

The Continent

Here we go again



THE WEEK IN BRIEF

ETHIOPIA

Africa Hall wins top architectural prize

The recently refurbished Africa Hall in Addis Ababa has won the prestigious World Monuments Fund/Knoll Modernism Prize – the first African building to receive the honour since the award began in 2008. Designed by Italian architect Arturo Mezzedimi, it opened in 1961 and hosted the 1963 founding of the Organisation of African Unity, the precursor to the African Union. Following years of decline, its decade-long, \$32-million restoration was completed in 2024.



PHOTO: RORY GARDINER

SURVEILLANCE

Made in Israel, tested on Palestinians

A *Drop Site News* investigation reveals that sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and former Israeli leader Ehud Barak sought to profit from the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria by marketing “field-proven” tools deployed by the Israeli military against Palestinians. Separately, a report by *Citizen Lab* found Kenyan authorities used Israeli-made Cellebrite software to break into activist Boniface Mwangi’s phone while he was under arrest in July last year.

SOUTH AFRICA

Mugabe son arrested for shooting gardener

Bellarmino Mugabe, the youngest son of Zimbabwe’s late former president Robert Mugabe, has been arrested in Jo’burg. He is accused of shooting a gardener working at his property; the victim is in a critical condition in hospital, the *BBC* reports. Bellarmino, 28, is the youngest son of Robert and Grace Mugabe. He and another man arrested in connection with the shooting are expected to appear in court on charges of attempted murder.



Bloc battle: Russia incubated the Alliance of Sahel States comprising Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, while France backs West Africa's bigger and older bloc, Ecowas. The outcome may favour less vested players.

UGANDA

Bobi Wine's wife and children flee in fear

Former presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu says his wife and children have had to flee Uganda, *Daily Monitor* reports. Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine, has been in hiding since 16 January, the day after Uganda's presidential election. In a video message to a democracy summit in Geneva, he described a military raid on his home that terrorised his family, forcing them to flee abroad. The message was the first time Kyagulanyi had addressed the international community since the election that brought President Yoweri Museveni his seventh term in office.

KENYA

The good and the bad of climate funding

Four Kenyan companies responding to the climate crisis have raised \$646-million: stovemaker Burn Manufacturing, electric motorcycle maker Spiro, and off-grid solar firms D.Light and Sun King. That's nearly 70% of the total funds raised by Kenya-based startups in 2025, according to the Africa Venture Capital Association. It suggests climate tech is getting significant venture capital interest, but that the funding is concentrated in just a few firms. Even so, the sector remains fragile, as seen in last month's shutdown of clean-cooking company Koko Networks.

AFRICAN UNION

Slavery and colonialism recognised as genocide

Leaders at the African Union summit in Addis Ababa have adopted a resolution describing slavery, deportation, and colonialism as genocide and crimes against African peoples. AU chairperson Mahmoud Ali Youssouf also called for an end to what he termed the extermination of Palestinians and expressed solidarity with Palestine. Member states agreed to mark 30 November as the African Day of Tribute to victims of the transatlantic slave trade, colonisation, and apartheid, *Africanews* reports.

MAURITIUS

A protest settlement on the Chagos islands

Four Chagossians landed on Île du Coin in the archipelago this week, saying they planned to settle permanently, *The Guardian* reports. Britain has been preparing to transfer sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory to Mauritius under a 2025 deal. A new civilian presence could complicate the handover by raising questions about residency rights and consent. UK authorities served the four men with eviction papers warning they could face fines or jail if they did not leave. But their lawyers successfully applied for an injunction to prevent their removal for at least seven days.



PHOTO: SIA KAMBOU/AFP

COCOA

Côte d'Ivoire mulls Ghana-esque price cut

Ivorian authorities are considering reducing the farmgate price promised to cocoa farmers, *Reuters* reports. Ghana recently lowered its guaranteed farmer price by 28%, and Côte d'Ivoire is concerned about cross-border smuggling if it does not follow suit. The two countries produce 60% of global cocoa. Last year, during President Alassane Ouattara's re-election bid, the Ivorian government guaranteed a farmgate price of \$5,000 a tonne. But global cocoa prices hit a two-year low last week due to a slump in demand, an ominous sign for already ballooning unsold stockpiles of Ivorian cocoa.

SUDAN

Fall of El Fasher bore 'hallmarks' of genocide

Over three days in late October, more than 6,000 people were killed when Sudan's Rapid Support Forces captured El Fasher in Darfur, an independent UN probe concluded. It described these mass killings of non-Arab communities as bearing "hallmarks of genocide", with RSF fighters using "exterminatory rhetoric" that showed their intent to destroy the Zaghawa and Fur communities. The UN mission documented executions, rape, torture, and enforced disappearances. Before the city fell, it was the Sudan Armed Forces' last stronghold in Darfur.

ORGANISED CRIME

Cybercriminals nabbed in continental operation

Police in 16 African countries have arrested more than 650 suspected cybercriminals and seized \$4.3-million in a major anti-scam operation led by Interpol, *Africanews* reports. The eight-week crackdown ran from December 2025 to January 2026 and targeted networks behind online investment fraud, mobile money scams, and fake loan schemes. Authorities say they identified 1,247 victims and shut down more than 1,400 malicious websites and servers. Investigators say the scams are linked to more than \$45-million in global losses.

NAMIBIA

MPs question generous benefits for ex-leaders

Namibian MPs are calling for a review of the lavish benefits given to retired presidents. These include a pension, a residence, staff, travel benefits, security, and cars. The call follows reports that ex-president Sam Nujoma has amassed wealth of more than \$6.2-million. *The Namibian* reports that MPs raised concerns about official residences becoming private property. Others argue generous benefits help curb corruption and encourage leaders to step down.



