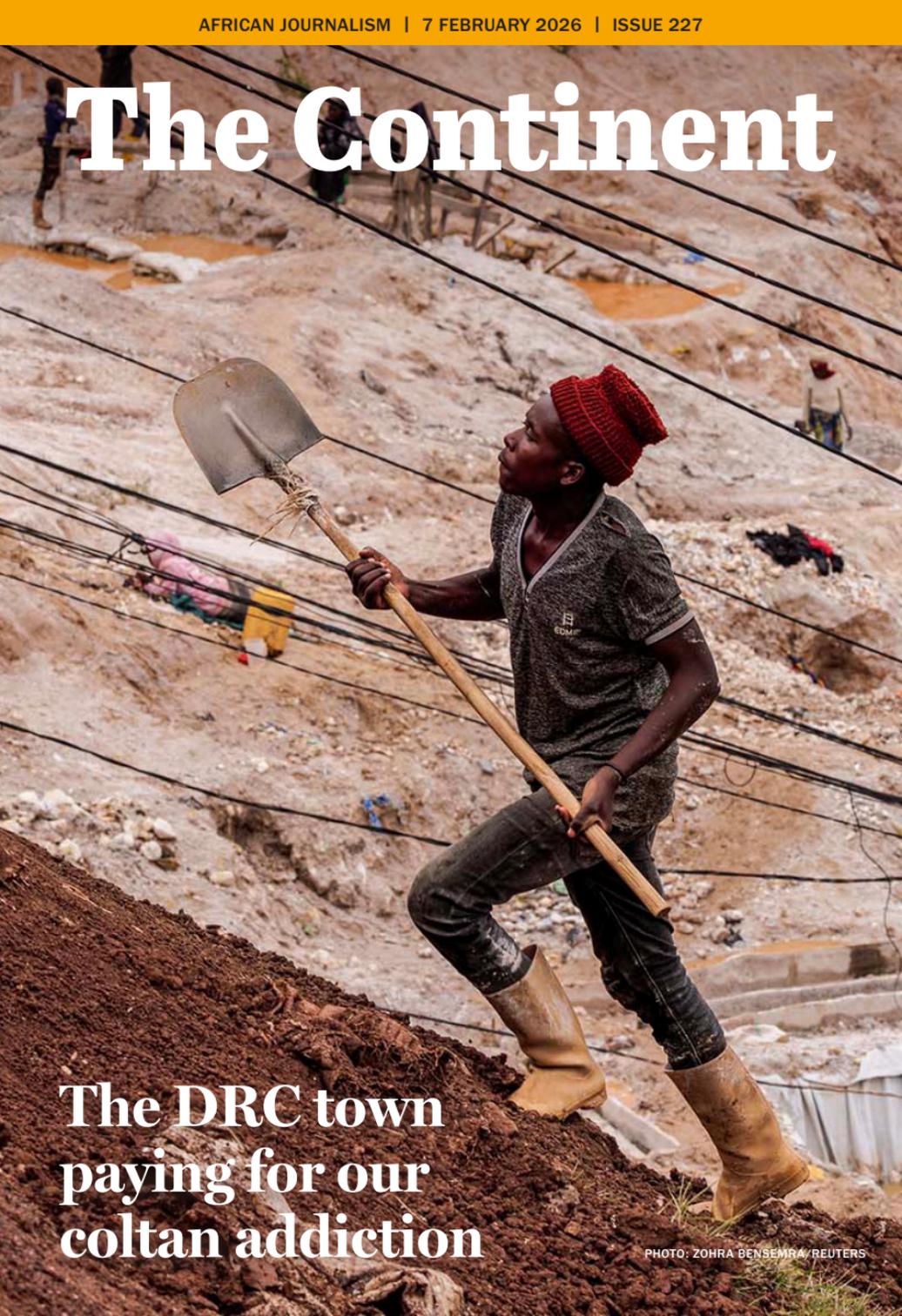


# The Continent

A man wearing a red beanie, a grey patterned t-shirt, dark pants, and yellow rubber boots is climbing a steep, muddy embankment. He is holding a large metal shovel with a wooden handle. The background shows a construction site with exposed earth, rebar, and some debris. Other workers are visible in the distance.

The DRC town  
paying for our  
coltan addiction

PHOTO: ZOHRA BENSEMRA / REUTERS



**COVER** The M23 rebel movement would rather that we did not know what exactly was happening in the coltan mines under its control in Rubaya, in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They have banned journalists from accessing the area after a devastating landslide killed hundreds of artisanal miners (p8). But *The Continent* was able to speak with local sources to understand exactly what makes these mines – without which the world’s high-tech economy would collapse – so dangerous to the men who work them (p14).

# Inside

- 7** **Guinea:** Junta holds off US mining interests
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## READING IS RESISTANCE

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# THE WEEK IN BRIEF

## MUSIC

### Grammys finally get it right

The late Fela Kuti doesn't need any external validation. Nonetheless, the Nigerian singer became the first African musician to be recognised with a lifetime achievement award at the Grammys. "Fela was more than a musician. He was a fearless voice of the people, a philosopher of freedom, and a revolutionary force whose music confronted injustice and reshaped global sound," said Nigerian President Bola Tinubu. According to his critics, Tinubu is exactly the kind of corrupt,



PHOTO: LAURENT REBOURS/AP

incompetent leader Fela railed against in his music.

