

The Continent

Ansam Al-Kitaa in Gaza City



COVER: This week, more than 250 newsrooms in 70 countries are publishing blacked-out front covers in solidarity with journalists in Gaza. As Reporters Without Borders, which co-ordinated the unprecedented international campaign, explains: “This isn’t just a war against Gaza, it’s a war against journalism ... Without them, who will alert us to the famine? Who will expose war crimes? Who will show us the genocides?” To understand why *The Continent* is taking part, read our editorial (Page 10). To understand what Palestinian journalists are living through, read Ansam Al-Kitaa’s despatch from Gaza City. Page 11

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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. This week, the museum travels to Dakar, Senegal, and all the way to the top of the African Renaissance Monument. Yes, we know it was built by North Korea – but we can’t help loving it anyway. Page 20

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

SOUTH AFRICA

Powerless workers steel themselves for layoffs

Africa's largest steel producer thrived as a way for apartheid South Africa to make steel and escape sanctions. But now ArcelorMittal is competing against the world and there's a lot of cheap steel out there. South Africa also doesn't have a track record of reliable electricity or railways – both crucial to the industry. The company now wants to lay off 4,000 workers. Its largest shareholder, Lakshmi Mittal, is trying to sell to its second-largest shareholder, the South African state.

EGYPT

Jettisoned controls send rent spike into overdrive

Egypt has scrapped rent controls in its biggest housing overhaul in decades. Rents are expected to rise twentyfold in “prime” areas and tenfold in mid-tier and “economic” zones. Minimum rents are now set at 1,000 Egyptian pounds (about \$21) a month in prime districts, 400 in mid-tier, and 250 in poorer neighbourhoods. The state has promised safety nets, *Reuters* reports. Last week, the cabinet approved rules to reallocate state housing to tenants affected by the rent hikes.

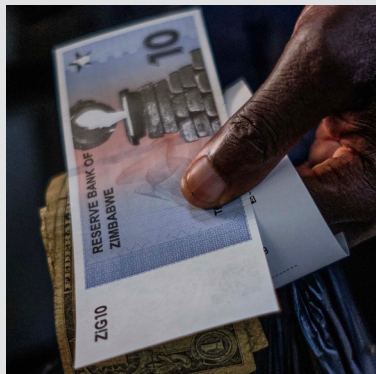


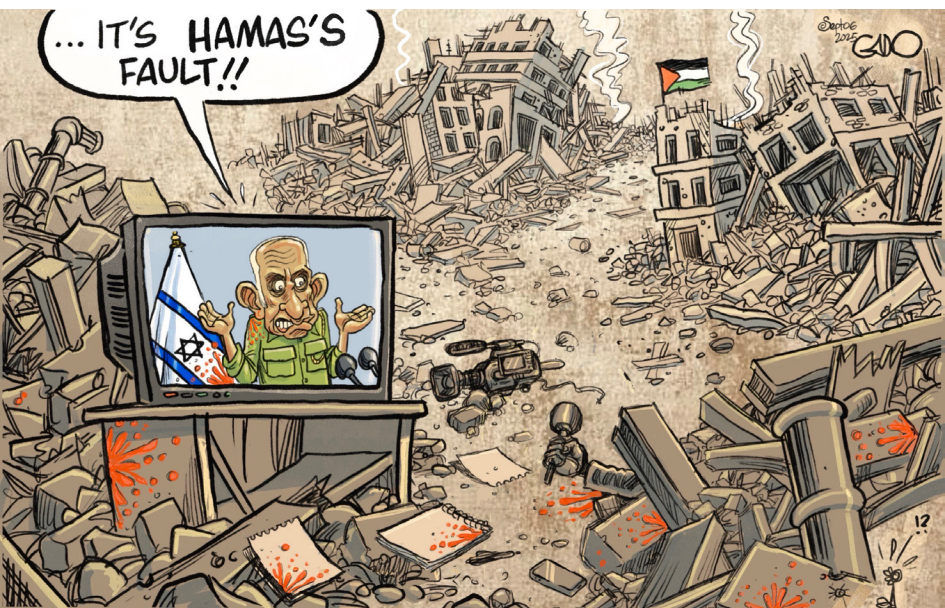
PHOTO: JAMESAI NJIKIZANA/AFP

VoetZag: The ‘new’ \$10 ZiG note, launched in April 2024, has already been replaced.

ZIMBABWE

Another day, another bank note

The Reserve Bank has unveiled redesigned bank notes, scrapping older “defiled” versions in another shock move for the economy. The Zimbabwe Gold (ZiG or ZWG) currency, launched in April 2024 as a gold-backed solution to the country's chronic currency woes, has already suffered a 43% devaluation, *New Zimbabwe* reports. Severe shortages are forcing many to rely on the South African rand. The new notes will test whether confidence in the ZWG can be salvaged.



