

The Continent

Hold 'em or
fold 'em

Botswana's
diamond gambit



ILLUSTRATION: GADO



COVER: It was long predicted and all at once, it is here. Save for economists' warnings about overdependence on a single commodity, all has been shiny and great for Botswana since it first discovered diamonds in 1967, a year after independence. It became the richest African country per capita, and a poster child for avoiding the resource curse. Then came lab-grown diamonds, identical to natural stones but which sell for nearly 90% less. De Beers, Botswana's historic partner, is now up for sale. Its second mining partner isn't sure it will continue to be a going concern – despite a recent media blitz about its large rare stones. Now, Botswana must gamble on whether this is a temporary slump ... or the end of the road (p13)

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The Museum of Memory: Our world is littered with monuments. Some seek to rewrite history. Others celebrate particular memories. They all speak to power, or the lack thereof. We close this eight-part series in Niamey, Niger, where a monument commemorates the last tree of the Ténéré, which outlived its own forest and defied the desert within the desert.

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF



PHOTO: MICHAEL O'HAGAN/AFP

Salvo: Kiir rival Riek Machar has been suspended from South Sudan's government.

SOUTH SUDAN

Machar charged with murder and treason

First vice-president Riek Machar has been charged with murder, treason, and crimes against humanity. The charges – announced on Thursday by South Sudan's justice minister – relate to his alleged involvement in attacks by an ethnic militia against federal forces in March. Hours after the minister's announcement, President Salva Kiir suspended Machar from his post. This escalation echoes an earlier episode when the rivalry between their two camps escalated into the 2013-2018 civil war in which an estimated 400,000 people died.

KENYA

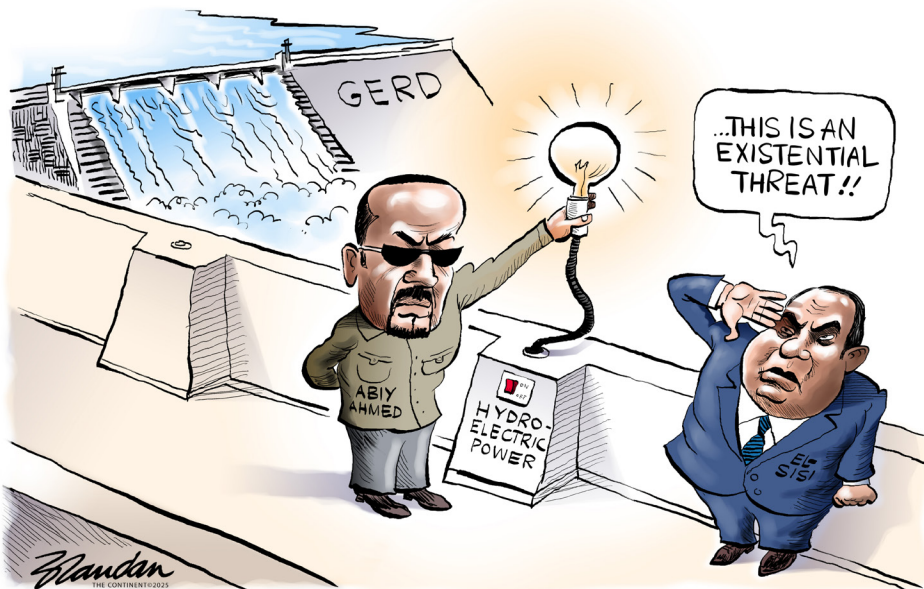
Filmmakers' phones bugged in cop custody

Forensic analysts at Citizen Lab have found that FlexiSPY spyware was installed on the phones of two Kenyan filmmakers after they were arrested in May. Police detained them in Nairobi over alleged “false information”, seizing their devices. They were freed without charge the next day but their equipment was returned only in July. The Committee to Protect Journalists has called the installation a grave violation and urged authorities to drop the case against the filmmakers.

NILE BASIN

Egypt breathes down Ethiopia's neck

Egyptian officials said on Monday they had finalised plans to deploy forces to Somalia under a bilateral security pact. Somalia has not confirmed the scale or timing of the deployment. But the announcement came just days before neighbouring Ethiopia was set to open the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam that has Egypt fuming. According to *Shabelle Media Network*, Egypt plans to deploy 1,000 troops to Somalia, ostensibly to support counterterrorism efforts against al-Shabaab militants.



NIGERIA

Nearly the whole country? Y'all tripping

Nigeria's electricity grid partially collapsed, leaving 30 of 36 states powerless between 11am and 12pm on Wednesday. According to *ThisDay*, power supply fell from almost 3,000MW to just 1.5MW during the grid failure. It was the 12th time in 12 months that the national grid collapsed. The Nigeria Labour Congress, an umbrella for Nigerian trade unions, has asked the government to comprehensively audit power infrastructure and review the privatisation of electricity generation and distribution.