PHOTO: MICHAEL PETRUS/AFP

Rich rewards: Sam Nujoma was Namibia's president from 1990 until 2005

GABON

Total social media ban disrupts lives and livelihoods

Multiple online platforms have been restricted, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and WhatsApp.

YAVUZZ AKENDENGUE IN LIBREVILLE

GABON'S media regulator has suspended countrywide access to social media platforms "until further notice". Officials from the High Authority of Communication said on Tuesday that the move is meant to restore order to what they describe as a "deteriorating" digital space.

According to the regulator, Gabon's digital sphere has in recent years been marked by offences against public morals, obscene content, defamation, cyber harassment, and false information. These trends have significantly undermined the integrity of online discourse, the authority says.

Some residents view the decision as a necessary corrective. "The [measure] is reasonable," Régis Otsouna, a Libreville resident told *The Continent*, arguing that online content is largely unmonitored. He cited the proliferation of explicit material, online exploitation, and harassment as evidence of a space that has grown increasingly toxic.

However, for many others, the ban is

a devastating blow to their livelihoods.

"I use social media to sell my bananas, promote my music, and make ends meet," said one local vendor. "It's not possible to live here [without it]."

Koumba Arvine, a student, said that instead of a total ban, authorities should implement stricter content filters.

According to the regulator, Gabon's digital sphere has been marked by offences against public morals, obscene content, cyber harassment, and false information.

Communication Minister Germain Bihahodjow acknowledged the ban's potential impact, and said the government was "working to remediate it in the shortest possible time".

President Brice Oligui Nguema, who came to power in a coup in 2023 but won elections last year, is already under economic pressure. Teachers and civil servants are currently on strike for better pay and working conditions. ■

SOMALIA

‘Rickety’ planes lose sky rights after sea splash and flyer fears

An unprecedented crackdown has led to the grounding of a number of aircraft – most of them registered in Malawi.

JACK MCBRAMS IN LILONGWE

The Somali federal government has suspended seven aircraft operating domestic flights over safety concerns. Somalia’s Civil Aviation Authority says the airplanes will need to be recertified before their suspension is lifted.

Most of the aircraft suspended on Thursday were registered in Malawi, carrying the “7Q” prefix. A former pilot and instructor with Flytech Aviation Group, a Malawi-based company, told *The Continent* Somali operators often register planes in countries like Malawi because regulations there are perceived as less rigorous and costly. Among other factors, Malawi does not have age restrictions on aircraft.

Somalia regained control of its airspace from the United Nations only

in 2018. In February 2021, the country registered its first two aircraft in 30 years. Even then, it still did not have its own aircraft-maintenance facility. Today, Somali airspace is technically regulated by the federal ministry of transport and civil aviation. But its civil aviation authority isn’t fully functional.

“Local operators have to register their planes elsewhere. Malawi historically has been easier and cheaper, but oversight is uneven,” the pilot said.

The crackdown came after a civilian aircraft crash-landed off Mogadishu’s coast. All 55 passengers were safely evacuated, but the case ignited a wave of public complaints about ageing fleets on domestic routes.

In response, the Malawi Civil Aviation Authority, promised “a comprehensive audit of all operators on the Malawi register”, saying compliance with international sanctions and safety requirements was “non-negotiable.” ■



Wing and a prayer: Swimmers watch a plane land at a military base in Mogadishu, Somalia

Reading is resistance.



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RWANDA

Vulnerable homes in the dark on ‘black box’ welfare system

The formula for Rwanda’s new ‘household welfare scorecard’ – which determines who gets aid – has not been disclosed, leaving many confused by their sudden change in status.

JOHN MUGISHA

RWANDA has replaced its long-heralded welfare system, Ubudehe, with a digitised version. The new Imibereho Dynamic Social Registry is backed by the World Bank and was meant to improve targeting for social protection. But vulnerable people who have inexplicably lost food aid and health insurance question its accuracy.

At its launch two years ago, the government said Imibereho would improve targeting, reduce citizen discontent, and enable real-time crisis response interventions.

The government also heralded the new system as a solution to Ubudehe’s subjectivity. The latter was informed by community-based rankings. Imibereho would instead integrate data from multiple government databases – national ID, land registry, and tax records – to reach an objective welfare score for more than 13.2-million households.

However, as the digital transition takes effect, reports are emerging that some of those the system is meant to protect are being left behind.

In Bugesera district, Claudine*, 42, said her family’s support stopped late last year, without warning. “I don’t understand why we lost everything,” she told *The Continent*. Her husband lives with a mental illness. Claudine and other family members earn about \$2 a day from hard labour like digging for smallholder farmers or washing neighbours’ clothes.

“That’s how I buy soap, salt, and cooking oil,” she said. Her household previously received food aid and health insurance through Ubudehe, but the Imibereho system reclassified them from the most vulnerable category to a higher bracket and the support stopped. She has not received any official communication from authorities stating whether she can appeal the change.

In Kanzenze sector, cash transfers to Alphonse*, a farmer who cares for a



PHOTO: MINALOC

Digital disparity: Community members register for Rwanda's new welfare system, Imibereho, in Rusizi

disabled parent, halted. "They told me it was part of Imibereho. But I didn't understand the process," he said.

In Ruhuha sector, Mutoni*, a widow, lost subsidised health coverage despite no change in her circumstances.

In Kanzenze sector, cash transfers to Alphonse*, a farmer who cares for a disabled parent, halted. "They told me it was part of Imibereho. But I didn't understand the process."

Local officials acknowledge the upheaval and say the system is still being calibrated. A sector official told *The Continent* some households were moved into higher categories because of "administrative errors" or incomplete

files during the data migration.