## OLYMPICS

### More Africans than ever at Winter Games

There will be 15 African athletes competing in the Winter Olympic Games in Milano Cortina – a threefold increase from the Beijing games in 2022, according to the International Olympic Committee. A total of eight African countries will be represented: Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Eritrea, Madagascar, Morocco, Kenya, and South Africa. The Winter Games began with the opening ceremony on Friday evening.

## MOROCCO

### Deluge follows drought, floods displace famine

More than 140,000 people have been evacuated from the northwestern plains after torrential rains caused severe flooding. The floods follow seven consecutive years of drought in the country. Heavy rainfalls in recent weeks have also caused chaos and casualties in parts of Algeria and Tunisia. The Moroccan army has been deployed to assist with evacuation efforts and no casualties have yet been reported.

## THE KING'S (HATE) SPEECH...



**Your Royal High-On-Your-Own-Supply-Ness:** At a gathering in January, the king of the Zulu people, Misizulu Sinqobile kaZwelithini, said foreigners should leave South Africa. His mother is from Eswatini.

### EGYPT

## Two-billion dollar eurobond planned

In addition to its embrace of neopharaonic nationalism (see p19), Egypt is taking concrete measures to address its growing economic crisis. The government says it will raise \$2-billion by issuing new eurobonds in the second half of the year. Finance Minister Ahmed Kouchouk said this was part of a strategy to diversify revenue generation, but International Monetary Fund boss Kristalina Georgieva, who met with the Egyptian central bank this week, warned against taking on too much debt.

### ENERGY

## Power for the people, by the people

End users are driving Africa's solar boom at a similar pace to state-backed grid expansions. A report by the Global Solar Council said Africa imported a record 15 gigawatts of solar panels last year. Large projects typically account for about 15% of that. "Rising electricity demand, unreliable grids and higher tariffs are pushing households and businesses to generate their own power," the report says, urging climate financiers to channel money into solar storage at household and business level.

## SOUTH AFRICA

## Vaccine victory for African herds

Scientists at South Africa's Agricultural Research Council have spent over two decades developing a new vaccine for foot-and-mouth disease. After meeting strict efficacy and safety requirements, they have produced the first batch of a multi-strain vaccine, *African Farming* reports. The World Organisation for Animal Health lists just three other countries which can formulate such vaccines: Morocco, South Korea, and Vietnam. The multidisciplinary development team, led by Dr Faith Peta, include Virginia Mahlangu, Kabelo Tlaka, Tumelo Ratopola, Thando Veto, Lucas Phaahla, Lucas Mabena, Gabriel Makhubela, and Bernard Matlou.

## CHINA

## State puts foot down on hidden handles

Car-door handles that retract to be flush with the body have become popular with electric-vehicle makers, in part because they make the cars look futuristic. But they may soon be history. This week China became the first country to ban these handles. From 2027, all new car doors there will need to be mechanically operable. Regulators elsewhere are likely to follow suit, given the handle-free doors sometimes hinder rescue after the car crashes or when the car's battery dies.



PHOTO: FETHI BELAID/AFP

*Because I said so:* President Kais Saied has ruled Tunisia by decree since 2021.

## TUNISIA

## Saied extends absolute power

Tunisians have lived under a state of emergency for a decade. This will endure at least until the end of this year. Last week President Kais Saied issued yet another extension of the state of emergency, which was first announced on 24 November 2015, *Africanews* reports. The president has ruled by decree since he dissolved parliament in mid-2021. A formal state of emergency gives his enforcers the legal cover to censor media, ban gatherings, and arrest dissenters – without court orders. And they have taken plenty of advantage of these powers.

## ALGERIA

## Railway opens for Belt & Road bragging rights

On Sunday, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune inaugurated a new 950km railway line. It links Algeria's Gara Djebilet iron mine in Tindouf to Béchar, a city that's closer to the country's ports and industries. The line is being celebrated by Chinese media as Africa's first long-haul railway. A Chinese contractor built it and China's Sinosteel is one of the partners in the iron mine. The Tebboune administration is pushing to diversify exports beyond oil, which accounts for three-quarters of the country's export revenue.

## ZAMBIA

## Lungu's family eyes final bid to bury him in SA

The family of former Zambia president Edgar Lungu – who died at a hospital in Pretoria on 5 June 2025 – is still seeking court approval to bury him in South Africa. A court ruled in August that his body must be returned to Zambia, and refused to hear an appeal. Lungu's family have since approached South Africa's Supreme Court of Appeal and have until 28 February to formally file a case. In Zambia, the body would receive a state burial, likely attended by President Hakainde Hichilema, whom the family accused of mistreating Lungu in life.

## BURKINA FASO

## Air Burkina summoned back to the nest

The government of Burkina Faso, led by President Ibrahim Traoré, has finalised its full nationalisation of Air Burkina, with a cabinet resolution announced last week. This ends the airline's latest run as a private company. In 2020 the Burkina Faso government of the time transferred it to African Global Development, a US company. Before that, it was owned by the Aga Khan Development Network, which bought it in 2001 before selling it back to the Burkinabe government in 2017.



**Return flight:** The once and future national carrier of Burkina Faso has had a bumpy ride.

Like many other national carriers, Air Burkina doesn't turn a profit.

## NEWS

## GUINEA

# Reality intervenes in US race for critical minerals

Guinea has critical minerals the Trump regime wants. But getting them threatens a World Heritage Site.

JOSEF SKRDLIK AND OLIVER DUNN  
IN CONAKRY

THE UNITED STATES hosted more than 50 countries for a critical minerals summit on Thursday, prompted by an increasing realisation that the US lacks control over supply chains for metals that power its technology, defence, and energy industries.