GHANA

Another week, another knee bends Trumpward

Ghana is now accepting deportees from the United States, the fifth African country to shake hands with The Donald. A group of 14, including Nigerians and one Gambian, have already arrived in the country. Rwanda, South Sudan, Uganda, and Eswatini also agreed to arrangements with the US. President John Mahama said Ghana would take West African deportees and facilitate their return to their home countries. He justified the decision by saying West Africans "don't need a visa anyway" to come to Ghana, *Reuters* reports.

SURVEILLANCE

Big Brother goes full throttle on Chinese tech

Geedge Networks, a company in China, is exporting censorship technology modelled on the country's Great Firewall to governments in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan. The technology includes tools to block websites and apps, throttle internet speeds, roll out blackouts, track anonymous users, and disable VPNs, the *Globe and Mail* reports. Rights groups warn the technology allows governments to "supercharge their control apparatus", with unprecedented censorship capabilities and real-time surveillance that threatens the freedoms of their residents online.

GUINEA-BISSAU

How will we miss you if you never really leave?

Officially, Guinea-Bissau's President Umaro Sissoco Embaló's term ended last Thursday. He is still president anyway – and without court cover this time. The Supreme Court had already extended his mandate once – opposition groups had argued that his term was meant to expire in to February. But the court ruled that it ended on 4 September. Political rivals are now calling his stay an illegal power grab but Embaló insists that he will remain in office until 23 November, when elections are expected to be held in which he intends to seek a second term. Guinea-Bissau's Parliament was dissolved last year.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Ex Mrs Prez to run but Thiam can't get a look in

Five presidential candidates have been cleared to run in October. Surprisingly, former first lady Simone Gbagbo is among them. Predictably, President Alassane Ouattara, 83, is also on the ballot and prominent aspirant, Tidjane Thiam, isn't. Gbagbo is the former wife of former president Laurent Gbagbo, who is barred both from voting and from running. She was sentenced to 20 years in prison over 2010's post-election violence but pardoned in



PHOTO: AFP

Gflagbo: Former Côte d'Ivoire first lady and 2025 presidential candidate Simone Gbagbo.

2018. She has been a prominent trade unionist and politician since the 1970s.

DRC

Rebel group's attack turns funeral deadly

An attack by militants of the Allied Democratic Forces in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo killed at least 60 people at a funeral, according to *Al Jazeera*. Some estimates have put the death toll as high as 100. The group, which claims affiliation with Islamic State, has been one of the deadliest armed groups in the region for years. In 2021, the DRC government agreed to let troops from Uganda into the eastern region to fight the insurgent group, which first emerged in a rebel uprising against Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni during the 1990s.

SOUTH AFRICA

Cape gangs ratchet up levels of hyperviolence

Six people have been killed in just two days in Cape Town's crime-ridden suburbs, police said on Tuesday. Two women were shot dead and a third injured late on Monday in Wallacedene. A few minutes later, two more women nearby were killed – execution-style. The murders came a day after two people, aged 20 and 22, were shot in neighbouring Eikendal, *The Guardian* reports. Last week, a man was gunned down at a magistrate's court – the third court killing since April – underscoring the spiralling gang crisis in the port city.

THE HAGUE

Joseph Kony's war-crime charges finally in focus

The International Criminal Court has begun its first hearing to confirm charges against Joseph Kony. The fugitive Ugandan led a brutal 20-year insurgency in northern Uganda from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Despite an ICC warrant, he has evaded arrest for 20 years and the hearings are taking place in his absence. The court is under strain: its chief prosecutor is on leave after allegations of sexual misconduct. In addition, the US has sanctioned



PHOTO: AFP

Warlord assistance, mon ami: Leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony (left).

some of its staff after it issued arrest warrants for Israeli war leaders. ■

NEWS

MAURITIUS

All at sea but for common cause and a few rupees

India's island-cash injection adds up to 'win-win' diplomacy (unless of course you're China).

CHRISTINE MUNGAI

INDIA WILL give Mauritius \$680-million to spread over health, infrastructure, maritime security and other public expenses. This may be India's biggest single investment in any African country.

Grants and loans from India to African countries are usually project-based, and frequently range from a few million to less than \$50-million, according to data from the Brookings Institution. There are larger investments or lines of credit, but these too usually fall below \$200-million.

Indian media explained the deal as a result of "historical and cultural ties". Nearly two thirds of Mauritians are descendants of indentured labourers from India who worked on colonial British sugar plantations. It is also the only African country where Hinduism is the major religion.