The social protection office was crowded when *The Continent* visited. Some people waited in line. Someone argued with an official. A child cried in one corner. All waited in frustration in the hope of correcting their status.

Ubudehe was replaced despite impressive national statistics on poverty reduction during its implementation. According to official data, the percentage of Rwandan residents in extreme poverty fell from 39.8% in 2017 to 27.4% in 2024.

The ministry of local government did not respond to our questions about the challenges of the Imibereho roll-out. ■

*Names have been changed to protect individuals

This story was published in collaboration with Egab

COMMENT

The US-Europe love pact rekindles their colonial kink

People who claim to be our allies are applauding the Trump regime's invitation to join in devouring us.

NANJALA NYABOLA

THIS VALENTINE'S DAY, it wasn't just couples publicly declaring their eternal love. At the Munich Security Council, the United States Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared that, despite his president's moves on Greenland, the love affair between Europe and the US was stronger than ever.

Rubio's speech received a standing ovation. Across Western media, headlines hailed his speech as a conciliatory overture – a sign of progress or rapprochement after the strident speech US Vice-President JD Vance

made at the same conference last year.

But if you paid attention, Rubio's speech was a horrific misreading of the past, a romanticisation of colonisation, and a chilling declaration of imminent violence for everyone who is not part of his narrow conception of "civilisation".

Rubio's priorities for this shared Western future include securing supply chains for vital minerals and fighting the "climate cult", while decrying the welfare state as an obstacle to rather than sign of progress. He echoed the racist "replacement theory" to insist that migration is a threat to Western societies. Yet arguably the politics of



Berlin 2.0:
 Marco Rubio, secretary of state for the United States, basks in the standing ovation he received after his speech at the 62nd Munich Security Conference in Germany on 14 February

PHOTO: ALEX BRANDON/
 POOL/AFP

immigration enforcement in the US this year demonstrates that as a son of Cuban migrants he is not part of the “we” that he wants to defend.

This “what” is chilling enough: the “how” should alarm us all. Rubio explicitly invited Europe to join the US in reviving and defending the Western civilisation that with “missionaries, pilgrims, soldiers, and explorers pouring from its shores across oceans [to] settle new continents”, built “vast empires extending out across the globe”.

He congratulated the administration he serves for bypassing the United Nations to bomb Iran without domestic congressional oversight. He hailed the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as a successful international intervention. He casually referred to people as “barbarians”.

It’s clear Rubio’s position is that Europe’s survival rests on joining the US to carve up the rest of the world. He wielded the myth of Western cultural superiority as a justification for militarisation of the continent, citing Dante, Shakespeare, The Beatles, and The Rolling Stones as examples of “the way of life” that Western armies must fight for.

Yet even his beloved Beatles have admitted to borrowing heavily from African-American musicians. Rolling Stones frontmen Mick Jagger and Keith Richards have said they were influenced by the gospel music of African-American artists like Mavis Staples. But in the myth of Western civilisation Rubio advances, Western culture emerges spontaneously

from ingenuity and grit, transcends the Atlantic, and must be insulated from contamination by outsiders.

Rubio’s was not a diplomatic speech recognising the birth of a new world order. This was racist, violent sentiment that admitted moral defeat and invited other countries to join in conquest.

We should be worried about the speech and everyone who applauded it.

They should be worried for themselves, too. Aimé Césaire wrote that “a civilisation that draws within itself atrophies” and that “a nation which colonises [and] justifies colonisation ... is already a sick civilisation ... morally diseased and progressing from one consequence to another”. The “another” here is its own annihilation.

For Africans, this speech was a warning that could not have come at a worse time. As in Berlin in 1885, the carving knives are being sharpened and our continent is on the menu. Yet, too many countries are saddled with morally bankrupt, selfish, and short-termist leaders, many of whom have already rolled over and accepted their 30 pieces of silver in exchange for a photo-op.