TECH

Google keeps Chrome but must learn to share

Google will not be forced to sell its Chrome web browser. But it must loosen its grip on online search, a United States federal judge ruled on Tuesday. The decision follows a years-long antitrust case about Google's dominance as the default search engine on its own Android and Chrome products, as well as on Apple devices. The department of justice had been pushing for Chrome's sale, but the federal court instead barred Google from signing exclusive contracts and ordered it to share (some) search data with its rivals.

ZAMBIA

HH corruption court locks up Lungu leeches

A Zambian court has sentenced former foreign minister Joseph Malanji to four years in prison with hard labour for corruption. Malanji, who served under ex-president Edgar Lungu, was convicted of embezzling state funds to buy property and two helicopters. Former treasury secretary Fredson Yamba received three years for facilitating an \$8-million transfer. They were among the first top officials arrested after President Hakainde Hichilema took office. The ruling marks a rare win for prosecutors in Zambia's anti-graft campaign.

KENYA

Big to-do over moolah used to woo yahoo US

Kenya has signed a lobbying contract with United States firm Continental Strategy worth a minimum of \$175,000 a month to boost its standing in Washington, *Business Insider Africa* reports. The deal aims to sway policymakers on trade, security, and diplomacy, as some US legislators question Nairobi. At home, critics are asking why taxpayers should bankroll foreign lobbyists when money is in short supply. Kenya joins the list of countries that bet on Washington and now find a leadership hard-pressed to find them on a map.

BURKINA FASO

So much for you-do-you in 'phobic Ouagadougou

Burkina Faso's transitional assembly has passed a law criminalising homosexuality, the first time such legislation has been introduced in the country. The move, backed by all 71 unelected members of the transitional legislative assembly, comes nearly three years after the junta seized power. Under the new law, those convicted of same-sex relations face fines and prison sentences of up to five years. Until now, Burkina Faso had no specific laws targeting homosexuals, although social prejudice still forced LGBTQIA+ communities underground.



PHOTO: XXXXXX

NIGERIA

Secessionist leader sentenced in Finland

A Finnish court has sentenced Simon Ekpa, a leader of Nigeria's secessionist Indigenous People of Biafra (Ipob), to six years in prison for terrorism-related offences. Judges ruled that Ekpa supplied armed groups with weapons and explosives between 2021 and 2024 and used social media to incite violence in Nigeria, the *BBC* reports. Ekpa, a Finnish citizen of Nigerian origin, was arrested in 2023. Ipob began as a peaceful movement in 2012, but launched an armed wing in 2020. Critics say its activities have fuelled deadly violence in southeastern Nigeria.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Touadéra rival renounces French connection

Anicet-Georges Dologuélé, the former prime minister of the Central African Republic, renounced his French citizenship on Monday in order to challenge President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in December's election, *RFI* reports. Dologuélé came second in the 2020 vote, and must now confront constitutional changes Touadéra enacted in 2023 allowing himself a third term and banning dual citizens from running. Holding French citizenship is also



PHOTO: ISSOUF SANOGO

Heads up: A supporter holds up a picture of Anicet Georges Dologuélé at a rally in Bangui.

why Tidjane Thiam in Côte d'Ivoire and Karim Wade in Senegal were disqualified from the elections.

LIBERIA

Heads roll as president amps up war on drugs

President Joseph Boakai has fired the leaders of Liberia's drug enforcement agency for "administrative reasons," the *Daily Observer* reports. This follows reports that the head of the agency's operations allegedly interfered in his daughter's arrest. The government also recently announced a hookah ban and restricted Tramadol use to hospitals, part of a wider crackdown on narcotics. Health Minister Louise Kpoto said Liberia was in the grip of a dangerous drug epidemic, and has pledged stricter enforcement against drug users and dealers.

ALGERIA

Olympian boxer fights gender-test knockout

Algerian Olympic gold medallist Imane Khelif is challenging a World Boxing rule that bars her from competing unless she undergoes a gender test. The rule, introduced after her Paris 2024 win, has already excluded her from upcoming events, *AFP* reports. On Monday, the Court of Arbitration for Sport confirmed Khelif's appeal, in which she asks for clearance to box at the World Championships in September without testing. The arbitration court, however, rejected her request to suspend the testing requirement while the case is heard.

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NEWS

SUDAN

They fled to the mountain. Then the mountain collapsed.

Tarsin village, on the slopes of Darfur's volcanic highlands, shielded civilians from warring groups. But its isolation now complicates response to a catastrophic natural disaster.

KHALID ELWALID IN KHARTOUM

DAYS AFTER a massive landslide buried about 1,000 people, only a few rescue workers have managed to reach Tarsin, a remote village in the Jebel Marra area of Darfur in Sudan. The landslide on Sunday also killed more than 5,000 animals, including sheep and camels, destroying survivors' livelihoods.

Volunteers from the citizen-led Emergency Response Rooms (ERR), who reached Tarsin on Wednesday, described the scene as devastating. "The [rescue workers] have managed to recover several bodies and the search for the missing continues," Mujib Al-Rahman Al-Zubair, who heads the civil authority in the area, told *The Continent*.