But geography may trump history on the current geopolitical chessboard.

India has been trying to counter China's influence in the Indian Ocean, and Mauritius is key to its strategy, sitting as it does on vital sea routes, with the Chagos Archipelago nearby, home to the US-UK military base Diego Garcia.

The deal includes support for maritime surveillance and protection of the island's marine economic zones, and port improvement for its capital, Port St Louis, a major shipping hub. The deal will also fund projects likely to improve the Mauritian government's standing with its own people: a new hospital, expansion of crucial roads and improvements to its airport.

Long celebrated for its democratic stability, Mauritius now faces acute criticism for backsliding. Since 2019, the state has centralised power, weakened oversight, restricted press and civil rights and expanded its influence over the police and judiciary. Sins that a dash of shiny new builds might make up for. ■



PHOTO: PIB / AFP

Ocean besties: India and Mauritius's prime ministers, Narendra Modi and Navin Ramgoolam.

MALAWI

Hoping for different results from the usual suspects

It's time for voters to elect a new leader, but will they even bother turning out this time?

JACK MCBRAMS IN LILONGWE

THE STAKES in next week's presidential elections couldn't be higher. Queues for petrol snake for kilometres in some parts of Malawi. Inflation hovers at about 30%, putting even maize, a staple food, out of reach for many. Yet on Tuesday, Malawian voters will find an all-too-familiar cast on the ballot: President Lazarus Chakwera, his predecessor Peter Mutharika, former president Joyce Banda, and current vice-president Michael Usi.

Thirteen others are contesting the vote, but name recognition and past records mean that only a few matter.

Chakwera, elected in 2020 on his promises of economic revival and clean governance, is accused of squandering that goodwill. A forex crisis constrained the economy and, although some infrastructure has been built, his administration's performance has been "lacklustre at best", as Professor Boniface Dulani of the University of Malawi puts it.

Disappointment with Chakwera and his Malawi Congress Party has breathed

new life into Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party. Mutharika, who lost the presidency after mass protests and a court-ordered election rerun in 2020, is now on the offensive. Polls give the DPP the edge, though not enough to cross Malawi's 50% +1 threshold.

Ultimately, "electoral alliances will determine the winner", according to Michael Jana, a political scientist based at the University of the Witwatersrand.

But déjà vu may keep many voters away. "People are now presented with the same old leaders whose weaknesses are well documented," said Jana. ■



Basket ballot: The Democratic Progressive Party highlights the cost of maize, a critical electoral issue.

ANGOLA

Africa's crude paradox: Too much oil, and also not enough

As exports dry up, domestic use becomes both a solution and a much bigger problem.

TOMAS TEIXEIRA IN LUANDA

Weeks after fuel-subsidy cuts triggered deadly protests in Luanda, President João Lourenço has inaugurated a new oil refinery. The \$473-million plant in Cabinda is the first to be built since independence, even though Angola is a major oil producer.

The country's only other refinery meets 28% of domestic fuel demand. When the new refinery is operational the two will meet about 40% of the need. The rest will still need to be imported.

Historian António Manuel dismissed the refinery as a "political project" meant to placate the people without delivering what they really need: concrete social programmes and an end to corruption.

Angola produces about a million barrels of crude oil a day, most which it can't refine itself, so must be exported. As

the world moves away from fossil fuels in response to the climate crisis, it risks becoming stranded with increasingly unprofitable oil infrastructure.

Like other oil-producing nations it is trying to hedge against that fate by meeting domestic demand. In Nigeria, Aliko Dangote launched a \$20-billion refinery in 2024. Ghana is doubling the capacity of the Sentuo refinery. Angola plans two more: in Lobito and Soyo.

But activists at this week's Africa Climate Week in Addis Ababa criticised this approach as countries "talking out of both sides of their mouth" on climate.

Fossil fuels augment the climate crisis, wherever they are consumed. Increasing domestic use also undercuts a strong African argument in global climate talks: the continent has hardly contributed to the crisis, but is paying the heaviest price and so deserves mitigation and adaptation finance from polluting countries. ■



PHOTO: SERGIO JORGE/ODERRECHT

Cutting it fine: The new refinery in Cabinda.

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ETHIOPIA

Bootstraps and shoestrings: How Africa has to beat the heat

Leaders are trying to future-proof the continent for a world of evaporating climate finance and accelerating pollution.



PHOTO: LUIS TATO/AFP

This isn't Venice: A neighbourhood in Gatumba, Tanzania, flooded by waters from Lake Tanganyika.