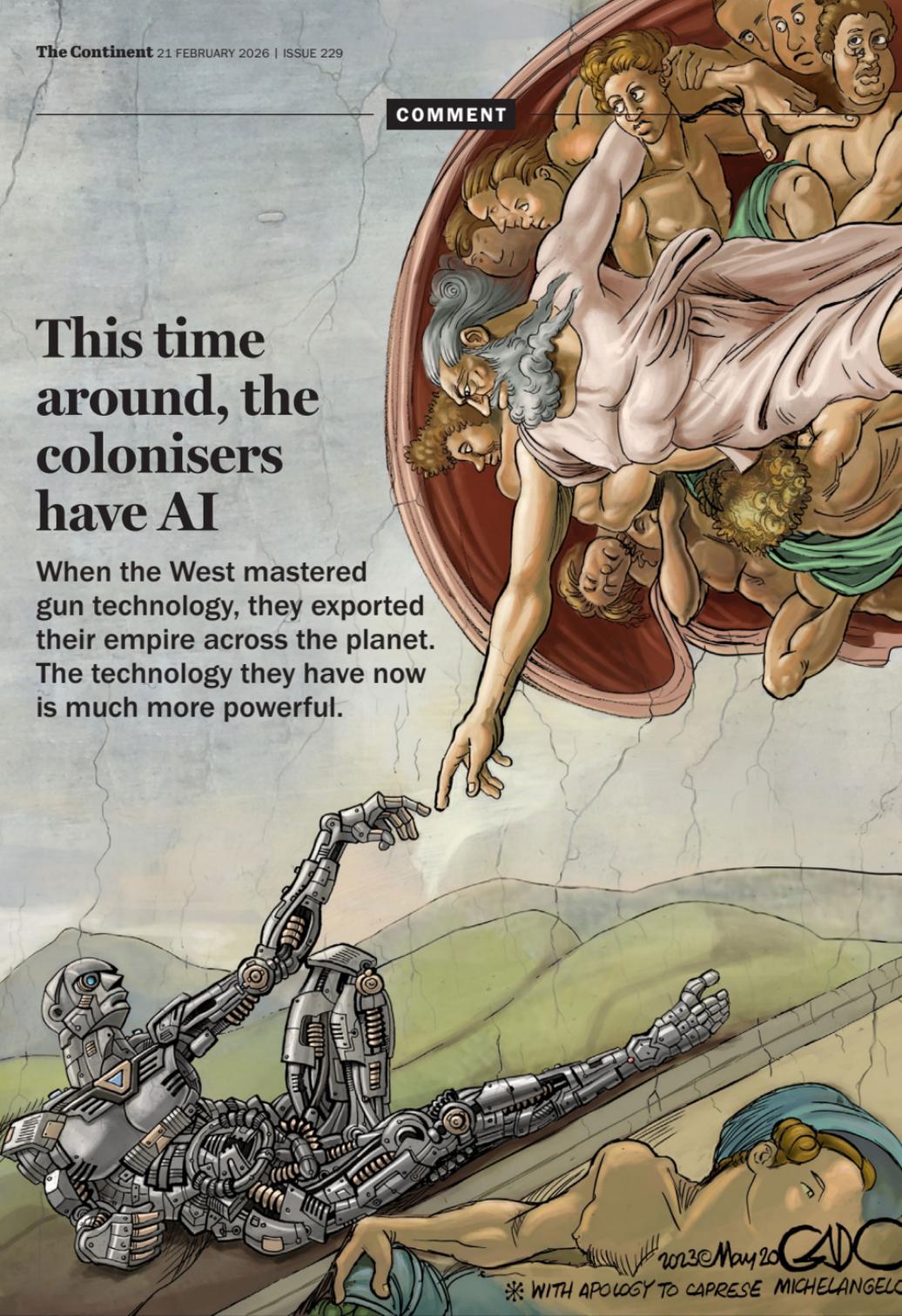
We are in desperate need of an African foreign policy and diplomacy that articulates, organises, and advances the defence of African people. The intent to devour us has been declared – and people who claim to be our allies are applauding it. ■

Nanjala Nyabola is a Kenyan writer and political analyst

COMMENT

This time around, the colonisers have AI

When the West mastered gun technology, they exported their empire across the planet. The technology they have now is much more powerful.



SIMON ALLISON

A STANDING OVATION.

At the Munich Security Council on Sunday, Marco Rubio, US President Donald Trump's chief diplomat, delivered a speech to foreign ministers, defence chiefs, and foreign policy experts. In it, he extended an invitation to Europe to "renew the greatest civilisation in human history" – a Western, Christian society that shares "culture, language, ancestry"; is "unapologetic in our heritage"; and will together "rebuke and deter the forces of civilisational erasure that today menace both America and Europe alike".

This kind of language is familiar to anyone who has studied the histories of empire, genocide, and white supremacy. Every single person in that audience in Munich understood exactly what Rubio was communicating.

And they gave him a standing ovation.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa – the leader of a political party forged in the struggle against white supremacy – was not in Munich. But he got the message loud and clear. "What we should be avoiding is a new form of colonialism," he told *The Africa Report*, in response to Rubio's speech.

Recognising the problem is one thing. Stopping it is something else altogether.

This time around, would-be empire builders have new, extraordinarily powerful technological tools at their disposal – and the leaders of the world's largest tech companies have fully endorsed that vision of the future.

US Big Tech magnates have lined up for photo shoots with Trump, the leader of the US administration whose vision Rubio was selling to Europe. They have lined his pockets with tens of millions of dollars in campaign contributions. Some may even share his racist ideology. Elon Musk, for example, gave what appeared to be a Nazi salute at a Trump rally last year. Musk's AI chatbot, Grok, together with his online encyclopedia Grokipedia, routinely promotes white supremacists and their ideas.

These are the people in charge of the AI revolution, which has been slow to deliver on its utopian promises – but fast to facilitate genocide and repression.

Nowhere was AI's utility to the violence of modern power projects more evident than in Gaza. Here, Israel relied heavily on AI tools to conduct one of the deadliest military campaigns in history, with civilians accounting for 83% of the dead, according to *The Guardian*. These tools are supported by the world's largest companies, including Microsoft, Google, and Amazon.

The world is being convulsed by two simultaneous revolutions – geopolitical and technological. Gaza, and Rubio's reception in Munich on Saturday, make one thing clear: these revolutions aren't ushering in a global utopia – they are entrenching and exacerbating existing inequalities and racial hierarchies.

And the avenues for resistance are narrowing, fast. ■

Simon Allison is The Continent's International Editor

ANALYSIS



PHOTO: ANDREW CABALLERO/REX/NOIUS/AP

Delivering us: Presidents Kagame of Rwanda and Tshisekedi of the DRC flank US President Trump.

The African Union is paralysed

Just when we need it most.

CHRISTINE MUNGAI

MARCO RUBIO, JD Vance, and Donald Trump are wrong about the way the West was made, says African-American author and historian Howard French.

“These world events took place on the back of the African continent and the millions of Africans who were enlisted in this vast construction project

through enslavement,” French told *The Continent*. “Rubio speaks of the need for the West to be unapologetic about this past. What he doesn’t understand is the fact that [just] because he never learned [history] does not mean it will go away.”

But our diplomats in Addis won’t be the people who school US leaders on African contributions to “Western civilisation”. They are too busy holding meetings.

As conflicts spiralled in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Sahel in 2025, killing thousands of people and displacing millions, the African Union’s peace and security council convened 69 times.

That is an average of more than one meeting a week.