Tarsin is a small farming village nestled in the volcanic highlands of central Darfur. The region has been under the control of non-state armed groups since the early 2000s when the Darfur war erupted. Brutal military campaigns by government forces and



PHOTO: SUDAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT/AFP

Janjaweed militias killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions in the region. Many fled to remote villages like Tarsin.

The remote hilly terrain and absence of proper roads, which shielded the fleeing people from military campaigns, is now limiting their access to the emergency aid they need. "This disaster comes on top of years of war, displacement and isolation in the region," said Mohialdeen Mohamed, a volunteer on the ERR team that travelled from Golo in the Tawila-Jebel Marra area to Tarsin.



Moving mountains: Villagers search through debris in Tarsin.

PHOTO: SUDAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT/AFP

The current war – between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), formerly Janjaweed, and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) – pushed even more people into the remote parts.

“We were forced to flee from El Geneina after the RSF attack in November 2023. It was 10 days of terror and ethnicity-driven attacks. We came to start rebuilding our life in Tarsin village,” said Mohamed Abdallah Ahmed.

When the landslide occurred, the 29-year old was away working on a farm outside Tarsin. He now might be the only survivor in his family.

“Someone called me and said my brother Ismail was dead and the rest of my family had disappeared,” he said. “After decades of war and months of torrential rains, even nature has turned against us.”

Jebel Marra is now home to at least 300,000 civilians cut off from emergency support, while trapped between violence and potential disasters like floods and landslides.

Seasonal rains are likely to become heavier with climate change, while the hillside soils become looser with more people farming them.

On 2 September, Abdul Wahid Mohammed Ahmed al-Nour, whose Sudan Liberation Movement militarily controls the area, issued an appeal for humanitarian support.

He asked for specialised rescue teams to recover bodies, comprehensive evacuation plans, and emergency shelter for nearby communities.

His group has long made Jebel Marra its stronghold, rejecting peace deals from 2006 to 2020. Even after the fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019, the Sudan Liberation Movement refused to sign the Juba Peace Agreement.

Al-Nour’s call is consistent with what responders say is critically needed. Thousands of people living in the mountainous terrain of Jebel Marra are still at risk, with their mobility hampered by heavy ongoing rains and the absence of proper roads. ■

EDITORIAL

The world's greatest killer of journalists

Israel is conducting a war against journalism. But journalists keep on documenting its crimes.

IN MAY 2022, an Israeli sniper shot and killed *Al Jazeera* reporter Shireen Abu Akleh. Last week, Israel targeted and killed five journalists in one attack. In between those dates, Israel became the largest killer of journalists in the world.

It has killed at least 247 in the 23 months since 7 October 2023. In the 33 years the Committee to Protect Journalists has tracked this data, 1,708 journalists around the world have been killed for doing their work.

Israel's surveillance – hosted on Microsoft servers – is one of the world's most sophisticated. It can kill a single Iranian commander with precision missiles bought by American taxpayers.

It knows who it is targeting.

When it killed Abu Akleh, Israel attempted to lie, blaming "Palestinian militants". These days, it rarely bothers. All foreign media are banned from reporting from Gaza. Having media cover your war crimes and genocide makes it harder to control the narrative.

And Israel excels at controlling the narrative – through threats, lawsuits and pressure. Western media have also been complicit in giving Israeli officials

the benefit of the doubt. But this hasn't stopped journalists in Gaza, who expect to be killed for their work. Their bravery is staggering. What they've documented is how a case of genocide can be built at the International Court of Justice.

It has killed at least 247 journalists in the 23 months since 7 October 2023

In this edition, one of them, Ansam Al-Kitaa, writes a letter to the world – and to our industry: "The helmet and vest are no longer tools to protect me as a journalist – they have become symbols of imminent danger."

We are publishing Al-Kitaa's letter verbatim because we believe Palestinian journalists should be heard, in their own words, before they disappear. It was translated from Arabic by our editorial partners at Egab.

Our cover is blacked out as part of a global campaign to demand accountability from Israel and its enablers. Over 250 newsrooms in 70 countries are doing the same this week.

— *The Continent* team. ■

ESSAY

I hold my phone in one hand and my heart in the other

ANSAM AL-KITAA IN GAZA CITY

I NEVER imagined that my pen would become a lifeline, that my phone would become a wall behind which I hide from the horror of bombardment, and that my work would become my only path to survival and to feeling my humanity.

In many places, journalistic work is defined as a profession of troubles. But here in the city of life and death – Gaza City, as I like to call it – it is a profession of life and death. Journalism for me is

not just reporting news, but waging a real battle with our bloody pain, and sometimes with death itself.

In many moments, death was closer to me than my breath. Each time I escaped death, I wondered: “Am I really lucky that I survived?” Then I quickly remembered that I am in a city besieged by death from every direction, harvesting souls every second, and that survival is only physical – the soul is trapped between the bodies of the dead and a past that has become mere memories.