**TINA S MEHNPAINÉ AND PROSPER
HERI NGORORA IN ADDIS ABABA**

LEADERS gathered in Addis Ababa for the second Africa Climate Summit tried to project a hopeful tone on the continent's climate future, despite funding uncertainty.

"Africa is not defined by vulnerability

– we are proving resilience," said Emmanuel Yarkpawolo, who heads Liberia's agency for environmental protection. Liberia is home to West Africa's largest forest, and it is offering it as a carbon sink for which polluting corporations can bid.

At the summit, a dozen African banks signed an agreement with governments

to support a framework for green industrialisation on the continent.

Launching the Africa Climate Innovation Compact, leaders said they would raise billions each year for locally led innovations in green infrastructure and nature-based solutions to the climate crisis. “We have moved the conversation from crisis to opportunities, from aid to investment,” Ethiopian President Taye Atske Selassie said at the closing ceremony.

Many African countries are spending up to 9% of their national budgets on climate disasters

But throughout the summit, there was an elephant in the room.

“There will not be enough funding and that is worrying,” said John Katikomo, a climate activist from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Delegates often brought up the fact that the United States, the world’s second-largest emitter of carbon dioxide, has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement. The pact calls for limiting global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

By leaving, the US signalled it would neither cut its emissions nor help to fund climate action elsewhere. That includes cancelling funding meant to help African countries cope with extreme weather linked to carbon emissions – even though the continent contributes just 4% of those emissions.

Some delegates tried to see the silver

lining. “It’s an opportunity for us to think differently and find solutions for ourselves,” said Saada Mohamed, of Kenyan thinktank Power Shift Africa.

But Africa’s financing gap is not trivial.

African governments need about \$2.8-trillion this decade to cover their climate commitments to the Paris Agreement. In Addis this week, African leaders affirmed earlier commitments that they would raise at least 10% of it at home: about \$280-billion. The rest, about \$2.5-trillion, was expected to come from international sources.

A new report by the African Union and United Nations Development Program says that by 2021 wealthy countries tracked by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development reported giving Africa about \$28.4-billion in climate finance. That’s only 12% of what Africa needs each year from outside sources.

Without enough outside help, many African countries are spending up to 9% of their national budgets on climate disasters. The World Meteorological Organisation warns this cost could rise to \$50-billion a year in the next decade.

Given the need, some of the delegates in Addis saw allowing major polluters like the US to opt out as a bridge too far.

“Floods, droughts, food insecurity, and displacement are costing us lives and livelihood. Every month of delay is another year stolen from Africa’s development,” said Mary Namakanga, a Ugandan delegate. “The US and other nations must understand that climate finance is not a favour. It is a duty.” ■

REPORT

Jewel of denial: Botswana's diamond dilemma

The country owes its fortunes to the promise that 'diamonds are forever'. But in the current market slump, shrinking company reserves and the dwindling of mining towns, suggest that forever may have already come and gone.

KELETSO THOBEKA IN GABORONE

THIS IS a great time for Lucara Diamonds, which owns Karowe mine in Botswana – at least according to news headlines. But if you read the fine print of its corporate filings, the end is nigh.

Last week, Belgian diamond-cutting company HB Antwerp announced it had received a 37.4-carat pink diamond from Karowe mine to cut and polish. The stone might be “one of the most important pink diamonds ever cut,” HB Antwerp co-founder, Oded Mansori, told reporters.

Lucara Diamonds made two other big finds in Karowe in 2024: a massive 2,492-carat diamond in August – the second largest ever found – and a 1,094-carat diamond a month later.

But buried in Lucara's quarterly corporate filings, which were published a month ago, was a formal warning about the next 12 months. “The company estimates that its working capital as at 30 June 2025, cash flow from operations, and other committed sources of liquidity will not be sufficient



PHOTO: MONIRUL BHUIYAN/AFP

***On the rocks:** Botswana's ex-president Mokgweetsi Masisi inspects the 2492-carat diamond discovered in Karowe mine in August last year.*

to meet its obligations, commitments, and planned expenditures,” the directors wrote. “These conditions cast doubt on the company's ability to continue as a going concern.”

The collapse of Botswana's diamond industry has long been predicted. Analysis of mining companies' latest corporate filings by *The Continent* and *Finance Uncovered* indicates that collapse is no longer abstract.

Lucara's numbers plunged from a profit of \$40-million in 2022 to a \$20-million loss in 2023. The going-concern warning suggests that the two

big finds of 2024 were not enough of a reprieve, even though they brought it back to profitability in 2024.