That did little to halt the wars.

A new report by Amani Africa, a governance thinktank based in Addis Ababa, paints the council as irrelevant within Africa and crowded out by external actors.

Sudan was discussed six times in 2025. The council condemned the existence of parallel governments and renewed calls for ceasefires. Yet, the war entered its third year, mass massacres were committed in El Fasher, and Sudan is now effectively partitioned between rival forces.

A presidential committee created specifically to mediate between the warring parties in Sudan never even held its first meeting. Meanwhile, the real negotiations are dominated by “the Quad” – the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates – with the AU as a bystander.

“We have to ask whether the *raison d’être* that brought the African Union into existence is actually completely being wiped out,” Solomon Dersso, director of Amani Africa, told *The Continent*. “The AU is being marginalised, side-stepped, and displaced. And the result is basically African countries being picked up [by external interests], literally, one by one.”

The pattern repeats. The 2025 review paints an institution caught in a ritualistic loop: convene, deliberate, condemn, communiqué, repeat.

In the DRC, the council demanded that the March 23 Movement (M23) rebels withdraw from the eastern part of the country. Instead, they captured more territory. Like in Sudan’s case,



Haven’t we met? Delegates attend a session at the AU Headquarters in Addis Ababa on Saturday.

PHOTO: MARCO SIMONCELLI/AFP

external parties came to dominate: the US brokered the Washington Accord between the DRC and Rwanda and Qatar facilitated the Doha Framework between Kinshasa and the M23. The AU wasn’t even at the table.

The report describes the AU’s role in Libya, as “marginal, if not totally irrelevant”.

In South Sudan, no external actors crowded out the AU. Juba simply ignored the council’s six demands to release vice-president Riek Machar. The fighting in Jonglei state, which is related to the Machar political standoff, is moving closer to a return to full civil war.

The AU says it has a “zero tolerance” policy on coups. Yet, military takeovers in Gabon, Madagascar, and Guinea-Bissau went largely unchecked. The message to soldiers seems to be: seize power, wait a bit, run for office, and all will be forgiven.

The AU does have a peacekeeping mission in Somalia. But in 2025, amid aid cuts, its troops went unpaid.

Trade not diplomacy?

If Africa's dignity in global affairs won't be forcefully stated by effective diplomats, will it be negotiated with commercial leverage? A working paper recently published by ODI Global challenges the oft-repeated claim that Africa has that lever because it holds nearly a third of global reserves for critical minerals.

The paper's author, Bright Simons, calls the figure "a comforting hallucination that has fostered a dangerous complacency". The reality, when "stripped of rhetorical gloss", is that Africa doesn't have enough industrial minerals like iron, copper, bauxite, and zinc. Africa's share of global reserves and production of these ranges between 2% and 5%, according to Simons. What it has are valuable minerals, like cobalt, which industries use in small quantities. These attract commodity investors – and frequently, speculators – because of their steep unit costs.

The interests of investment bankers making a wager and of politicians like Trump and Rubio sometimes intersect, but not always. Leverage in markets doesn't necessarily mean geopolitical influence.

What Africa does have is its people. That cuts both ways. The continent's population is increasing at three times the rate of the global average, accounting for nearly half of the world's total annual increase. By 2070, Africa will surpass Asia as the most populous continent. With industrialisation and jobs, that could reproduce the "Asian economic miracle".

Without that economic transformation, this demographic dividend becomes a vulnerability.

So far, the external actors already treat Africa's population boom as both a labour pool and security threat. Europe, for example, funds migration control to keep young Africans out, while simultaneously fueling a massive brain drain of African doctors, nurses, carers, and teachers to care for its own ageing population.

Africa is going to dominate the supply of new workers and consumers over the coming decades. The West will have no choice but to come knocking, says French. "[Perhaps] most dramatically, the world will come to rely on Africa's supply of brains, of innovators, of inventors, of scientists, creatives, and thinkers."

Is that how Africa secures dignity and due recognition in global affairs?

That depends, "on how well the continent prepares itself for this situation, how well states invest in their own populations, and crucially, how deeply African nations co-ordinate their efforts and work together", French told *The Continent*.

That is exactly what makes the AU's paralysis so concerning. Dersso at Amani Africa is calling for a "state of emergency" at Africa's top governance organ to force leaders to respond collectively to conflicts across the continent. ■

Christine Mungai is the news editor of The Continent

PHOTO ESSAY

Love, in actuality

From Bulawayo, Ganvié, Goma, Kampala, Lagos, and Nairobi, photojournalists send snapshots of the many splendours of love spotted out and about on Valentine's Day.



GANVIÉ, BENIN

PHOTO: YANICK FOLLY/AFP

Love boat: Jeannine, a seamstress, and her husband Florent, a local fisherman, set off from La Place des Amoureux after a date in the lake city of Ganvié, Benin. For decades, this narrow canal has been the discreet stage for first glances and lovers' meetings away from parental eyes. But it's falling out of fashion with younger people – and maybe also with Jeannine.



GOMA, DRC

PHOTO: MOSES SAWASAWA/THE CONTINENT

***Ambush ardor:** In Goma a delivery agency called Shangwe delivers unexpected gifts to your family or friends. Here, a woman has her hands full with a teddy bear drenched in Valentism.*



NAIROBI, KENYA

PHOTO: FREDRIK LERNERYD/AFP

***Bloom boom:** Kenya's central bank warned lovers against using bank notes to make bouquets, leading to blossoming sales for Nairobi's flower vendors. Gone to their heads a bit, to be honest.*



IKEJA, NIGERIA

PHOTOS: SOGO OLADELE/THE CONTINENT

Gotta love it: Couples and insouciant singles pose for pictures at a mall in Ikeja, Lagos state, where a crimson tide of Valentine's pop-ups spread love and marketing to ardent consumers.