“One day we woke up and we realised we had outsourced our economic security and our very future,” said Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who hosted the summit.

The US proposed establishing a new trading bloc, guaranteeing minimum prices for critical minerals. Vice-President JD Vance said this would unlock private investment in mining and refining, as “sustained price weakness makes financing impossible”.

However, by the summit’s end, the US seemed even further from the control it desires – at least within Guinea, one of seven African countries invited.

US designs on Guinea’s metals are encapsulated in the so-called Liberty



Corridor, which aims to connect a rich iron deposit in the country’s southeast to a deepwater port in Liberia. It remains nowhere near realisation. Ivanhoe Atlantic, the company developing the deposit, has yet to receive a mining permit from Guinean authorities.

On Thursday Ivanhoe Atlantic chief executive Brownyn Barnes resigned, an indicator that permission to proceed might be severely delayed – or denied.

One of the project’s major problems is its apparent incompatibility with preserving the adjacent Mount Nimba Strict Nature Reserve. This Unesco World Heritage Site is home to endangered chimpanzees and dozens of endemic species. ■

# DRC

## Rebels bar media from disaster site

M23 is taking its programme of media censorship and narrative control up a notch.

LYDIA NAMUBIRU

THE M23 rebel group, which seized parts of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo in early 2025, barred journalists from a disaster site this week. Landslides killed hundreds of people in the Rubaya mining area last week. Yet, “no reporter is allowed to go there”, a local journalist told *The Continent*.

This obstruction is the latest in a documented pattern of censorship. In a report last week, 20 journalists working in areas controlled by AFC-M23 told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) about the violence, threats, detention, and censorship they had experienced.

In one case, a journalist details being beaten at an M23 checkpoint in Bukavu, the capital of North Kivu province, which the rebels seized in February 2025.

“A soldier started slapping me for no reason and hurt me,” Cikala Mihigo told CPJ. He was returning from an interview

with the families of Congolese soldiers who fought against the M23 takeover. At the checkpoint, soldiers tried to search his bag, which he refused to let them do.

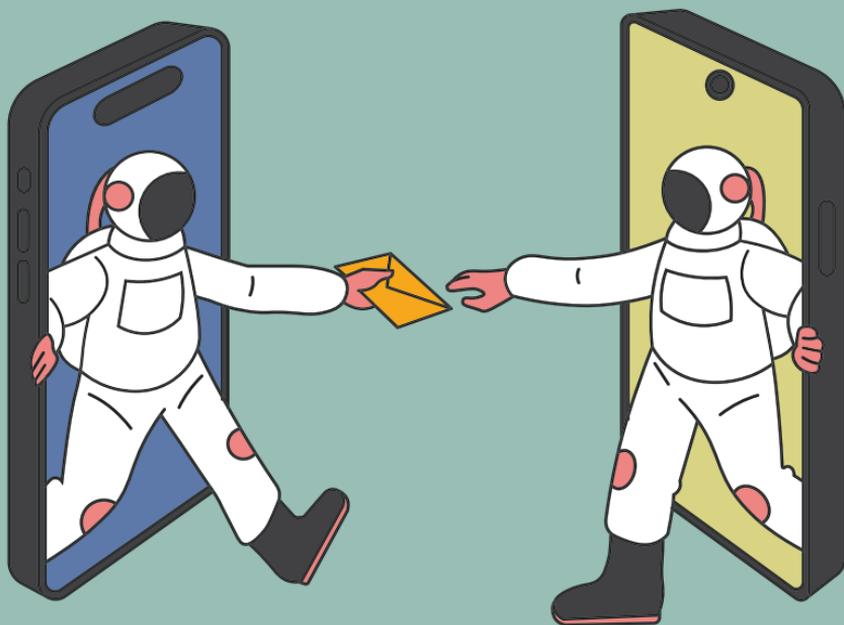
Many journalists, faced with rising censorship, have been forced to flee the rebel-controlled areas. “CPJ has seen a surge in journalists’ requests for emergency support, reflecting an increasingly difficult media environment over the past 12 months,” the watchdog body said.

The *New Humanitarian* reported that the rebels were going to great lengths to control the narrative on their capture of parts of the DRC, including by dictating what local media broadcasts. “As soon as the rebels entered, we changed our programming schedules,” a journalist from Lubero told the *New Humanitarian* in October. “News programmes, talk shows and programmes dealing with security are no longer broadcast.” ■



**Mute point:** M23 forces are targeting journalists who report from rebel-controlled areas of the DRC.

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# LIBYA

## Gaddafi's heir laid to rest

But he might not rest in peace. Neither will his country.

HINDIYA AL-ASHBI IN BENGHAZI

FOUR ARMED assailants stormed the residence of Seif al-Islam al-Gaddafi, Libya's most controversial political figure, on Tuesday evening. Having turned off camera surveillance at the northwestern Zintan residence, the assailants engaged Muammar Gaddafi's son in what his political team called direct combat. Seif al-Islam and two of his bodyguards died in the fire fight.

The family chose Bani Walid, a city in the northwest, for his final resting place. His brother, Khamis Gaddafi, was also buried there after he was killed in 2011 during the violent end of their father's 32-year rule over Libya.

Seif al-Islam's funeral on Friday was anxiously watched for what his demise portends for the country. For years prior to his assassination, he had already been haunting Libya's politics.