De Beers, Botswana's most important multinational partner and the world's biggest diamond producer, is also teetering. The company's core operations lost \$189-million in the first half of 2025, as it spent far more than it earned from its main business activities. De Beers is holding unsold stock of \$1.8-billion. The \$500-million in diamond inventories that its parent group has sold this year so far went for below-cost prices, according to trade-publication *MiningMx*. Revenue from Debswana, a joint venture between De Beers and Botswana's government, fell 52% in just two years.

In diamond-mining towns, the slump is already beginning to draw blood.

Debswana cut production 27% in 2024 and began a voluntary retrenchment scheme. Since December, 600 (of 4,000) workers have left. More job losses are expected by the year's end: a geologist working for its Letlhakane mine said workers had received letters notifying them of impending retrenchments.

According to Mbiganyi Gaekotswe, the secretary-general of Botswana Mine Workers Union, some workers' salaries have gone unpaid because of the slump and many are suffering from stress, anxiety and reduced morale. He has called for better social protections for workers, including secure terminal benefits and retraining for workers who are let go. Further retrenchments, he insists, must be the last resort.



The sunken places

Jwaneng in southern Botswana is home to the world's most productive diamond mine. About 40% of De Beers's supply comes from this town, where water is salty and unpotable and the streets are narrow, pothole-strewn, and often have no traffic signs or night lighting.

People from all over southern Africa have come to seek jobs in Jwaneng since 1982 when De Beers set up an open-pit mine. But now the town is starting to look ghostly. On its streets, many former miners – identifiable by their ashen skin – have turned to roadside trade.

Agang Phuti once worked for Debswana but now sells used clothing and snacks by the roadside. "The little we make goes towards survival," she says. "It's a struggle."

Local contractor Onalenna Senwelo's company is struggling after its electrical-works contract at Letlhakane mine was terminated in November. "My business partner and I were gutted," he says.

Even those who still have jobs are apprehensive.

"I don't know what will happen if demand keeps falling. I just hope the industry will bounce back," says Mercy Ketlogetswe. She operates a 300-tonne long-haul dump-truck for Debswana.

For Ketlogetswe, who was once a bottle-store cashier, landing this job was a dream come true. She began at Debswana as a contract worker before applying to be one of 200 women trained to operate heavy machinery. "It changed my life ... I can take care of myself and my family," she says. Whether she will continue to be able to do so depends on the global diamonds market.

The situation is no different in the mining towns of central Botswana, including Orapa and Letlhakane.

Laone Mbangiwa, who has been living off miscellaneous mining contracts in Letlhakane, is considering leaving in search of greener pastures. "Things are not as they used to be ... Many people have been coerced into resigning and others fear losing their jobs," she says.

The end of the affair

This could be a bad hangover, a long slump, or the end of "forever" for diamonds – but the difference may not matter in Botswana.

One reason the current slump looks so dramatic is because 2022 was a boom year for the industry, according to mining historian Duncan Money. "There was huge demand from consumers after the pandemic and diamond prices soared, hitting a peak in 2022 of almost 40% above pre-pandemic levels."

From this historic high, the dive could be a return to more normal demand levels. But lab-made diamonds are eating into that demand, creating a longer-term headache for the industry and Botswana.

Synthetic stones made up almost half of engagement ring sales in the United States last year, up from just 5% in 2019. They are 80% to 90% cheaper than natural stones. Unlike oil, which often rebounds, diamond prices may not.

"The appeal of diamonds was always partly based on scarcity. And now they

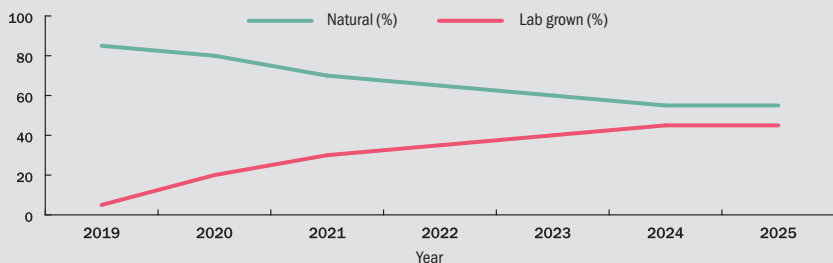


Facet asset:

Trucks carry ore from the open pit of the Jwaneng Diamond Mine.

PHOTO: MONIRUL BHUIYAN/AFP

Market share of lab grown vs mined diamonds over five years



SOURCE: 2025 BRITCO RESEARCH REPORT

are no longer scarce,” says Money.

And Botswana’s economy is not positioned to weather a long recession in that industry.

In recent years, diamonds still accounted for nearly a third of government revenue, 80% of export earnings, and up to a quarter of GDP.

It is Africa’s richest country per capita but Botswana is now facing its worst fiscal and social crisis in decades.