KAMPALA, UGANDA

PHOTOS: BADRU KATUMBA/THE CONTINENT

And still we rose: A boda rider straps in bunch of flower deliveries on Valentine's Day, while a floral vendor entertains an enthralled child at a nearby market stall.



BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE

PHOTOS: ZINYANGE AUNTONY/THE CONTINENT

Mercy bouquet? A dapper Boston Nkosi offers emergency petals for last-minute lovers at his flower stall in Bulawayo; dangly ornaments lay bear some Valentine's sentiment on a car's windscreen; a family takes a fashionable stroll through Centenary Park; and a frankly charming young couple celebrate the day and their own love further down the way.

INVESTIGATION

Revealed: The top guns in Russia's Africa infowar

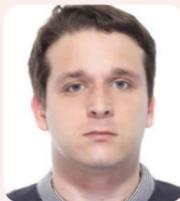
Russian efforts to influence countries are uneven, as is the network of operatives behind them. Dozens of operatives have cycled through the Central African Republic. By contrast, although they claim to have inserted themselves into Namibia's last election, there's no evidence that any operatives ever set foot there. Documents leaked to *The Continent* last October and others obtained by *Forbidden Stories* this week, identify the operatives at the centre of the infowar in Africa. None of them responded to our requests for comment.



Sergey Vasilyevich Mashkevich

He is the mastermind behind the entire operation. Mashkevich trained as an engineer, but made

his career in political consulting. Between 2015 and 2018, he worked in Russia's presidential administration as an adviser in a department that oversees occupied regions of Georgia. In October 2018, he joined Yevgeny Prigozhin's network to lead its mission in Sudan and across Africa. He has been awarded at least three high-level Russian state medals and his internal file recommended him for another in 2024, for allegedly stabilising the friendly regime in Bolivia and defending Russian interests in Africa.



Taras Kirillovich Pribyshin

He is sanctioned by the United States and was linked to the Internet Research Agency, a troll farm accused of

interfering in the 2016 US presidential elections. The operation was tied to Yevgeny Pribyshin, whose company Pribyshin joined in 2013. He shifted focus to Africa in about 2018, travelling to Madagascar, Zimbabwe, Libya, Sudan, and the Central African Republic on influence missions. The leaked files credit Pribyshin with a 2024 "investigation" alleging links between Ukraine and terror groups in the Sahel. He has at least two Russian state medals and distinctions from the CAR government.



**Nikolai
Vladimirovich
Radkovsky**

His internal file calls him a “bold media manager”. Radkovsky has worked for the Prigozhin network since 2014. He received a medal for leading influence operations in Syria from 2015 to 2017, and later led similar missions in Sudan, Madagascar, and Libya, and travelled to Egypt. The leaked files credit him with campaigning against Ukraine in Mali and against France in Niger and Burkina Faso. Those 2024 efforts accused Ukraine of backing terrorists in Africa and portrayed France as supporting opposition figures labelled pro-Western.



**Yulia Andreevna
Berg**

She was sanctioned by the US in 2021 under her maiden name, Afanasyeva. South Africa is the only African country in which she is confirmed to have been physically present, in 2024. Leaked files include a ticket purchase showing she travelled from Moscow to Johannesburg in March 2024 – months before the election that saw the ANC lose its parliamentary majority and negotiate a governing coalition. The St Petersburg op reported that “the Company” supported ANC campaigning “at the request of the party leadership” and later campaigned to marginalise its coalition partner, the Democratic Alliance.



