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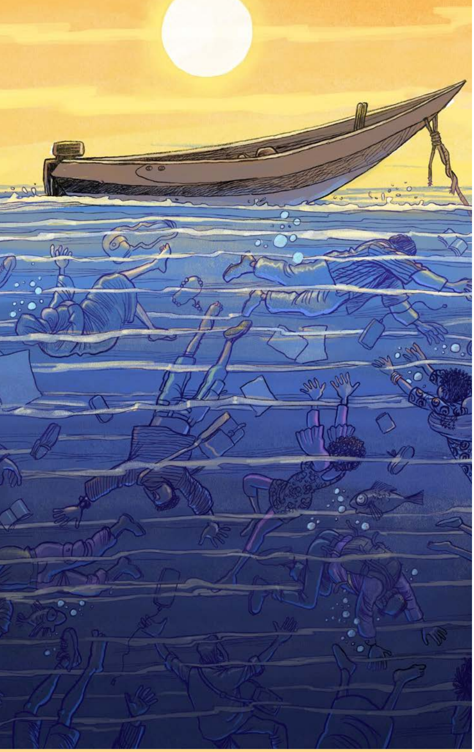
The Continent

Exodus: Why we leave Tigray



COVER Three years after the official end of the war, Tigray remains broken. Its economy is shattered, fears of another armed conflict are mounting and its young people are leaving in droves. Once proud and powerful, now it is emptying. A Tigrayan writer traces his own journey from ordinary citizen to resistance fighter to fleeing migrant. Along the way he encounters others leaving Tigray for the Gulf through perilous desert and sea routes, each one embodying a lost future, despair and dangerous hope. Today's situation hauntingly parallels Tigray's past (p16).

Inside

THE WEEK IN BRIEF

CÔTE D'IVOIRE

Octogenarian Ouattara headed for fourth term

Ivorians head to the polls on Saturday as President Alassane Ouattara seeks a fourth term, pledging to extend nearly 15 years of economic growth. Critics accuse his government of silencing dissent after the strongest challenger, former Credit Suisse chief executive Tidjane Thiam, was barred from running. Ouattara, 83, faces two former ministers and former first lady Simone Gbagbo. With the governing party's backing and opposition figures sidelined, he is widely expected to win. But growing frustration over shrinking political space could cast a shadow over his next term.

PHOTO: SIA KAMBOU/AFP

Head and shoulders: *A Ouattara supporter dances at the closing rally in Abidjan.*

UGANDA

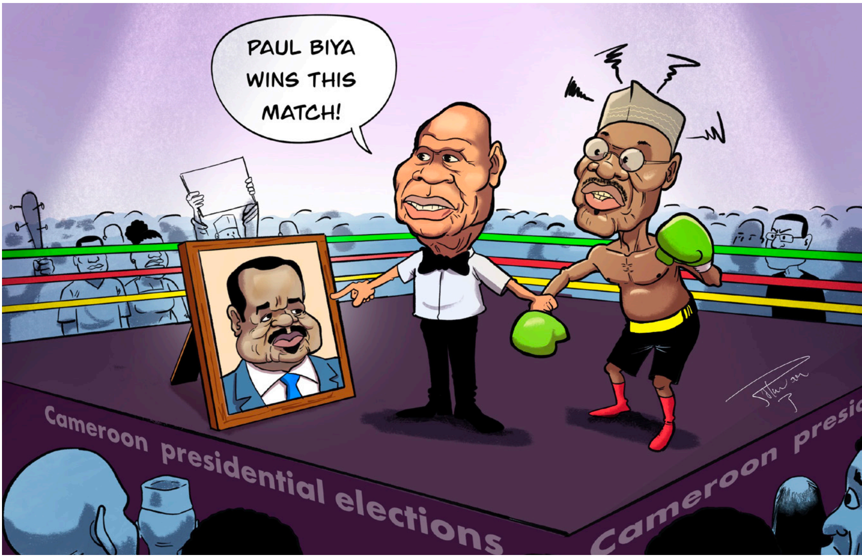
Deadly midnight crash kills 46 people

Forty-six people died in a major bus crash on the busy highway between the capital Kampala and the northern city of Gulu. Initial reports suggest it began with a head-on collision of two buses, which were trying to overtake other vehicles – a lorry and an SUV. The other vehicles also lost control. A police spokesperson said the Wednesday accident occurred just after midnight. It is reportedly one of the worst crashes the country has experienced.