He had been groomed as heir to his father, who was killed during the Nato-backed 2011 revolution. After the revolution, Seif al-Islam was captured

by a militia and held for six years in Zintan before being released under a blanket amnesty. In 2015, a Tripoli court sentenced him to death in absentia for war crimes. He was later pardoned, but the International Criminal Court maintained a warrant for his arrest on murder and persecution charges.

In 2021, Seif al-Islam decided to run for president under the "Green March" movement, positioning himself as the custodian of his father's ideological legacy. In a country still fractured and unstable, tens of thousands of supporters saw him as a route back to order. In contrast, his opponents – particularly Islamist factions in western Libya – viewed him as a grave threat.

Disputes over his candidacy helped to derail elections that ultimately never took place, even after he was disqualified.



PHOTO: DARRIO LOPEZ/MILLS/AP

**Simpler times:** Seif al-Islam, days before the fall of his father Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011.

Seif al-Islam's assassination in the run-up to the April presidential and parliamentary elections could disrupt another electoral attempt.

"His supporters will not let this event pass without response," said political analyst Ibrahim Al-Ajel. He predicts they may obstruct the elections by provoking violent acts against candidates and at polling stations.

His supporters have already flooded social media with calls for retaliation against people they describe as aggressors. Videos from Sirte, the birthplace of Gaddafi senior, show dozens of women in the streets, weeping and mourning his death.

The sense of loss among Seif al-Islam's

supporters is tinged with xenophobia.

"He was our only hope to restore our homeland's sovereignty from the Turks, Russians, and Africans who control it and have looted our resources," said Khadia al-Hassi, a tax official in Benghazi.

But the outlet for those emotions is likely to be internal. "National reconciliation efforts will likely stall," Al-Ajel said. He predicted that the Gaddafa tribe, of which the Gaddafis were members, will hold the people of Zintan responsible because Seif al-Islam was under their protection. "This doesn't necessarily mean civil war, but it could mean severe social boycotts and mobilisation." ■



PHOTO: MAHMUD TURKIA / AFP

**Loss and fury:** Supporters mourn Seif al-Islam Gaddafi – son of Muammar, the late Libyan despot.

# KENYA



PHOTO: SIMON MAINA/AFP

**Coal snap:** Koko Networks earned credits by mitigating the deforestation caused by charcoal production.

## Carbonated credits or sparkling tax traps?

**CHRISTINE MUNGAI IN NAIROBI**

CLEAN COOKING company Koko Networks sent an abrupt message to customers last weekend announcing it would shut down operations, closing a business that had become one of Kenya's largest players in the global carbon-credit market.

Behind the closure is a dispute over

carbon finance. Before shutting down on 31 January, Koko was generating close to \$120-million a year – not from selling its clean-energy fuel but from carbon credits. It marketed about six-million credits a year, which were supposedly earned from avoiding deforestation when its Kenyan customers replaced firewood with its biofuel. Each credit was worth about \$20 on

the international markets. The carbon credits revenue was central to Koko's model. It subsidised low-cost clean cooking fuel for about 1.5-million households in Kenya.

For an actual forest to remove carbon from the atmosphere that is equivalent to six-million credits, it would have to be so big that it covers half the land area of Rwanda.

Carbon credits are a big deal in Kenya. The country accounts for just more than 20% of Africa's marketed carbon credits, the largest percentage. President William Ruto has repeatedly promoted carbon trading as a future export earner and a way for local communities to benefit from climate funds. At the United Nations' big climate meeting in 2022, COP27, he launched the African Carbon Markets Initiative. At the Africa Climate Summit in 2023 he said carbon markets should benefit communities, not intermediaries.

### **Carbon credits are a big deal in Kenya. The country accounts for just more than 20% of Africa's marketed carbon credits, the largest percentage.**

That political push led to tighter rules. New regulations introduced in June 2024 imposed a \$4 levy per credit, required 25% of revenues to go to the state, and directed half of the fees to a national climate fund. For Koko, this meant an estimated additional



PHOTO: KOKO NETWORKS

***Fuel rushes in:** A Koko Networks truck delivers fuel to homes and businesses in Nairobi, Kenya.*

cost of more than \$24-million a year. The company argued the changes made its Kenya operations financially unviable.

Koko Networks is incorporated in Mauritius. Sources close to the talks between the company and the Kenya government said the latter was intent on capturing more tax and fee revenue from carbon trading, particularly when companies operating in Kenya are registered abroad.

The government has not publicly explained why talks with Koko collapsed. But sources familiar with the negotiations say last year's shift in US politics was also a factor. Washington had actively been supporting Kenya's carbon market, including through USAID-backed initiatives, during the tenure of former ambassador to Kenya Meg Whitman.

After a change of administration in the US and Whitman's departure, those arrangements came up for review. ■

## ANALYSIS

# Swallowed up by the earth

The global economy's relentless hunger for coltan was always dangerous for Rubaya. The town was – and still is – a mining-governance void, before and after M23's takeover.



PHOTO: MOSES SAWASAWA/AP

**JOSAPHAT MUSAMBA  
AND QUENTIN NOIRFALISSE**

LAST WEDNESDAY, Bosco, a 29-year-old miner, got up, grabbed his flashlight and chisel, put on his boots, and went to work in the tunnels of Luwowo. This mining site is one of 14 that surround

the town of Rubaya in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

He would never come home again.