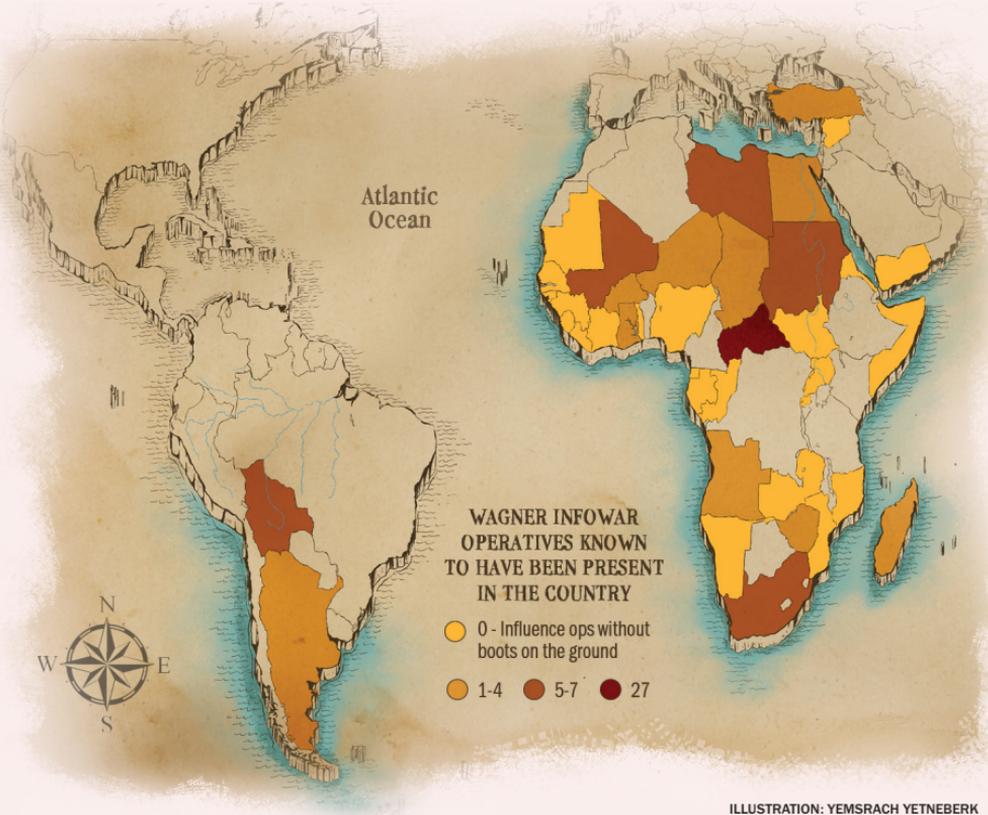
**Maksim Anatolievich
Shugaley**

Shugaley, also spelled Shugalei, is the most flamboyant of the active Russian infowarriors. He even had Russian action films made to burnish his image. He heads the sanctioned Foundation for the Protection of National Values – closely tied to Prigozhin’s network – and presents himself as a sociologist. The leaked files say Shugaley was sent to Chad in May 2024 to help Mahamat Déby’s election campaign. That September, Chadian authorities detained him for about six days. He was also arrested in Libya in 2019 for alleged interference in the aborted elections. He is sanctioned by the European Union and Canada, among others, but not the US.



**Artem Vitalyevich
Gorny**

The accountant. He was deputy leader of the network’s activities in Sudan in 2019. He registered as an entrepreneur in Russia and worked as the logistics and money man for the former Wagner operatives’ in St Petersburg after Prigozhin’s death, depositing large cash amounts in a bank account belonging to StratConsult, which hosted the operatives in 2024 and 2025. He managed the operation’s office leases and purchases of equipment and services. By December last year, he had been promoted to deputy project leader of the operation.



Dmitry Viktorovich Volkov

December 2025 employee lists obtained by *Forbidden Stories* describe him as a sociologist and political consultant assigned to the network's largest African mission in CAR.

Volkov is a wide-roving operative. He joined the former Wagner network in February 2023 to head the "information direction" in Mali, was promoted to lead the country mission in January 2024,

and in July that year was reassigned to Bolivia to lead the mission to stabilise then president Luis Arce Catacora's presidency, after a disturbance that many commentators derided as a "self coup". The operatives reported that they helped Arce's team to roll out counternarratives to reframe the incident as a genuine coup attempt.

Volkov is trained as a film director and has previously worked for Russian television channels, including TVC, NTV, and Rossiya-1. He received political-science training from the Russian Academy of State Service in 2011.



Vadim Olegovich Berezikov

Ghana drew little interest from the former Wagner operatives in 2024, the period covered by the files leaked to *The Continent* in October. By December 2025, however, two operatives had been assigned to the country. Documents recently obtained by *Forbidden Stories* show that Berezikov leads the Ghana operation.

He was formerly a deputy director-general at Channel 12, before he joined Prigozhin's network in 2021 and worked as an editor at the Prigozhin-linked St Petersburg TV Channel. As a political consultant, he has worked with Alexander Malkevich, a Russian operative sanctioned by the US and EU in 2022 over Ukraine.



Ksenia Valeryevna Soboleva

Soboleva (maiden name: Mitko) oversees the operation's digital influence infrastructure. The leaked documents covering 2024 operations include logs of chats in which she instructs a vendor to create Facebook accounts with names such as "Lourenço Ngola", "Aminata Djerma", "Oumar Koudou", "Mariam Barka", "Chidi Akinyemi", and "Lucia Aguilar Kalvan". Soboleva also managed the funds to promote Telegram channels like "Sovereignty", "Arab Africa", and "Abbas Djuma", and paid affiliated influencers. She is based in Moscow and St Petersburg. She has led the operation's media department since December.



Maksim Yurevich Sokolov

Sokolov leads the network's influence operations targeting South Africa, new

documents obtained by *Forbidden Stories* show. His name also appears in the leaked records from 2024 but only in connection with a two-day trip to St Petersburg from Nizhny Novgorod, where he lived.

STORY TEAM:

Eloïse Layan
Kiri Rupiah
Léa Peruchon
Lydia Namubiru
Sofía Álvarez Jurado

INVESTIGATIVE TEAM:

Lydia Namubiru
Youri van der Weide
Sabrina Slipchenko
Emmanuel Freudenthal
Kiri Rupiah
Ira Dolinina

Léa Peruchon
Édouard Perrin
Katya Hakim
Diana Cariboni
Eloïse Layan
Sofía Álvarez

OUR PARTNERS

The Continent (South Africa), *All Eyes on Wagner/INPACT* and *Forbidden Stories* (France), *iStories* and *Dossier Center* (Russia), *openDemocracy* (UK and Latin America)

DATA

Justice still has a fair way to go

YESTERDAY (20 February) was World Day of Social Justice. One crucial element of social justice is treating people equally regardless of gender or sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion or political belief, and similar categories. How are we doing on that front?

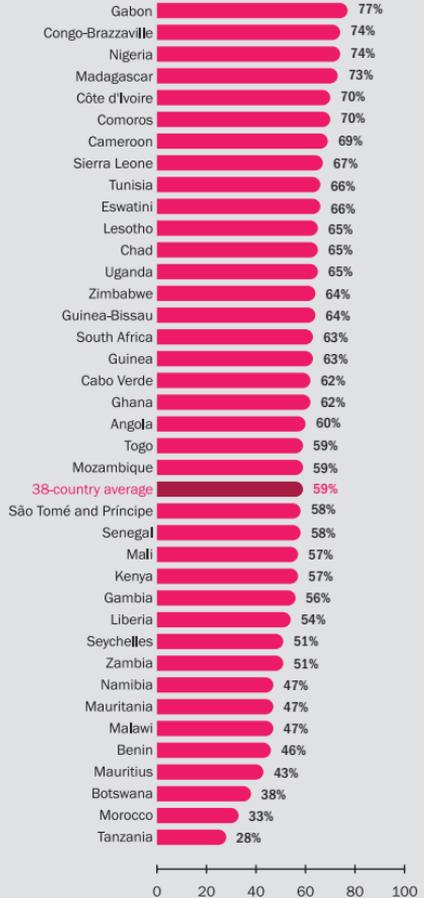
Not great. In 30 of 38 African countries surveyed in 2024/2025, majorities say citizens are “often” or “always” treated unequally before the law.