NIGER

US missionary kidnapped in Niamey

A US missionary has been kidnapped in Niger's capital, Niamey, according to security sources and local media. Three armed individuals in a Toyota Corolla reportedly took the unidentified man and likely drove out of town Tuesday night or Wednesday morning, a source told *Associated Press*. No armed group has claimed responsibility, but Niger has long faced attacks from insurgents including jihadis linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.



CAMEROON

Net throttled as Biya on course for victory

As protests rage over alleged irregularities in this month's presidential election, internet access in Cameroon has been significantly disrupted, monitor NetBlocks said. The blockages "may limit coverage of events on the ground", the group told *Reuters*. On Wednesday the country's constitutional council dismissed all petitions challenging the 12 October vote, clearing the way for full results that will declare the winner. The ruling also fuelled demonstrations in multiple cities. Local media report that long-serving President Paul Biya is headed for victory.

GHANA

Nigerians freed from cybercrime ring

Police rescued 57 Nigerians trafficked to Accra and arrested five people suspected of operating a cybercrime and human-trafficking ring, authorities said on Thursday. The victims, between 18 and 26 years old, were housed and forced to engage in online romance scams, Ghana's Criminal Investigations Department said. The police retrieved 77 laptops, nearly 40 cellphones, two vehicles and other devices from the building. The suspects allegedly lured their victims by promising them lucrative jobs and other opportunities in Ghana, *Africanews* reports.

ZIMBABWE

Zanu-PF plans to extend presidential term

Zimbabwe's ruling Zanu-PF is pushing to extend President Emmerson Mnangagwa's term by two years, possibly keeping the 83-year-old in power until 2030. The proposal, made at the party's annual conference, would require amending the Constitution, which limits presidents to two five-year terms. Mnangagwa hasn't endorsed the plan publicly, *Al Jazeera* reports. His rivals call it unconstitutional. Tensions have escalated, with Mnangagwa accusing his deputy Constantino Chiwenga of treason for alleging corruption within Zanu-PF.

NAMIBIA

Patient zero: Mpox outbreak declared

Namibia's health ministry has declared an Mpox outbreak after confirming a case in Swakopmund on 18 October. The patient is stable and in isolation, *The Namibian* reports. Authorities suspect cross-border transmission within southern Africa. In line with WHO protocols, a single confirmed case warrants an outbreak declaration. Contact tracing is under way. Mpox is a viral disease with smallpox-like symptoms, which spreads through close contact. The ministry urged the public to remain calm and follow prevention guidelines.

PHOTO: ANDREJ IVANOV

ANGOLA

First major copper mine to start production

Angola's first major copper mine, Tetelo, will begin production on 29 October, a step in the country's push to diversify away from oil and into clean-energy minerals, *Reuters* reports. The $250-million project, owned by Shining Star Icarus – a partnership between China's Shining Star International and Angola's Sociedade Mineira de Cobre de Angola – will produce 25,000 tonnes of copper concentrate annually in its first two years. Copper, alongside cobalt, nickel, and lithium, is key to the global energy transition. The output will be sold to commodities giant Glencore.

FRANCE

Sarkozy heads to the slammer

Former French president Nicolas Sarkozy began a prison sentence on Tuesday. He was convicted of conspiracy to finance his 2007 campaign with funds from Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, *AFP* reports. The 70-year-old received a five-year sentence in September and will be held in solitary confinement at La Santé prison in Paris. He has appealed the ruling and denies wrongdoing. Sarkozy is the first French leader jailed since World War II-era leader Philippe Pétain, despite many dubious actions by said leaders. His lawyers are expected to seek an early release.

PHOTO: JULIEN DE ROSA/AFP

Last touch: *Nicolas Sarkozy hugged his wife Carla Bruni-Sarkozy before going to jail.*

SUDAN

BNP must cough up for financing violence

A New York jury has found French bank BNP Paribas partly responsible for atrocities committed under Sudan's former leader, Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted in 2019. The bank was ordered to pay $20-million to three survivors, *France24* reports. Between 2002 and 2008, 300,000 people were killed and 2.5-million displaced. BNP was accused of enabling Al-Bashir's regime by providing financial services that helped to fund the violence. The bank denies wrongdoing and plans to appeal. Al-Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court for genocide.

