay back their debt. In the UK, lawmakers closed off a similar loophole in 2010. A similar campaign is now running in the US.

The United Nations has also said things need to change in the way countries borrow from international financial institutions, which impose conditions and also leave out the population of those countries, who end up carrying the debt.

Foreign debt expert Waris said leaders take on debt for more than 10 years, knowing they won't have to deal with the problem. “It's the next regime that repays the debt.” That next government then goes back to debt holders to renegotiate the debt, saying: “We didn't take on this debt. We can't pay it.”

And then the vulture funds come in. ■

Charles Ebikeme is a science writer based in London.

Dear reader, this missive comes to you from London. We are not here in the company of one president or another for healthcare purposes. Nor, we hasten to add, did we dip into the public purse to fund a jaunty shopping trip to Selfridges. And we deny in the most strenuous of terms the frankly outrageous rumours percolating in certain circles that we've come to chill with King Chazza and Queen Cam, the patron saint of sidechicks.

The reality is that there is another queen in London town. True royalty. And we are simply here to breathe the same air as Beyoncé!

With Queen B on tour, we have had no choice but to listen to her repertoire on repeat, daring to pick out favourites, yet failing because how could we ever claim one to be better than any other?

There was one, however, which made us think of some of our lovely leaders, who are never far from our thoughts.

Not *Drunk in Love* (though *Drunk on Power* would have been a shoe in) and no, not *Beautiful Liar* either (drop the beautiful part and we'll talk). Certainly not *Break My Soul* (that ship sailed a long time ago). But rather 2006's *Déjà Vu*.

There are a few reasons for this, starting with news from the Central African Republic, where President Faustin-Archange Touadéra announced that he had decided to submit a little "project" to the people for their consideration: a referendum on a new constitution!

The referendum is scheduled for the end of next month and if adopted – *quelle surprise* – it would allow old Faustin to run for another term. Lovely for him, if it all goes through, he can bring a copy of the new constitution to the "show and tell" session at the next African Union Leaders Summit!

Speaking of which, there will be a new face joining the fray, now that Bola Tinubu has been sworn in as president of Nigeria.

In his address at the inauguration, Tinubu announced that a long-standing fuel subsidy would be removed, but provided scant detail on the matter – which prompted a new trend that has since become all the rage in Nigeria: panic buying. With confusion reigning alongside acute anxiety over when the subsidy would be removed, people rushed to stock up on petrol, forming long queues, driving up prices and even forcing

Less lemon, more lemonade



CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Samira Sawlani



Believe: A towering exemplar of dignity, hope and wisdom, with Nelson Mandela.

fuel stations to close, perhaps due to pump attendants going into hiding to protect their sanity. The government has since urged everyone to calm down and stated that the subsidy removal is not coming into effect immediately. Tinubu appears resolute and unapologetic, channelling his inner Beyoncé with a little *I Ain't Sorry*.

Cruel deflections

It's been another eventful week in Senegal, where Ousmane Sonko was acquitted of raping 23-year-old Adjir Sarr but convicted of a lesser charge of "corrupting youth", sparking protests and unrest in which at least nine people have been killed.

Sonko has claimed the charges were politically motivated, intended to block him from running for the presidency. But in defending himself in the public eye he has mercilessly undermined the rights of Senegalese women.

A coalition of women's organisations have united in condemnation of a speech by Sonko in which he declared: "If I were to rape, it would certainly not be a monkey victim of a stroke. I don't lack options."

As the women's groups said, his comments reinforce rape culture in a country where "one in three women is a victim of violence and abuse, and only one in four dares to initiate legal proceedings to seek compensation".

Whether his "corrupting" conviction and its accompanying two-year prison sentence will affect his presidential aspirations or not remains to be seen, as he may yet appeal the verdict.

Ring the alarm

Over in Uganda President Museveni has gone ahead and signed into law the country's monstrous Anti-Homosexuality Act. Thanks to this legislation, the punishment for "engaging in acts of homosexuality" will henceforth be nothing short of life imprisonment.

The speaker of Parliament, Anita Annet Among thanked President Museveni for his "steadfast actions in the interest of Ugandans" – because members of the LGBTQIA+ community are somehow a huge threat to the country? We stand in solidarity with all those affected. You deserve so much better than this cruelty.

Finally, in Sudan fighting has continued despite a ceasefire being in place. The army has withdrawn from peace talks citing the RSF paramilitary's "lack of commitment" and "continuous violation of the ceasefire."

Meanwhile the fighting goes on, health services are under strain and people are forced to leave homes, loved ones and livelihoods, many fleeing to neighbouring states that are already overwhelmed. ■

Senegal is all out of good options, with worse to come

A president who won't budge and an opposition leader protected by cruel vigilantes do not inspire hope for a stable society

Borso Tall

In the run up to Senegal's presidential election, the big question on everyone's lips is not just who will win, but who will run? The incumbent Macky Sall, once the great hope of democrats, now looks like he wants to stay in power, and is willing to break presidential term limits to do so. But will he succeed? And what would that mean for democracy in Senegal?

Though Sall has not publicly said that he intends to overturn the constitutional term limits that he himself supported introducing in 2016, members of the ruling party proposed him as their candidate for February 2024 elections.

Sall's refusal to rule out standing has resulted in popular resistance, leading to 17 deaths (including two gendarmes), 600 political detainees and an economic crisis.

Sall's main opponent is the populist

mobiliser Ousmane Sonko, leader of the Patriots party, who this week was acquitted of rape charges brought against him by a young woman. He went on to ridicule and condemn her in public, leading to further threats of violence against her from supporters. He was instead found guilty of "corrupting youth" – described as "debauchery with a person under 21" – and sentenced to two years in prison.

The conviction, along with a prior suspended sentence for defaming the minister of tourism, could render him ineligible to stand in the next election, and risks triggering a wave of violence the likes of which Senegal has never seen.

Whatever one thinks of Sonko, the perception the law was manipulated to exclude him is dangerous. Sonko's supporters have already rallied to his cause, flocking to his home, and in some cases attacking shops associated with Western countries viewed as close to Sall, including the United States and France. Some protesters are ready to die to see Sonko in power.

Civil society leaders responded by holding a national dialogue on 31 May, but it will take much more to bring the country back together in the face of intransigent leadership on both sides of the political divide. ■



Borso Tall is a freelance journalist based in Dakar. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa

THE BIG PICTURE

Brass roots: That's no tuba, friends. That's a euphonium, played by a member of the Republican Guard March Band in Addis Ababa on the occasion of the 60th anniversary, last Sunday, of the founding of Organisation of African Unity, which later became the African Union.

Photo: Amanuel Sileshi/AFP



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