Bosco was one of the tens of thousands of artisanal miners who work in the area, home to rich deposits of cassiterite and, above all, coltan. A miner's workday is hard, dangerous, and long. It is spent

dozens of metres underground, in cramped, dark tunnels. The miners' labour is essential to the functioning of the modern global economy.

Rubaya accounts for about 10% to 15% of global coltan extraction, which, when processed, yields tantalum. This highly resistant metal is used in capacitors for electronic devices to regulate voltage.

It is a core component of cellphones, game consoles, solar panels, and surgical implants. It also has many applications in the weapons industry.

As you read this newspaper, you are likely holding 40mg of tantalum in your hand – that's how much is needed in an average cellphone.

Mining activity has been increasing in recent months to keep up with global demand. Early last week, it began

raining, a heavy downpour that seeped into a Luwowo hillside already weakened by the warren of hand-dug tunnels.

The disaster struck on the afternoon of 28 January. A landslide, followed by a second, buried at least 300 miners underground. The death toll is still rising.

Bosco's family retrieved his body themselves and his church paid for the funeral.

Landslides are not uncommon here. The miners themselves have a term for it: "kufandama" – to be swallowed up by the earth. In June 2025, a landslide claimed the lives of at least 45 miners, possibly many times more – exact numbers can be hard to verify.

Miners, civil society, and researchers are all agreed on the causes of kufandama: since 2018, intensive mining



PHOTO: ZOHRA BENSEMRA/ REUTERS

**Death trap:** A worker carries ore at the Rubaya coltan mine, where landslides killed hundreds last week.

has destroyed forest cover and tunnels have eroded the area's hillsides. The soil – largely sand, clay and silt – was always inherently vulnerable and now is much more so.

Although coltan is listed as a strategic mineral by the Congolese state, in Rubaya its exploitation has remained largely artisanal. Some private companies like the Bisunzu Mining Company (SMB), have attempted semi-mechanisation to strip the hills and avoid using cramped tunnels, but without success.

### **Laws on paper, danger on the ground**

For two decades, the DRC government has been trying to formalise and regulate its artisanal mining sector. It employs 1.5- to 2-million workers across the country, including about half a million in the east.

The DRC revised its mining code in 2018, prohibiting artisanal tunnels longer than 30m. In reality, the tunnels are often longer, sometimes even up to 150m. The law also stipulates that only co-operatives can operate artisanal sites. In practice, miners often have no share or say in the committees that dominate the hierarchical structures running the sites.

For miners, who are at the starting point of a long supply chain they have no control over, necessity is the law.

Rubaya has proved particularly resistant to reform. For years it was mired in conflict between SMB and the Cooperamma co-operative, disputes rooted not only in mining rights, but also in social and ethnic tensions.

Other actors – including the state-owned Sakima and various political

figures – jostled for control.

In theory, state oversight was provided by Saemape, the mining-management service. In practice, it was chronically underfunded and largely unable to deliver. With little supervision, minerals from Rubaya flowed to Rwanda for years, both legally and illegally. Kigali became the world's leading exporter of coltan, despite having only minimal domestic reserves.

### **Rebels extend Rwanda benefits**

In April 2024, AFC-M23 rebels seized Rubaya, driving out the Congolese army and Pareco-FF, a pro-government militia that had controlled the area since 2022. Minerals are not the rebels' end goal, but they are crucial to financing the movement.

## **Minerals are not the rebels' end goal, but they are crucial to financing the movement.**

State officials fled, and M23 installed its own administration. Many residents say security improved compared to previous years, which were marked by abuses and extortion. Pareco-FF was sanctioned in July 2025 for mineral smuggling and violence against civilians. Yet the persistence of deadly landslides underscores the limits of M23's capacity – or willingness – to govern safely.

Kinshasa responded by declaring minerals from Rubaya “red” when the rebels took control, rendering them



**Disaster zone:** Miners work at the D4 Gakombe coltan quarry in Rubaya.

PHOTO: MOSES SAWASAWA/AP

illegal. That suits M23. The group levies taxes directly on miners and the minerals go exclusively to Rwanda, without Congolese or international oversight.

Before rebel control, minerals moved from pits to trading centres, then to processing facilities in Goma, before export – often via Rwanda. M23 removed multiple actors from this chain, including the Mining Division, Saemape, co-operatives, and the International Tin Supply Chain Initiative, a traceability programme that, admittedly, experts often criticise for weak due diligence.

It is difficult to assess how much taxation currently earns the rebels, but United Nations experts put it at \$800,000 a month at the end of 2024. At the time, 120 tonnes of unprocessed coltan were

leaving Rubaya every month. Current estimates put that at 200 tonnes.

To track the movement of people and minerals in and out of Rubaya, the rebels set up an intelligence service, using local chiefs to supervise and surveil the activities.

“Everything goes to Rwanda,” said one observer in Rubaya.

Mostly, that was already happening. Wazalendo militias allied with the Kinshasa government were accused of illegally selling coltan to Rwanda in 2021 and 2022.

The difference now is the absence of friction for Kigali. Observers on the ground say Rwandan buyers come directly to the mining sites and the boom has attracted new miners, including Rwandans.

## Governing fragile ground

Having replaced the state – at high cost to civilian lives – the rebels now face a governance dilemma: how to govern a financially vital mining site that is physically unsustainable.

In the immediate aftermath of last week's landslide, AFC-M23 appears keen to soften its image. Local sources say the rebel movement did not help the families of victims of previous landslides. This time, the rebel governor of North Kivu province visited the injured miners and promised support, including paying hospital fees.