DRC

Major milestone marked in Ebola outbreak

The last patient from the recent Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been discharged, starting a 42-day countdown to declare the outbreak over. According to the World Health Organisation, since the outbreak began in September in Bulape, Kasai province, 53 confirmed and 11 suspected cases were recorded, with 19 recoveries. There have been no new cases reported since 25 September. More than 35,000 people have been vaccinated and health teams remain on alert to detect any new infections.

NEWS

TUNISIA

Protesting in a city that can't breathe

Toxic air has sparked mass protests against Tunisia's chemical industry – and the government that enables it.

INTISSAR GASSARA IN GABÈS

THOUSANDS OF residents brought the southeastern coastal city of Gabès to a standstill on Wednesday, in one of Tunisia's largest protests against President Kais Saied's government. Their demands were not for abstract reforms. They simply want clean air.

The general strike, called by Tunisia's General Labour Union, shut down schools, offices, and businesses after a series of suffocation incidents at local schools. Four separate gas leaks this month sent students gasping for air as toxic fumes swept through classrooms.

"The strike is the result of a … feeling of despair in the face of the authorities' inaction," said a local activist, who asked not to be named for security reasons.

The source of the fumes is Gabès's sprawling chemical complex, built in 1972 to process phosphate, Tunisia's most valuable mineral resource. A recent audit by the state-owned Tunisian Chemical Group, reported by *Reuters,* found serious breaches of national and international standards. The plant releases 14,000 to 15,000 tonnes of phosphogypsum waste daily into the Mediterranean Sea, along with ammonia and nitrogen oxide.

The waste has "greatly damaged seagrass beds and led to desertification of large marine areas", the audit found. Scientists warn of long-term cancer and neurological risks from radioactive byproducts.

Saied called the crisis an "environmental assassination", but in the same breath blamed Gen Z youth for "fuelling tensions". His mixed messaging has done little to calm residents. Authorities promised to close the plant in 2017, but now talk only of "rehabilitation" while going ahead with plans to expand phosphate output fivefold by 2030.

The government's solutions are just "old promises, recycled again", said local activist Saber, who requested that his last name be withheld for security reasons. "The complex has exceeded its lifespan and become a real danger to residents." ■

This article is published in collaboration with *Egab*

NIGERIA

Teargas at rally five years after Lekki massacre

Military-era reflexes and a culture of impunity: Nigeria's police continue with brutality.

PELUMI SALAKO IN LAGOS

PHOTO: KOLA SULAIMON / AFP

Ironic: *The #EndSars protests, in which 12 people were killed, were against police brutality.*

POLICE FIRED teargas at protesters gathered on Monday in Abuja to demand the release of Nnamdi Kanu, leader of Indigenous People of Biafra, a banned group. Videos on social media showed people fleeing, including a man wearing a bishop's cassock.

Such sights have become common in Nigeria, but this was remarkable because it took place on 20 October – the fifth anniversary of the Lekki tollgate massacre of #EndSars protestors.

Five years ago, soldiers fired bullets at a crowd gathered in Lagos to protest police brutality. They killed 12 people and injured at least 48. Last year, the Ecowas Court of Justice found Nigeria guilty of human rights abuses over the killings and ordered the government to pay victims 10-million naira each.

"None of that has been obeyed," says Yemi Adamolekun, director of advocacy group Enough is Enough Nigeria. The judgement remains unenforced – and Nigeria leads the region in ignoring judgements from the Ecowas court.

Nigeria's democracy remains stuck in its military-era reflexes, says Friday Odeh of governance NGO Accountability Lab.

"This heavy-handed, military-first approach is rooted in years of unaccountable governance, where dissent is viewed as a threat instead of a democratic right," he says.

It also undermines belief in Nigeria's institutions. Ayo Ajadi, a protester who was present at the Lekki tollgate in 2020, says that day changed everything.