ILLUSTRATION: WYNONA MUTISHI

I escaped death so many times. Once I had an interview with a family at a house, and as soon as I walked in, a bomb killed a young man on a motorcycle right in front of the house. I missed it by just a few seconds. There are endless situations like this, as if death plays hide and seek with me.

The helmet and vest are no longer tools to protect me as a journalist – they have become symbols of imminent danger. While international law and the Geneva Conventions stipulate the protection of journalists, the mark we carry – the word “Press” – has become a target instead of protection.

I sometimes tremble at the thought of

wearing the vest, not because it’s heavy, but because it now identifies me as a journalist in a place where anyone who documents the truth is targeted. The vest carries me toward danger rather than protecting me from it.

I remember well every time I left my house to film a news story. I shook with every step I took and recited the Shahada, thinking: “What if this is the last time I document something? What if the next shell falls beside me? Will these words be published? Will anyone read them? Will anyone know about my insistence on documenting the suffering of the people of northern Gaza Strip?”

How many times have I stood on



PHOTO: SAID KHATIB/AFP

Line of fire: Paramedics and press carry a journalist injured in a clash with Israeli forces in Gaza.



Left: A family emerges from the rubble of their house after an Israeli attack in Deir al Balah, Gaza on 14 June 2024.

Below: A boy stands amid the ruins of the Saftawi neighbourhood, west of Jabalia in north Gaza on 25 August.

PHOTOS 1: ALI JADALLAH/
ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES
PHOTO 2: BASHAR TALEB/AFP



the roof of my house, or at the Ghafri intersection in the middle of Jalaa Street in Gaza City, raising my phone high with one hand and holding my heart with the other, hoping that weak signal would manage to send a video file before the sounds of shells and missiles rise and pierce my body.

What does it mean to be a journalist without internet, without transportation, walking for long hours? I arranged an appointment to interview a family, but I arrived to find only the parents – their four children were killed in a raid the night before. But the family was thankful that at least they died in one piece and



Targeted: A *Heroes of Palestine* mural in London by Auberi Chen, Core 246 and Captain Kris depicts Palestinian journalists Mohammed Al-Masri, Ali Jadallah, Hind Khoudary and Abdelhakim Abu Riash.

PHOTO: DANIEL LEAL/AFP

managed to bury them with dignity. You see a house completely damaged by bombardment, you thank God that at least the walls are still there.

People say Palestinians are resilient, and I am not sure if it is resilience or shock and trauma from the horrors we see every day.

When death takes family

But all these battles never prepared me for what was harder: personal loss. On 4 November 2023, I lost my nephew. He was only 17 years old.

He went out with his cousin to the Tel al-Hawa area to retrieve some belongings from the family house. We didn't know that the area had become a "red zone", and that the Israeli army was targeting

everything that moved there.

He was hit in the stomach with what initially seemed like a minor injury. But the intense bombardment prevented ambulances or civil-defence vehicles from reaching him. Rescue teams were sent to save him, but they were also targeted. My nephew remained bleeding alone in the street until the next day, losing his life without anyone being able to reach out to him.

The tragedy didn't end there. His body remained on the road for three full weeks. No one could bury him until the first truce, when residents near the area took it upon themselves to bury him hastily, without a funeral or farewell, away from his family and loved ones.

How can I comprehend that? I didn't

say goodbye to him, didn't touch his hands, didn't look at him for the last time. I couldn't even say, "Allah yerhamu", as if my tongue was stuck in denial. Sometimes I still see him laughing in front of me, or hear his voice calling me.

A week after his death, during the beginning of the ground operation, we were staying with my sister near the Al-Shifa Medical Complex. We lived through one of the harshest nights. That night was like nothing else – the shells never stopped, bullets were piercing the walls, and the sound alone was enough to paralyse the body. We slept on the floor, not daring to sit up, afraid that a stray bullet would pierce our bodies.

With morning's arrival, everyone in the neighbourhood decided to leave collectively towards the only street, hoping that our numbers would protect us. I felt I was living through a new Nakba, the 1948 catastrophe.

I was crying as I fled, carrying my little nephew in my arms, and the tears wouldn't stop. My feet were hurting, my heart was trembling, and fear was paralysing me, but I was walking despite everything. The things we used to see on television, we were now living.

Writing through grief

I write reports about families who lost their children, about children deprived of their childhood, about women who bury their dreams with their loved ones. But when I write about others, I find that I am also writing about myself. Every death story brings me back to my nephew, every image of a corpse reminds



PHOTO: MOHAMMED SALEM/REUTERS

Slain: Inas Abu Maamar cradles the body of her niece Saly, 5, who was killed when an Israeli missile struck their home in Khan Younis, Gaza. This photo won the World Press Photo of the Year 2024.

me of his corpse, every farewell reminds me I didn't say goodbye to him.