That symbolism does nothing about the structural causes of kufandama.

Some witnesses want the site temporarily closed. That seems unlikely. Rubaya's taxes are central to M23's

finances and maintaining favour with Rwanda. Instead, mining is more likely to keep pushing the geological limits of the site further.

For families like Bosco's, the global race for coltan has exacted its final price. For Rubaya, the question is not whether the earth will give way again, but how many more lives will be swallowed before anyone – state, rebel, or other – chooses to control the digging. M23 has swallowed the state but is unlikely to deliver on its famous promise to do a better job of governing. ■

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Josephat Musamba is a doctoral researcher studying conflict and development at Ghent University. Quentin Noirfalissee is an investigative journalist and documentary maker



PHOTO: MOSES SAMWASAWA/AP

**Impassable:** The rains have ruined roads in the region, hindering rescue, relief and aid efforts.

## REPORT



FILM STILL: QUEEN CLEOPATRA. CR. NETFLIX © 2023

# How Black were the pharaohs?

Fair or unfair, Egyptian nationalists really want to know.

## MAHMOUD ABDELRAHMAN IN CAIRO

ATEF TAWFIQ was haunted by a single question: Are today's Egyptians truly descendants of the ancient pharaohs?

The 30-year-old physician from Kafr el-Sheikh governorate grew up steeped in pride for his country's 5,000-year-old civilization. But in recent years he has watched others – on social media, especially – assert ownership of that heritage, claiming modern Egyptians were interlopers with no genetic connection to the pyramid builders.

“When your own civilisation is being

stolen in front of you, you have to respond – with evidence, not just words,” says Tawfiq.

His answer came in the form of a DNA test. According to the results, he shares 86% genetic similarity to ancient Egyptians and 97% to contemporary Egyptians. “It gave me a sense of pride in my country's history,” he says.

It's unclear what Tawfiq's results actually mean in genetics science, given that all human beings also share 98.8% of their DNA with chimpanzees. But he is only one of hundreds of Egyptians who have submitted saliva or blood samples

to laboratories in recent years, driven not primarily by medical curiosity but by a desire to reclaim their ancestry, in what has become a charged debate over who can rightfully claim “pharaonic” heritage.

Martino Khalil, an Egyptian Canadian, understands that “human identity is more complex than a laboratory can settle”. Yet he, too, felt compelled to take the test. After living in Canada for nearly two decades, he began to ponder his Egyptian roots and wrote extensively about Egypt and its history between 2019 and 2023.

Sceptical commentators, including those he describes as Afrocentrists,

would question him: “You’re not Egyptian. You don’t look like us. Your skin is lighter, your hair is different. What’s your connection to this history?”

**“You’re not Egyptian. You don’t look like us. Your skin is lighter, your hair is different. What’s your connection to this history?”**

In late 2022, he ordered the DNA test kit. “I did it out of curiosity and because I wanted material evidence to counter these claims,” Khali says.

His results said he was 99.6% Egyptian



PHOTO: AMR NABIL/AP

**Ankhs but no ankhs:** President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was seen to have endorsed the identity shift towards neo-Pharaonic nationalism when he presided over the widely televised Pharaohs’ Golden Parade in 2021.

Coptic and 0.4% North African, specifically with Amazigh origins. He felt reassured, but it didn't really change how he saw himself. "I believe human identity is far broader than genetic lineage," he says. "We're not closed bloodlines reduced to numbers."

### Pan-Arabism to genetic nationalism

The surge in genetic testing coincides with rising nationalist fervour in Egypt, where economic crisis, weakening regional influence, and an influx of refugees have converged with government promotion of what some researchers call "neo-pharaonism".

For decades Cairo led pan-Arabism but Egypt's regional influence has waned. With that, pharaonic heritage has emerged as an alternative source of national pride.

The shift became visible in April 2021, when President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi presided over the Pharaohs' Golden Parade, a nationally televised spectacle in which 22 royal mummies were transported through Cairo in gold-trimmed carriages accompanied by martial music and ancient-Egyptian-themed performances.

In the parade's wake, social media movements with names like "Kemet" (the ancient Egyptian name for Egypt) and "Egyptian Consciousness" proliferated. Attracting hundreds of thousands of followers, they celebrate ancient Egyptian civilisation while pushing back against "Afrocentric" ideas that claim that pharaonic Egypt was a Black African civilisation.



*Toot 'n come in:* Ancient mummies carpool to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in 2021. PHOTO: AP

This online activism has had real-world consequences. In 2022, these groups successfully campaigned to cancel an "Afrocentric" conference planned in Aswan, and protested against American comedian Kevin Hart's scheduled Cairo performance. The next year, they mobilised against Netflix's *Queen Cleopatra* docudrama, which cast a Black actress in the title role.

The outcry prompted Egypt's ministry of tourism and antiquities to issue an official statement declaring that Cleopatra was "fair-skinned with Hellenistic features".

Beneath this surge in identity politics is a heavier undercurrent from which both government and the people might seek to be distracted: Egypt's severe economic crisis. The country owes \$150-billion in external debt, its currency is collapsing, and inflation has reached record levels. Present-day life is increasingly difficult.

The economic crisis also leads longer-settled residents to perceive newcomers

as increased competition for dwindling opportunities, turbocharging the turn to identity politics. Egypt hosts more than a million refugees from Sudan, who have fled the war there. Neo-pharaonic social media accounts have increasingly targeted Black refugees, with hashtags calling to “kick refugees out of Egypt”.