"[I realised] that accountability here is selective and that the state can erase even visible truths," the 27-year-old tells *The Continent*. "It deepened our distrust in institutions and reshaped how our generation sees citizenship." ■

BOTSWANA

Green pastures abroad, golden passports at home

As Botswana nationals leave home, foreigners are courted with citizenship for sale.

KELETSO THOBEGA IN GABORONE

THE UNITED KINGDOM has imposed visa requirements on Botswana nationals for the first time, citing a surge in arrivals who later seek asylum. At the same time, Botswana's government is offering "instant citizenship" to foreigners for $75,000 a person.

The UK says that 1,835 Botswana nationals legally reside in the UK and 1,329 have refugee status. Many asylum-seekers cite discrimination, homophobia, gender-based violence, and ritual killings as the reasons they fled Botswana but UK authorities appear to regard some of the claims as fraudulent. "We want to disrupt abuse of our immigration system," UK foreign secretary Yvette Cooper said of the recent policy change. In June, British authorities broke up a ring of six Botswana citizens who allegedly smuggled 200 people into the country over two years.

For many locals, migration is about survival. "There's a huge gap between the rich and the poor," said Angela Tshiping, who left Botswana for the UK six years ago. "Living overseas as a foreigner has its challenges but the decent pay is better than struggling." The average worker in Botswana earns $500 a month.

Despite Botswana's long-standing political stability, it consistently ranks among the world's least happy countries. In the 2024 World Happiness Report, it scored just 3.38 out of 10 and ranked 137th of 143 countries. This hints at a deep-seated frustration rooted in limited opportunities and shrinking economic prospects.

As it faces its bleakest economic crisis in decades, Botswana's government is counting on foreigners finding the country more appealing than many locals do. In a scheme managed by Canadian company Arton Capital, the government is offering citizenship to foreigners who are willing to pay $75,000 per applicant or $90,000 for a family. Arton Capital says 464 people have already expressed interest in the scheme, which was announced earlier this month. It could work if it "balances attracting foreigners with protecting national interests", says business consultant Bakang Phuthego. ■

OUR PARTNERS

The Continent has received support from the following institutions: 11th Hour Project, African Climate Foundation, Africa No Filter, African Union, Amplify SA, Ford Foundation, Fred Foundation, GiZ, Luminate, National Endowment for Democracy, Mott Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Pulitzer Centre and the Swiss Philanthropy Partners.

MOROCCO

Youth protesters stay on the streets

Half of Moroccans are younger than 35. They're protesting for better schools and hospitals, as the kingdom spends big on football stadiums for the 2030 World Cup.

OUSSAMA BAJJI IN RABAT

AFTER a brief pause, young Moroccans returned to the streets of Rabat on Saturday. Rallying outside Parliament, they demanded better healthcare, education reforms, and action on corruption and rising prices.

The protests are organised by online youth collective GenZ 212, which is demonstrating over inequality and a cost of living crisis that has hit ordinary Moroccans hard. On 27 September, the first day of protests, demonstrations took place in Casablanca, Rabat, Souk Sebt, Tangier, and Agadir.

In Casablanca, 32-year-old podcast producer Hamza El Fadil joined the protests. El Fadil, known for his podcast *In Another Format*, said he felt compelled to move from commentary to action. "The biggest challenge I was facing was the absence of freedom of expression."

El Fadil was injured in clashes with police and detained along with about 70 others before being released after midnight. "Arrest didn't change my position," he said. "We're defending people's right to freedom, dignity, and social justice." More than 400 people have been arrested in nearly three weeks of protests that have left three people dead and hundreds injured, according to the interior ministry.

The unrest began after eight women died during childbirth at a hospital in Agadir, which ignited anger over collapsing public services. Protesters have since accused the government of pouring billions into stadiums for the 2030 football World Cup, while neglecting hospitals and schools. Morocco is a constitutional monarchy, where more than half the population is younger than 35, yet unemployment among 15-to-24-year-olds has reached 36%, according to the *Associated Press.*

"Stadiums are here, but where are the hospitals?" has become a common chant.

In Rabat, Al-Mahdi Sabiq, 26, was in a park with about 20 other young protesters planning their next move when his aunt called from Souk Sebt, his hometown in central Morocco, telling him the police were at his family home. Hours later, police detained him and questioned him for six hours.