In Gaza, death is not a passing event. It is a daily open wound. It is faces we miss in every corner, conversations suddenly cut off, and empty beds at night. But harder than death is being robbed of even the right to say goodbye.

In Gaza, danger didn't chase only civilians – it chased us journalists too. The occupation knows that words can expose its crimes, so it turned journalists into direct targets. My colleagues carried nothing but their cameras and

pens, yet they were targeted mercilessly.

So far, we have lost more than 246 journalists who were racing against time to tell what was happening before becoming breaking news themselves. I know faces among these martyrs – we shared fear and hope together, covered stories side by side, then they suddenly departed.

Every time I hear a new journalist's name added to the martyrs' list, I feel the bullet hit us all, and that the occupation doesn't just want to kill us as individuals, but wants to erase the truth itself.

A name, not a number

Despite my love for Gaza City – the city where I was born, growing up in its alleys



Above: Palestinians gather to access aid in Beit Lahia on 17 June.

Left: Yazan, a malnourished 2-year-old boy, in his family's damaged home in the Al-Shati refugee camp in Gaza on 23 July.



PHOTO 1: OMAR AL-QATTAA/AFP
PHOTO 2: REUTERS/STRINGER

– the targeting of journalists and civilians together sometimes makes me think about leaving it. Not because I want to abandon it, but because I want to escape the death that chases us everywhere.

I am Ansam Al-Kitaa, a journalist from the northern Gaza Strip. I am not a number on a victims' list. I want to be a name, not a number.

I don't want to die. I love life and fight every day to live it, not just survive. I dream of a better life and believe we deserve it, no matter how much they try to bury our dreams under the rubble.

Don't forget us.

We are not numbers, not passing footage on news screens.

We are humans who dream, suffer, love, write, and live despite the death surrounding us. We only ask that our

voices be heard, our stories told, our humanity respected.

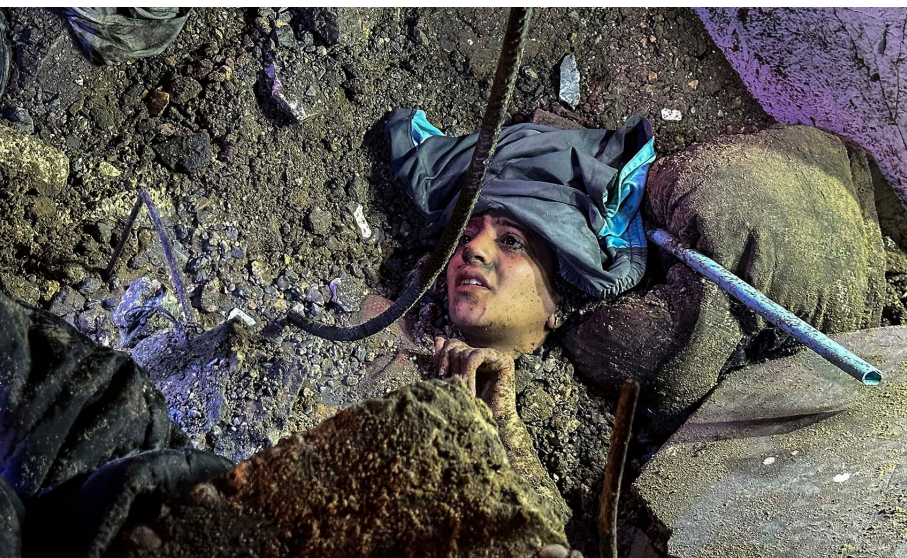
We don't want pity, but justice.

Every day we live here is a battle for survival, to preserve our memory, our identity, what remains of us.

The word we write is resistance, the image we document is testimony, and our voice is the last scream before the rubble swallows the truth.

If this voice reaches you, don't turn away from it. Listen, transmit it, and be a bridge between us and a world that seems to have forgotten that Gaza is not just geography, but faces, names, and small dreams fighting to stay alive. ■

This story was published in collaboration with Egab



Crushed: Saja Hamad lies trapped under the rubble of a house hit in a strike in Nuseirat on 20 August.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STRINGER



PHOTO: OMAR AL-QATTAA/APP

Ash and ruin: Members of the al-Dahduh community gather to break their fast during Ramadan, amid the rubble of Gaza City's Tal-al Hawa district on 2 March.