The International Monetary Fund expects Botswana’s economy to contract 0.4% this year, *Reuters* reports. Finance minister Ndaba Gaolathe has warned that the government will spend 7.5% more than it earns.

A senior finance official admitted that liquidity is drying up and the government is “sitting on unpaid invoices”. National debt is expected to double to 43% of GDP.

The social impact is already showing: President Duma Boko has declared a public-health emergency because hospitals are short of both drugs and equipment. Aid cuts have not helped.

One last throw of the dice

In response, Botswana is trying to take tighter control of its diamonds. The government owns 15% of De Beers, but has now hired a Swiss bank and a British advisory firm to advise it on whether it should buy majority ownership. Anglo American, the majority owner of De Beers, said last year that it was breaking up and selling most of its parts, including the diamond producer.

Buying Anglo American’s stake in De Beers would be a bold gamble for Botswana. It would claw back sovereignty over the resource that once powered its prosperity – the same resource that now threatens to sink Botswana’s economy.

Gaborone’s calculation would be that the market is in a long slump rather than a final collapse. Therein lies the gamble.

Once celebrated as an economic success story for turning its most valuable resource into development, Botswana now risks becoming a cautionary tale about the perils of resource dependence. ■



LIMITED SERIES

The Museum of Memory

HOW WE CHOOSE TO REMEMBER

CURATED BY SHOLA LAWAL
ART DIRECTION BY WYNONA MUTISI



Last Tree of The Ténéré

NIAMEY, NIGER

A TEMPLE in a corner of the open-air museum complex in Niamey houses the frail remains of L'arbre du Ténéré. The tree, an ancient acacia with two curved trunks, is rooted into a cement base and its gnarly branches push towards the temple's ceilings.

Symbols of the Tuareg people, spread across northern Niger from where L'arbre du Ténéré originates, are inscribed on the blue-and-white temple's base and front walls.

The tree has spun legends for decades, with some people wondering if it has mystical powers. For about 300 years, the old acacia blossomed alone in a vast area of Niger's chunk of the Sahara. Its presence was wondrous: a living reminder of the once-green savannah that existed in the desert thousands of

years ago, replete with lakes, vegetation and wildlife. This was before a great climate-change event caused the area to dry out and become one of the most arid patches on Earth.

L'arbre du Ténéré was once part of an acacia forest. However, by the 20th century all its neighbours had died off. The sole tree was located halfway on the untarred route that the azalai, or salt-



PHOTO: KIM GORDON-BATES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

trading caravans, took from northern Agadez to Bilma, the town of large salt mines 400km to the east.

For locals, the acacia was a signpost on their journey. Every year, before they crossed the Ténéré, the azalai would gather under the tree, as though gathering strength from it. Legend has it that the acacia had no neighbours within 400km, although the oasis town of Timia is 150km to the west.

Foreigners were baffled, particularly French explorers who traversed the area when Niger was colonised by France from the 1890s. The patch of the Sahara where the tree stood was known as the Ténéré, or “wastelands” in the local Tamasheq language, and is famed for its harsh landscape – a desert within the desert.

Nothing survives in the blistering sun and the hot blankets of sand. Yet, the acacia stood.

L'arbre du Ténéré was the muse of several French officers. Cartographers marked it on maps as a notable landmark. In his memoir, Michel Lesourd, a French army officer who saw the tree in May 1939, pondered how it survived, why no camels from the travelling caravans had eaten its branches, and why locals were never tempted to cut it down for firewood.

Perhaps it was sacred and touching it was taboo, Lesourd wrote. Later, the officer found some answers: a well dug by the French colonial military close to the tree revealed its roots went at least 30m down to the water table.

There were signs of the tragedy to come. In 1959, French explorer Henri Lhote wrote in his notes that its girth was significantly reduced since he first saw it some decades before. The lower branches were gone and it had lost some leaves at the top. Part of its trunk appeared torn out; he wrote that a vehicle had hit it.

Then, in 1973, a Libyan driver ran his truck straight into the tree, killing it. He was believed to be drunk. The 300-year-old tree was dead.

It was heartbreaking news for Nigeriens. The tree was transported to Agadez by car, before its remains were airlifted to the museum in Niamey, where it remains. In 1974, the Nigerien government issued postage stamps featuring the acacia to commemorate its death.