The protests were organised through the messaging app Discord, the same app used recently by protesters in Nepal.

"Discord was our only way to communicate," said Sabiq, who works with civil society groups, describing how youth from different cities connected without traditional structures.

For Farouk Mahdaoui, a lawyer and national secretary of the youth wing of the Democratic Left Federation, his participation was stopped even before it began. He was arrested within minutes of arriving at the protest outside Parliament in Rabat – before he could join the crowd. Mahdoui, who is married with a young daughter, had come to support youth demanding free education, healthcare, social justice, and dignity.

"I entered the police station and sat on a hard bench, surrounded by my comrades. Fear was written on the faces of some around me," Mahdaoui said. He spent about six hours in detention, answering questions and waiting as police filed reports, before being released late in the night.

Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch has since called for dialogue, and King Mohammed VI promised reforms to improve public services and job creation. This week, the government allocated 140-billion dirhams (about $15.3-billion) to health and education – a 23% increase from last year – and promised to create 27,000 new public-sector jobs.

Sabiq remains sceptical.

"Daily expenses, unemployment – these are our daily challenges," he said. "Rights and demands are seized, not given. We face a large wall resembling the Berlin Wall. Each of us must leave a crack in it. One day it will fall." ■

This story was published in collaboration with *Egab*

Youth protests: *Service delivery rallies sparked by eight maternal deaths in Agadir resumed in Rabat.*

PHOTO: ABDEL MAJID BZIOUAT/AFP

MAURITIUS

Five years later, fisherfolk are waiting on justice for oil spill

A public inquiry confirms that a drunken navigation error and failed oversight caused a ship's catastrophic crash into the reef. The island is still waiting for reparations.

PHOTO: AFP

Oil spill: *The* MV Wakashio *ran aground and broke apart near Blue Bay Marine Park in Mauritius. The crew was negligent, the Coast Guard failed to respond appropriately, and the damage is lasting.*

LORRAINE MALLINDER IN MAHÉBOURG

IN JULY 2020, the *MV Wakashio* smashed into a coral reef off the southeast coast of Mauritius. Twelve days later, the Japanese cargo ship's hull cracked open, spilling 1,000 tonnes of oil into the lagoon – one of the worst ecological disasters in the country's history.

Now, a long-awaited public inquiry by a Mauritian investigative court has revealed that the crash destroyed 96km² of reef, releasing a plume of coral powder that blocked sunlight and killed marine life, costing $2.5-billion in damage to the reef.

The report has also confirmed what many people already suspected: the ship's crew and the island's maritime authorities share blame for the catastrophe, whose effects will linger for generations.

But the Mauritian authorities also failed. The National Coast Guard waited 42 minutes after the crash to contact the ship, then falsified logbooks to suggest they had been monitoring it earlier.

The director of shipping compounded the error by ordering a cargo hold be filled with seawater to stabilise the vessel, which hastened damage to the hull 12 days later.

In the aftermath, fishers received only 113,000 Mauritian rupees (about $2,600) each in compensation from the ship's insurer. "The reef is done, the sea has never been the same," says fisher Jean-Ridol Edgar. He now has to spend nights at sea to find fish he once caught close to shore.

Oil still lingers in the region's biodiverse waters, including Blue Bay Marine Park, Île aux Aigrettes, and the protected wetlands.

The report also warns of long-term effects, including the buildup of "permanent organic pollutants" in fish and humans, raising cancer and neurological risks that will continue long after the oil has gone.

PHOTO: AFP

Clean-up: *Women employed by Floch Depollution collect contaminated algae on a beach.*

The findings of the inquiry could influence ongoing legal battles targeting shipowner Okiyo Maritime, its parent Nagashiki Shipping, charterer Mitsui OSK Lines, and insurer Japan P&I Club. Mauritian lawyer Robin Mardemootoo, representing 1,762 victims, is seeking Rs 3-million ($66,000) per person for "deep trauma", alleging "gross, reckless mismanagement" by the defendants.

Progress has been slow due to cumbersome rules requiring papers to be translated into Japanese and served through government channels to the defendants.