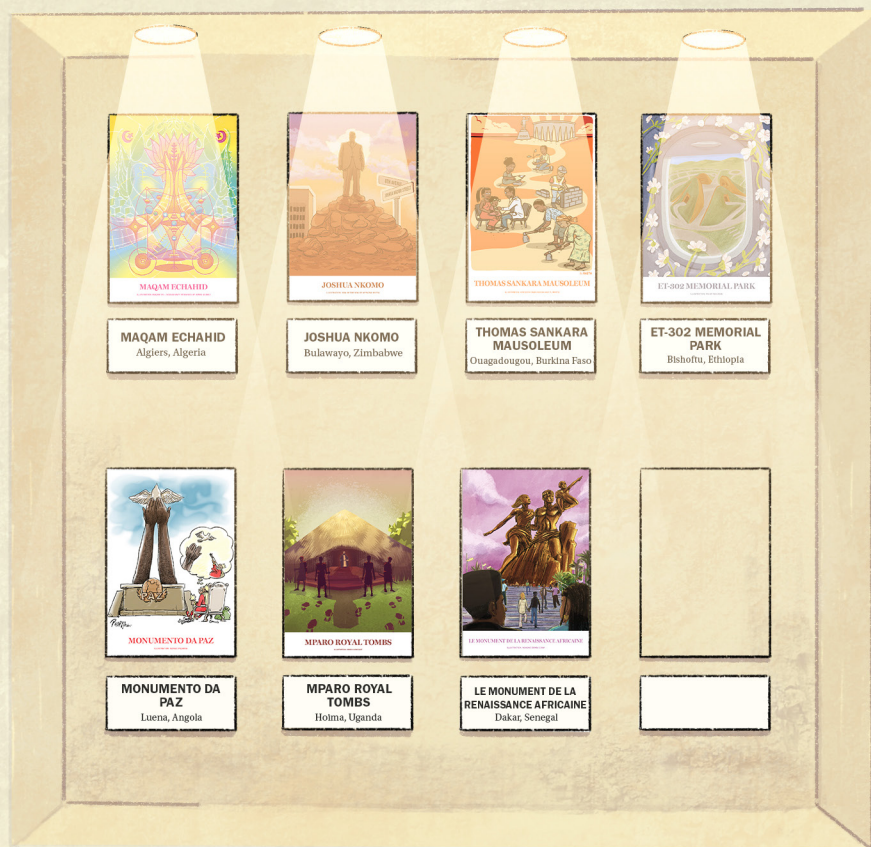
PHOTO: RAMADAN ABED/REUTERS

Famine's horror: A man carries the body of baby Zainab Abu Haleeb, who died of malnutrition at Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza Strip, on 26 July.



PHOTO: SAMAR ABU ELOUF/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Stolen future: As his family fled an Israeli assault on Gaza City in March last year, Mahmoud Ajjour, 9, turned back to urge others onward. An explosion severed one of his arms and mutilated the other. The family were evacuated to Doha in Qatar where, after medical treatment, Mahmoud needs special assistance for eating and dressing, as he learns to use his feet to write. The picture, by Palestinian photographer Samar Abu Elouf, won the World Press Photo of the Year 2025.



LIMITED SERIES

The Museum of Memory

HOW WE CHOOSE TO REMEMBER

CURATED BY SHOLA LAWAL
ART DIRECTION BY WYNONA MUTISI



PHOTO: JOHN WESSELS/AFP

Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine

DAKAR, SENEGAL

THE TOWERING structure of Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine can be seen from virtually any raised point in Senegal's capital, Dakar.

It is composed of three figures: a muscular man holds a baby on one shoulder while his other hand encircles the waist of the woman by his side, seeming to sweep her along. All three emerge triumphantly from volcanic lava, looking towards the far-off horizon.

The 52m-tall monument stands on one of the twin cone-like hills, or *les mamelles*, of the Ouakam district in the west of Dakar, close to the shore. With

the hill included, its height reaches 150m from the ground, making it one of the tallest structures in Africa. The three human figures, and the volcano from which they emerge, are made from bronze and copper. The base of the structure is reinforced cement. Inside the monument itself, directly beneath the male figure, is an entryway that leads to a wide museum space displaying art from across Africa.

The monument was designed by Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby Atepa and built by North Korea's Mansudae Overseas Projects group.

Construction began in 2006 and took about three years. Former president Abdoulaye Wade unveiled it at a grand ceremony on 4 April 2010 – exactly 50 years after the country won independence from France. Wade called the monument a symbol of hope for Africa's rebirth after centuries of racism.

Not everyone was convinced.

When the \$27-million price tag leaked ahead of the unveiling, many Senegalese argued that the money could have been spent more prudently. Wade defended the project, saying the monument would attract tourists. It turned out, however, that Wade had an ulterior motive – he claimed he was entitled to pocket 35% of the ticket sales, on the basis that the monument was his idea and he helped to design it. The Macky Sall administration, which succeeded Wade in 2012, did not accept this arrangement. It's unclear if Wade pocketed any of the revenue in the last two years of his presidency.

Separately, some imams in the Muslim-majority country complained about the figures' clothing – or lack thereof. Their skimpy clothing was “idolatrous,” the imams said. Wade again tried to deflect. He compared the

clothing to that found on some statues of Jesus Christ, insulting the country's minority Christian community. Bishops described Wade's comments as humiliating. Young people took to the Dakar streets in protest and clashed with the police. It was not until Karim Wade, the president's influential son, personally apologised to the archbishop of Dakar that the brouhaha died down.