### ‘Citizen science’

Mohamed Abdelhady launched Egy-Origins in 2017 to map the genetic sequence of Egyptians across thousands of years by comparing contemporary DNA samples with results from ancient mummies.

What began as an individual initiative has evolved into a citizen-science project. Abdelhady says about 400 Egyptian volunteers have already been tested, with results showing what he describes as 90% genetic similarity to ancient populations.

“There’s a widespread misconception that Egyptians have been genetically altered over 5,000 years due to invasions or migrations and, therefore, modern Egyptians don’t belong to their ancient ancestors,” Abdelhady says. “But with science and genetic analysis, we can refute these claims.”

Not all scientists are convinced.

Dr Yahya Gad, professor of molecular genetics and supervisor of the ancient DNA laboratory at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation, disputes the existence of a single genetic map for ancient Egyptians, given that ancient Egyptian history spans more than 3,000 years.

Available mummy samples also show bias. Royal and elite classes were represented more than ordinary people because they enjoyed higher-quality embalming processes, which increased chances of body preservation.

“Egypt has always been a meeting place for cultures and peoples and this mixture is what makes us see natural genetic diversity today in the Egyptian population,” Gad says. “They fall in the middle of the genetic map of modern humanity after mixing with most ancient world peoples, except East Asia.”

He emphasises that some contemporary Egyptians’ resemblance to ancient ones in features or genes is natural and does not grant any individual or group genetic superiority. “Genes are a tool for understanding health and medicine, not a means for ranking between humans.”

### **“Genes are a tool for understanding health and medicine, not a means for ranking between humans.”**

Regardless of scientific credibility or lack thereof, Egyptians seeking answers and grounding continue sending blood samples to laboratories for testing. This practice mirrors the actions of their government, which is grappling with its place in the modern world by looking backwards to an ancient past. ■

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This story was published in collaboration with Egab

## PHOTO ESSAY



## Go, fleece lightening!

SHEARING sheep is back-breaking work that demands fitness on a par with elite athletes. Professional shearers can operate at about 80% of their maximum heart rate for up to nine hours – professional footballers do the same for just 90 minutes.

Unlike in most of the world, shearing in Lesotho is done by hand. Shearers spend the day bent over. Their legs secure the sheep and keep them calm. This is a rare skill. Basotho shearers are a dominant force at international sheep-shearing competitions. They are

expected to excel at next month's world championship – the Golden Shears – in Masterton, New Zealand.

The wool industry is central to Lesotho's economy and more than half of the shearers in South Africa are from Lesotho. A shearing team, comprising a shearer, wool classer, handler, and shed hand are paid about \$1 per sheep. They do about 100 sheep a day, compared to 200 for a machine shearer.

Photo editor **Paul Botes** recently spent an afternoon with sheep shearers in Thaba-Tseka, Lesotho. ■









COMMUNITY

# What have you done because of *The Continent*?

One of the questions in our Big Annual Survey™, to which 1,500 of you responded.

"I've actively sought information from civil society in other countries to find out more about a short story in *The Continent*. This has led to broadening my network."

"Branched out to new music, movies, and other art from amazingly talented African artists that I would have not learned about otherwise!"

"I understand Africa better and it changed my perception."

"A story that appeared in one of your editions 'The tone-deaf billionaire' helped me rethink my organisation's approach to philanthropy."

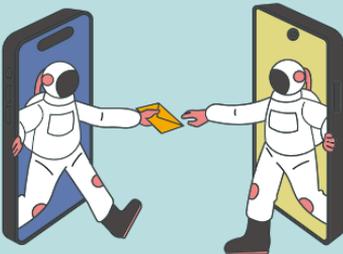
"I live in Chile and your publication is that it has made me talk much more frequently about the events in Africa."

"I am more determined to find ways to make my expertise available and useful to Africans."

"I have had conversations with relatives triggered by a story I read."

"I had lost touch with what was going on at home on the continent and you guys have got me back into my political self."

"After the recent Tanzania election story, I called my Tanzanian friend and checked in on her. She was afraid to speak but ultimately expressed how traumatising the whole experience was and it was a great moment for us to connect as friends and for me to be there for her as she navigated the crisis."



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DATA

# Harassment bedevils the women of Africa

FROM catcalls and wolf whistles to stalking and groping, women and girls face various kinds of sexual harassment in public. How common do citizens think such harassment is?

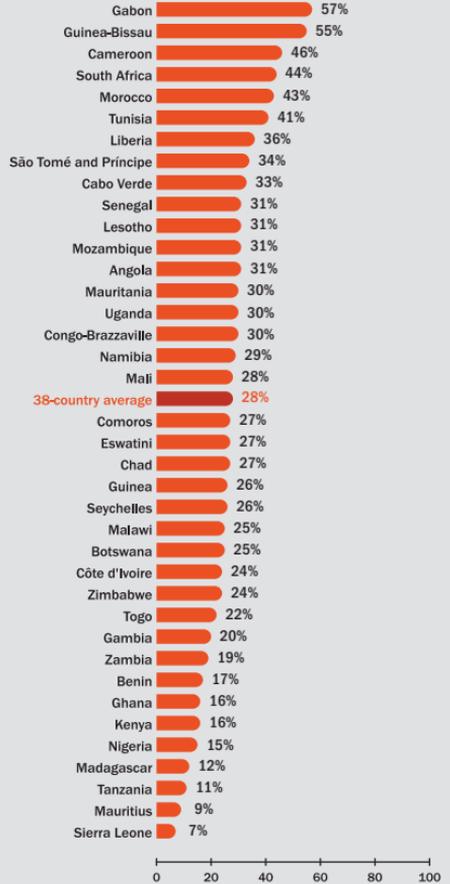
Across 38 African countries surveyed over the past two years, almost three in 10 respondents (28%) say women are “often” or “always” sexually harassed in public places like markets, streets, or public transport.