A metal contraption, made of a pole that's affixed to tin drums at the base, now stands in the tree's original spot, a touching attempt to memorialise the lost acacia. Passing tourists often chalk their names on the memorial. ■

Illustration note from Nigerien illustrator Zeddy: *Resilience, tenacity, and courage come to mind each time I contemplate the remains of the Tree of Ténéré in its mausoleum at the Boubou Hama National Museum in Niamey. This powerful symbol for the Nigerien people inspired my work. I sought to capture the tree's solitude in the desert, illuminating the night like a beacon. The footprints evoke its role as both a guide in the desert and a metaphorical compass in our lives.*



ZEDDY

LAST TREE OF THE TÉNÉRÉ

ILLUSTRATION: ZEDDY

PHOTO ESSAY

Run rings around M23

WORDS AND PHOTOS: MOSES SAWASAWA/THE CONTINENT

MORE THAN a million people reside in Goma, the eastern DRC city that was seized by fighters of the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group in January. For months now, their daily life has unfolded under armed occupation. Despite the fear and the sense of abandonment that pervades the city, some residents are attempting to resume a “normal” life.

Inside a modest building with peeling paint, the Goma Nyama Boxing club keeps the hearts of the city’s young men and women beating. Dozens go in every day to spar and train using sand-filled punching bags. With every punch thrown at the heavy bag, it is as if the boxers are striking back against the fear that hangs over Goma. ■









DATA

Democracy is in the eyes of the beholder

AHEAD OF International Day of Democracy next week (15 September), we’re looking at what Africans think of the state of democracy in their homeland.

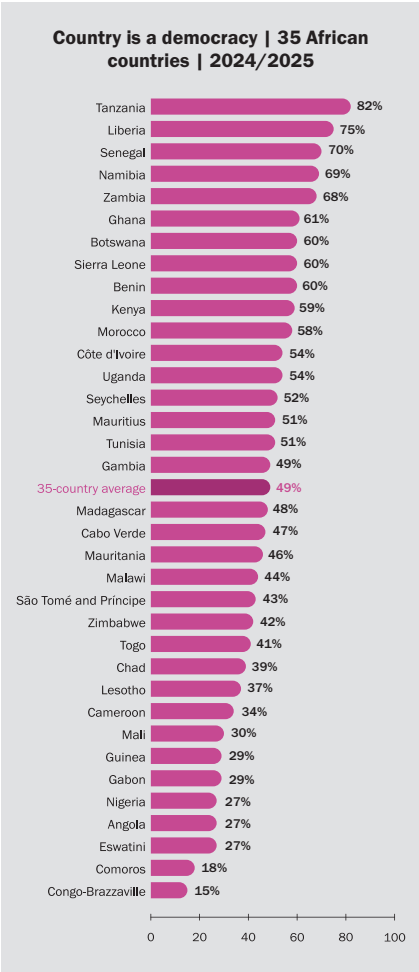
On average across 35 countries we’ve surveyed since the start of 2024, fewer than half (49%) of respondents identify their country as a “full democracy” or a “democracy with minor problems.”

Countries vary enormously. At least three-quarters of Tanzanians (82%) and Liberians (75%) say they are living in a democracy, compared to just 18% in Comoros and 15% in Congo-Brazzaville.

Across 26 countries for which we have data stretching back to 2011, average perceptions of democracy have bounced back to where they were a decade ago, regaining five percentage points since our 2021/2023 survey.

In that round, we asked respondents to predict how their democracy would fare in five years’ time. People across the full sample of 39 countries were more likely to expect progress (33%) than decline (21%), although the biggest share (36%) expected no change.

So far, things seem to be trending in the right direction. But there’s a long way to go yet. ■





FILM REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



We're still doing this, are we?

Netflix must learn to hop off the bandwagon before tried-and-tested gets tired-and-testing.

IT HAS become a Netflix subgenre at this point: an ordinary person gets involved in a criminal operation and triumphs against the odds. They're working class and unremarkable – aside from how well placed they are to commit the perfect crime in broad daylight, that is. Think *Unseen* starring Gail Mabalane, a remake of the Turkish show *Fatma*, and Nigeria's *To Kill a Monkey*.

The latest Netflix addition to this tradition is *Marked* – forgive the title –

co-created by Akin Omotoso, Sydney Dire, and Steven Pillemer.

At the centre of this tale of faith and desperation is Babalwa (a solid Lerato Mvelase), a former police officer working as an underpaid security guard for a company that transports money.

Married to a pastor, Babalwa is a devoted Christian who tries to live above board in her personal and professional lives. When her only daughter becomes sick, her faith is shaken to its core as she learns she is the kind of person who will do absolutely anything to raise the money to keep her child alive.

Marked ticks all the boxes of a heist caper. The first episode sets up the stakes and Babalwa's tilt to the dark side. Over the subsequent five episodes, motives are underlined, the team is assembled, spoilers are introduced, action set-pieces occur, and the inevitable complications emerge. So far, so cliché.