Wade was right about one thing: the African Renaissance Monument has become the country's most famous tourist spot. Hundreds of people visit the site every day. Those who can brave the 198 steps to get to the bottom of the monument. There, visitors can stop for a coffee or buy a ticket to enter the museum. The more adventurous can ride the elevator that goes all the way up the Renaissance man's body to his hat. From the windows at the top, all of Dakar is spread out below, with the roaring Atlantic to one side.

At night, yellow lights spill out from the man's hat, turning it into a beacon. Of what, though? Wastefulness and lasciviousness? Less so, as time passes. North Korean masonry? No comment. Hope? Certainly. And pride. ■

Illustration note from Senegalese illustrator Ngagne Demba Diaw: *The Monument de la Renaissance Africaine is more than bronze and stone; it is a vision. It embodies Africa's optimism and resilience: a reminder that despite the wounds of slavery, colonialism, war and poverty, our gaze must remain fixed on the horizon of hope. Illustrating this monument is a way of translating that spirit. The upward climb of its stairs is not just physical, but symbolic: each step mirrors the path of Africans toward renewal and possibility. At sunset, when the sky over Dakar turns into fire and gold, the monument becomes more than a landmark. It becomes a meeting place for lovers, friends and families – a space where past, present and future converge. From its heights, the ocean swallows the sun, reminding us that Africa, too, can carry its scars into the night and still promise a dawn.*



LE MONUMENT DE LA RENAISSANCE AFRICAINE

ILLUSTRATION: NGAGNE DEMBA DIAW

FEATURE

Meet Nigeria's human flycatchers

By the rivers of Nindama, they sat down for science.



Tall order: A volunteer healthworker in Sokoto, Nigeria, measures a community member's height to help work out the correct amount of medicine she will need to prevent river blindness and lymphatic filariasis.

PHOTO: ADESEGUN ADEOKUN/SIGHTSAVERS

ABDULLAHI JIMOH IN NASARAWA

IN NINDAMA, a remote village in Nasarawa state, Yahya Umar used to start his day sitting by the river, his trouser legs rolled up and calves exposed, waiting for blackflies to land on him. Each time one landed on his skin, Umar trapped the blackfly in a

small tube before it could bite.

For months during peak biting season between June and October, Umar and his neighbours spent days by the river, trapping the flies. Their bodies were surveillance tools in Nigeria's decades-long fight against one of the continent's most stubborn diseases: onchocerciasis, commonly known as river blindness.

The disease is caused by a parasite and transmitted through the bites of infected blackflies, which breed in fast-flowing rivers and streams. The parasite's tiny larvae crawl beneath the skin, causing unbearable itching, disfiguring rashes, and – if they reach the eyes – irreversible blindness. Globally, only trachoma blinds more people.

Nigeria has the highest burden of onchocerciasis, with more than 120,000 cases of blindness attributed to the disease. The fight against river blindness is one of the country's longest-running public health campaigns, spanning more than three decades. Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, and Ethiopia are also still struggling to contain the disease.

Nigeria has the highest burden of onchocerciasis, with more than 120,000 cases of blindness attributed to the disease.

However, this year Niger became the first African country in which onchocerciasis was considered endemic to be certified free of river blindness, after years of flycatching surveillance confirmed no transmission. This breakthrough was achieved through relentless mass distribution of ivermectin, a drug that interrupts the parasite's life cycle. The same ivermectin became infamous in the United States during the Covid-19 pandemic, when it was incorrectly touted as a cure.

Nigeria hopes to replicate Niger's success by 2030. According to Dr Babatunde Adewale of the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research, more than 37-million Nigerians have already received preventative doses of ivermectin, although 43-million remain at risk. Ten states, including Plateau and Nasarawa, have stopped drug distribution after the World Health Organisation confirmed elimination. Other countries, such as Senegal, have stopped mass ivermectin treatments and entered post-treatment surveillance.

The path to being certified free of the disease rests on the legs of people like Umar. In 2020 alone, more than 44,000 flies were caught by volunteers in Plateau and Nasarawa. When dissected in laboratories, none carried the parasite, paving the way for WHO to declare the states free of onchocerciasis.

The catch of using traps

This disease-surveillance approach – known to scientists as “human-landing catch” – may sound archaic, but it remains the WHO's gold standard for proving elimination. In Latin America, hi-tech mechanical traps have worked well – they mimic people's presence by using clothes smelling of human odour, treated with a sugar and yeast mixture to produce carbon dioxide.

But in Africa, the use and results of mechanical traps have been inconsistent for several reasons.

First, the glue used in the traps usually has to be imported from outside Africa.



PHOTO: SIGHTSAVERS

Fly in the ointment: Mechanical traps do not work for all the species of fly that spread river blindness.

Second, commercial carbon dioxide, which makes the traps more effective than the sugar and yeast mixture, is expensive and difficult to obtain. Third, the blackflies that spread the disease in Africa are not one uniform species but a family with diverse behaviours and habitats. A trap that works on one group may fail entirely on another.