On average, 59% say there is uneven application of the law, including about three-quarters in Gabon (77%), the Republic of the Congo (74%), Nigeria (74%), and Madagascar (73%).

Perceptions of unequal treatment rise as lived poverty increases, from 49% among the well-off to 64% among the very poor, suggesting social stratification is seen to be real. Looking at 28 countries for which we have data over time, perceptions of unequal treatment fell six percentage points between 2014/2015 and 2016/2018, rose over the next two survey rounds (by three and four percentage points, respectively), and finally dropped again (by five points).

It’s a case of one step forwards, two steps back – and one step forwards again. There’s a long way to go yet. ■

People treated unequally under the law | 38 African countries | 2024/2025





FILM REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



Imran Hamdulay's cinema of healing and forgiveness

The South African director tackles heaviness with warmth – and comes up with a winner.

A child goes missing at his birthday party. His father, Ryan, fears he has been kidnapped by the gangs controlling their neighbourhood and reacts with brute force. This sets off the chain of events in *The Heart is a Muscle* that forces Ryan

to confront his own history of violence.

This tender crime thriller, written, produced and directed by Imran Hamdulay, patiently plumbs the masculine psyche, asking audiences to sit with emotions too often tucked away.

Hamdulay came to this story after observing a similar incident at his friend's braai – how the father went from fear to anger in a heartbeat. This sparked questions for the filmmaker.

“I had questions I could not answer and that place of discomfort is the place to be because that is where something interesting can be found,” he tells *The Continent*.

The story crystallised around the dynamics between fathers and sons. “What are we like as fathers, brothers, and friends to each other? What are the vulnerabilities that we hold and how do they come out? What does healing look like within men? And what does it require to open yourself up for healing?”

The entire film rests on the shoulder of lead actor Keenan Arrison. Hamdulay wrote the script with him in mind and cast him without an audition. As their relationship blossomed, they talked often about fathers. Hamdulay lost his dad early and Arrison's passed shortly after the shoot. “We spoke about how our fathers gave us not only trauma, but kindness and joy as well. These carry us as much as anything else.”

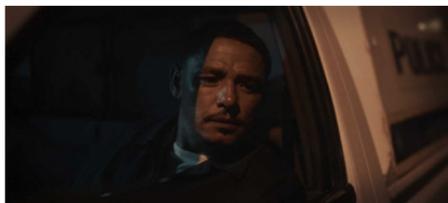
Hamdulay believes Arrison brought



Not all heroes can bear Capes:

Keenan Arrison leads a film that tests man's capacity for both kindness and violence.

ALL PHOTOS:
COURTESY OF THE
HEART IS A MUSCLE



kindness not just to his character but to the overall project. “Working with cast and crew who are good people is key. We give so much of ourselves – time and talent. It is powerful when that is done with kindness.”

Hamdulay always knew the story was going to be set in the Cape Flats and insisted on presenting this area – whose media depictions tend to emphasise gang violence and danger – through a more complex, less reductive lens.

The bleak depictions are “a hangover from the apartheid government”, Hamdulay argues. “It was important to me that we show the duality of the area without ignoring one part.”

He muses that the Cape Flats are similar to his lead character in the way both wrestle with memory and what the past gave them.

The Heart is a Muscle is steeped in a sense of place. Its characters converse in the Capetonian creole, Kaaps.

Making the film took a year and a half from start to finish. That’s rather quick by industry standards, and is thanks to executive producer Adam Thal, who believed in Hamdulay’s vision and insisted on moving fast. Hamdulay likes to work on a tight schedule. “You don’t have time to overthink. Your instincts kick in,” he said.

Lengthy timelines had frustrated Hamdulay when developing earlier projects, so this time round he side-stepped the film labs and funding institutions. He received support from the National Film and Video Foundation and the Red Sea Fund only at the post-production stage. “I didn’t want to wait six to eight months before I heard back from someone, so I thought ‘fuck it, I am going to shoot with or without you.’”

That decision also bought him creative independence. “Maybe if I had made this film another way, I would have had to fight for my vision.” ■

The Quiz

- 1 Which country in mainland Africa lies furthest west?
- 2 Darfur is a region of which country?
- 3 What is the demonym for people from Gabon?
- 4 Kirundi is an official language in which country?
- 5 Jos is a city in which African country?
- 6 Which country does the Sinai Peninsula belong to?
- 7 Which country is former boxer John Mugabi from?
- 8 Which Kenyan president did activist Jesse Jackson meet with in 1997 as a special envoy?
- 9 Which country does musician Diamond Platnumz come from?
- 10 Which country's presidents are sworn in at the Centennial Pavilion (pictured)?



HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to [+27 73 805 6068](tel:+27738056068) 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

"Democracies have a space to swear in presidents. But really good ones have space to swear at them, too."

PHOTO: CRISTINA ALDEHUELA/AFP

Big Pic

Net profit: Closed year-round, the Matan Fadan River in Nigeria's Kebbi State opened to 50,000 competitors last week for the Argungu Fishing Festival. With nets in hand, they vied for prizes including a million naira and two cars.

PHOTO: SODIQ ADELAKUN/ REUTERS



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