The moral dilemma presented by the protagonist's peculiar circumstance makes things a bit more interesting here, as do agile performances from a supporting cast of familiar actors. Polished production-design work keeps things visually dynamic.

But, ultimately, although *Marked* may be a cut above the glut of recent Netflix-commissioned crime thrillers, it still isn't convincing enough to stand out from the pack. ■

The Quiz

- 1 In which country are the Blue Nile Falls (pictured) located?
- 2 Who is currently serving as the president of Malawi?
- 3 The Italian Invasion of 1935-1937 took place in which country?
- 4 Which country did Laurent-Désiré Kabila once lead?
- 5 Which country did Laurent Gbagbo once lead?
- 6 What is the name of Mauritius's official currency?
- 7 Seretse Khama was which country's first president?
- 8 Niger's capital is its largest city and its economic hub. What is its name?
- 9 True or false: Luanda is the name of a city and province in Angola.
- 10 *Beng Beng Beng* is a 1998 song by which African artist?



HOW DID I DO?

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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

"They say you shouldn't go chasing waterfalls – mainly because they run so fast, but even if you do catch one it will probably be high af and then what? "

DEBATE

Sudan's landslide tragedy is more than just a natural disaster

To fully sit with and respond to the tragedy in Tarsin, we must move beyond its passive framing as a random act of God.

SUAD ABDEL AZIZ AND SARAH ELBAKRI

MANY NEWS headlines described the landslide that struck the village of Tarsin in western Sudan on 31 August as a natural disaster, but this tragedy was not just a random act of nature. The forces that set its victims up for mass death cannot be separated from climate injustice, imperial extraction, and the ongoing genocide in Sudan.

The landslide came after days of relentless rain that destabilised bedrock in Jebel Marra, the Marra Mountains of central Darfur in western Sudan. Climate change has made such extreme weather events more likely. Climate change isn't fuelled by "nature", but by the pollution of corporations and industrialised countries.

The people who lived in Tarsin, at least 1,000 of whom are now dead, are unlikely to have contributed much to the pollution driving climate change. But their fate fits a tragically common pattern: it is people with minimal resources and political power who inhabit the world's most environmentally fragile areas.

In Sudan's current war context, many of these people were driven to Tarsin and the wider Marra Mountains by the United Arab Emirates-backed Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and their ongoing genocidal campaign in Darfur and Kordofan. The militia is attempting to violently annex the west of Sudan, in an ethnic-cleansing campaign in which it burns villages and besieges cities to drive out the indigenous populations so it can take control of the land and resources. Many in Tarsin were displaced from their homes in North Darfur's Fasher and Tawila areas after the RSF laid siege to nearby El Fasher. Families fled into the Marra Mountains, where they settled on steep and unstable terrain.

Mass displacement strips communities of their capacity to withstand environmental shocks, while forcing them into unsustainable land-use practices, including deforestation and soil degradation, which makes their new locations even more fragile.

The landslide disaster was, therefore, not just the result of heavy rainfall, but the direct outcome of a war strategy.

The RSF keeps up its brutal campaign



Unnatural: Responders survey the aftermath of the Tarsin landslide.

PHOTO: SUDAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT/AFF

in part because it has external support, primarily from the UAE. This financing is about resource extraction and strategic control: the militia would give the UAE unfettered access to Sudan's gold reserves, agricultural land, and supply routes in the areas it comes to control.

Given all this, the landslide was driven by decades-long ecological destruction, powered with pollution by the industrialised world and militarised internal displacement, externally funded to make way for imperial extraction.

It's important to get beyond speaking passively of "natural disasters" to connect these dots. Only then can we speak meaningfully about justice.

For Sudan, climate justice in the wake of this tragedy must go beyond temporary aid. True justice requires: ending the genocidal RSF campaign; confronting the UAE's attempt to

grab land and resources; supporting grassroots movements that defend indigenous people's ancestral lands; and continuing to demand accountability and reparations from the polluting countries and corporations whose profits fuel climate collapse

We owe it to the people of Tarsin – like countless communities rendered vulnerable by extraction, imperialism, and hunger for power – to sit with these complexities and work at unspooling them simultaneously. Even if this isn't the simplest story – or the path of least resistance. ■

Suad Abdel aziz is a Sudanese-American human-rights lawyer. Sarah Elbakri is a Sudanese-American advocate for climate justice. Both are part of the advocacy collective Decolonize Sudan and live in Dallas, Texas, US

Big Pic

The beat goes on: Orthodox clerics lead Enkutatash or new year celebrations in Addis Ababa, on 11 September, marking the end of the rainy season and the start of the Ethiopian calendar year 2018.

PHOTO: LUIS TATO/AFP



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