That is why Nigeria, even with support from NGOs like the Carter Center and Sightsavers, still relies on human flycatchers. Volunteers are paid stipends of about ₦10,000 (\$6.50) a month for their work. At the end of each collection day, they take ivermectin as a

precaution against exposure.

Success in Plateau and Nasarawa has shown elimination is possible, but blackflies can travel long distances along river networks, so WHO recommends sustained surveillance to prevent resurgence.

WHO warns that though the numbers are falling across Africa, the stakes remain high. In 2023, nearly 250-million people still required treatment for onchocerciasis. In light of these stakes, Umar views his work – exposing his skin to blackflies for science – as a personal victory. “We did this to protect our future generations,” he says. ■

DATA

Sierra Leone: The new kingdom of kush?

SIERRA Leone is in the grip of a kush epidemic. Thousands of users of the lab-made drug, predominantly young men, have died or been admitted for psychiatric care since 2022.

In June 2024, President Julius Maada Bio declared a national emergency on substance abuse.

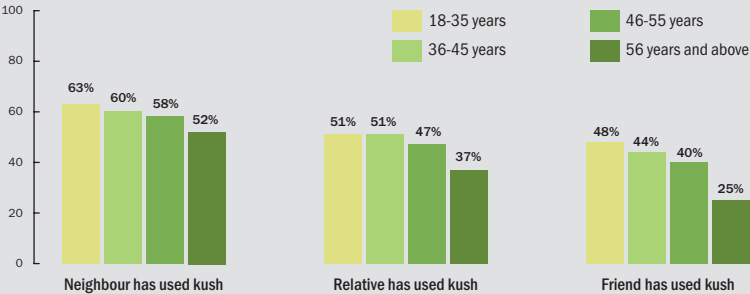
Unlike its namesake – a strain of organic cannabis – lab-produced kush comprises synthetic cannabinoids and opioids, making it much more addictive. The drug is manufactured locally, but supply chains for key ingredients stretch to China, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The drug is increasingly popular in Liberia

and other parts of West Africa. In our survey sample, 96% of Sierra Leoneans have heard of kush. Among them, an astonishing 99% identify its abuse as a severe problem in the country.

A majority (61%) personally know of a neighbour who uses kush, while almost half can identify a relative (49%) or friend (44%). Younger respondents are more likely to know a user.

Large majorities say imposing harsher penalties (70%) and enforcing strict border-control measures (69%) are the best way to tackle the crisis. Experts also emphasise the importance of harm reduction, such as providing medication to reverse opioid overdoses. ■

Know someone who has used kush* | by age group | Sierra Leone | 2025



*Respondents who had not heard of kush are excluded.



BOOK REVIEW

BY JACQUELINE NYATHI



The mendacity of hope

One cannot help but feel for young dreamers who dare to wish for a better life abroad.

AJUNA and Kagaba are a young couple with audacious dreams. Kagaba hasn't been able to find work in Uganda after completing his university degree and, like so many young Africans, starts plotting a move to the United Kingdom.

The pair have to hustle to raise the funds needed to book Kagaba's passage

(and forge his papers) but, after a false start, Kagaba finally makes the journey. Yet whatever hopes and ambitions he might have had, a bitter reality unfolds instead. For despite his best attempts, the cracks in the system are waiting to swallow him whole.

This, then, is a tale of how the dream of migrant life rarely works out as desired for young Africans, especially when the path they take is neither straight nor narrow, and puts them at odds with an inhospitable authority.

It's also a story of paused lives and broken dreams – Ajuna and Kagaba's relationship is sorely tested as they live apart. The seeming punishment they endure for having the audacity to dream breaks their hearts, and ours.

Like the best African oral history, *Promises* is both a record of time and place, and a cautionary tale. Goretti Kyomuhendo has gathered the threads of an all-too-common migration story into a tragic and moving account of young lives ruined.

Still, there is wonder to be found amid the hardship, especially in this superb novel's portrayal of the intricacies of African weddings and the matchless support system of the African extended family. The demands of all these communal ties may sometimes feel like a burden, but they lift us up when it's needed most. ■

The Quiz

- 1 From which language does the word “Sahara” come from?
- 2 What was Zambia’s name from 1911 to 1964?
- 3 Unguja is the largest island of which archipelago?
- 4 The Bijagós Islands (*pictured*) are part of which West African country?
- 5 True or false: Algeria has one official language.
- 6 “Gold Coast” historically referred to which African country?
- 7 Abidjan is the former capital of Côte d’Ivoire. Which city is its capital now?
- 8 In which city is the Monument de la Renaissance Africaine found?
- 9 Juba is which country’s capital city?
- 10 What colour is the star on Djibouti’s flag?



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

“I’m the biggest island in my own archipelago.”

Big Pic

Fantastic Volksie: A Sue Storm cosplayer eschews invisibility at Comic Con Africa last weekend. The Jo'burg event drew 70,000 fans of comics, games, pop culture, clobbering time and looking hella boss.

PHOTO: PHILL MAGAKOE/AFP



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