Majorities in Gabon (57%) and Guinea-Bissau (55%) report that women are frequently harassed, and more than four in 10 say the same in Cameroon (46%), South Africa (44%), Morocco (43%), and Tunisia (41%).

On average, women are slightly more likely than men to say that women are pestered in public (29% vs 26%), as are urbanites compared to rural residents (33% vs 22%), perhaps reflecting higher levels of exposure.

Reports of harassment decline with age (from 31% among 18-to-25-year-olds to 24% among those aged 56 years and older) but rise with increases in education and lived poverty levels, possibly pointing to both greater awareness of what constitutes harassment and more experience of it. ■

Women are often/always sexually harassed in public | 38 African countries | 2024/2025



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



# FESTIVAL REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



PHOTO: DIA DIPASUPU/GETTY VIA AFP

## The personal and political converge at Sundance

External goings-on clouded the mood of this year's festival, but some films still shone through.

THE AFRICAN films selected to premiere at Sundance arrived struggling to compete for attention in a year in which conversations about film were often overshadowed by politics.

Olive Nwosu (pictured above), who debuted her Lagos-set neo-noir feature *Lady*, was unable to get her Lagos-based cast to join her in presenting the film. Nigeria is one of several African

countries to have its citizens restricted from travelling to the United States. Incidentally, at the awards ceremony, the film's acting ensemble received a special jury prize.

*Lady* is both a visually adventurous odyssey of nightlife in Lagos and a psychologically rich character study. Newcomer Jessica Gabriel's Ujah is a taxi driver who has a transformative journey when she drives a group of sex workers undefeated by their circumstances. *Lady* is pretty graphic about the world it depicts but it also makes room for a celebration of sisterhood. Nwosu told *The Continent*: "I wanted to tell a story from a young working woman's point of view that really stayed close to her and shows how she moves through Lagos. I wanted real intimacy but also boldness that matches the city's energy."

A different kind of energy suffuses *Kikuyu Land*, the sweeping documentary directed by the duo of Nairobi journalist Bea Wangondu and Andrew H Brown. The film moves from the breathtaking countryside, where tea plantations become sites for labour and sex abuses, to an epic land battle with larger national implications, before zeroing in on Wangondu's own personal connection to the material. *Kikuyu Land* is as complex as it is conventional, while remaining coherent.

It is impossible for one film to speak for an entire region and *Kikuyu Land*



**Clockwise from left:**  
Kikuyu Land,  
Jazz Infernal  
and Birdie

PHOTOS 2 & 3:  
COURTESY OF  
THE SUNDANCE  
INSTITUTE



recognises this, asking audiences to sit with the many tensions it provokes, some of which are not ultimately resolvable. “I don’t have all the answers I was looking for, but that’s okay,” Wangondu says. “I did this film for my own identity as a Kenyan citizen.”

Over at the short films corner, *Birdie*, directed by Praise Odigie Paige is a quiet stunner that grapples with faith, isolation, and displacement. In 1970, a Nigerian woman and her two teenage daughters are living in a Catholic refugee home in Virginia in the United States. While awaiting word from their patriarch, a soldier in the Biafran War, they process their layered emotions in different ways.

*Birdie* features formally assured filmmaking, highlighting mood and shot compositions over narrative propulsion. Its meticulousness ushers

in an intriguing new voice in Odigie Praise, who borrows from her own experience immigrating to the US. She says: “For the first time in almost a decade, I found myself in a place where I could experience a sense of home. A lot of questions then came with me letting my guard down and planting my roots. That’s how the film was born.”

*Jazz Infernal*, which won the jury’s award for international fiction, is another personal attempt at confronting themes of alienation, albeit in a more freewheeling fashion. Koffi, an Ivorian trumpeter, arrives in Montréal, Canada and is immediately introduced to the systemic realities of his new identity as an immigrant. *Jazz Infernal* is a jubilant ode to the legacies people carry with them as they cross cultures. Director Will Niava says: “This film is about my father, the love that he poured into me.” ■

# The Quiz

- 1 Who was Seif al-Islam Gaddafi's father?
- 2 Rubaya is a town in which central African country?
- 3 What is the demonym for the people of Sudan?
- 4 Who is the president of the Republic of Congo?
- 5 Isaias Afwerki is the president of which country?
- 6 Which country was Kofi Annan from?
- 7 In which country is the Sabratha Ancient Theatre (pictured) located?
- 8 What is Nigeria's administrative capital?
- 9 What is Djibouti's currency called?
- 10 What is the official language of Mauritius?



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## HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to **+27 73 805 6068** and we'll send the answers to you!

### 0-3

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

### 4-7

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

### 8-10

"Nothing can prepare you for how impressive those ancient amphitheatres are. You colosseum for yourself."

PHOTO: V. DIANNELLA/DEA

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# Big Pic

**Boarding school:** Surfers from the Black Girls Surf academy ride the swell on Senegal's Almadies coastline. Girls from the village of Xataxely in Dakar have signed up at the academy – a regular school with world-class waves.

PHOTO: NICOLAS REMENE/AFP



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