A separate environmental damages suit by nongovernmental organisation Eco-Sud has faced similar obstacles. The group's head, Sébastien Sauvage, criticised Okiyo for rejecting legal service while trying to cap liability at Rs 719.6-million ($16-million). .

Mitsui OSK Lines, although denying

PHOTO: LORRAINE MALLINDER

Forgotten: *Jean-Ridol Edgar in Cité la Chaux, where he has been fishing all his life.*

liability, pledged $9.4-million and launched recovery and energy projects in Mauritius. In a controversial move, Mauritius's previous government – ousted last year after corruption scandals and its mishandling of the spill – appointed Mitsui's chairman as honorary consul to Tokyo in 2023, effectively undermining the legal action. The new administration has since opened its own embassy in Tokyo to pursue an independent civil claim. Fisheries minister Arvin Boolell said insurer Japan P&I Club has paid only 7.4%of the Rs 838-million ($18-million) that the Mauritian government has spent on cleanup. Reef damage outlined in the inquiry could still open the door to a major claim

In Cité la Chaux, near the site of the spill, Jason Sarah recalled how he and his brother kept fishing through the 2020 oil spill. The brothers did not have the fishing permits that would have entitled them to government compensation after the disaster, small as it was. "We didn't have [a] choice," he said. "We would sail one hour through the oil. It would make my head hurt."

"The risks are still there," added Vincenzo Gai. The fish they catch now in the high seas are smaller, rot faster, and require more ice at sea. "It's been five years. We're not living, we're surviving. How come there's still no compensation? It's like they forgot all about us."

The Continent reached out to Okiyo Maritime Corp and Nagashiki Shipping for this article, but did not receive any response. Questions sent to Mitsui OSK Lines were not answered.

ESSAY

The exodus out of Tigray

Young people are leaving en masse – and don’t know if they’ll ever come back.

ILLUSTRATION: JUNIOR GICHUHI

ZEYWEGIH LEYTI IN SEMERA, AFAR

ON THE morning of 3 August 2025, a boat carrying at least 200 migrants sank in the Gulf of Aden, off the Yemeni coast. At least 90 people died, all of them from Tigray in northern Ethiopia. A short video online showed their bodies as they washed up ashore. From their clothes and jewellery, I could tell they came from Raya, the region of southern Tigray where I grew up.

Like those young people, I know first-hand the pain of leaving your homeland because you are too afraid to stay. It has been nearly six months since I left Tigray, which had already experienced a devastating war between 2020 and 2022, in which hundreds of thousands of people died.

I fought in that war.

Now, as tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea escalate, different factions within Tigray are again making preparations for war. Another conflict seems inevitable. I felt I had no choice but to leave. I was lucky: I did not have to take the perilous route across the Red Sea. I flew to Addis Ababa from Mekelle, the capital of Tigray.

I was one of many. Hundreds of thousands of people across Ethiopia are fleeing, especially from Tigray. In 2024, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) tracked 446,000 people leaving the Horn of Africa via the "Eastern

PHOTO: YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP

War zone: *A tank, allegedly belonging to the Eritrean army, abandoned near Mekelle in 2021.*

route", crossing into Yemen to reach the Arabian Gulf. Ninety-six percent were Ethiopian, and a third of those were Tigrayan – although Tigrayans make up only 6% of Ethiopia's population.

The shadow of the last war hangs over all of us in Tigray. In 2020, I was a junior government official in Addis Ababa. Tensions had been rising for months as Ethiopia's federal government vilified the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Tigray's ruling party. Soon, all Tigrayans were treated as enemies. I was not a member of the TPLF, but even playing Tigrayan music in front of colleagues drew insults from my bosses. By September 2020, the hostility became unbearable. I quit my job and went home.

'I was not a member of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, but even playing Tigrayan music in the office drew insults from my bosses'

A few weeks later, fighting broke out in my village between TPLF militias and the Ethiopian army. I had fled with my parents to hide in the hills and caves above our village. The militias inflicted heavy losses on the army and then vanished into the hills. The Ethiopian soldiers were humiliated and were hungry for revenge. From my hiding place, I saw them go door to door, killing civilians. I heard the commander order them to kill every male over the age of seven.

Within an hour, over 170 unarmed villagers were dead. I lost many childhood friends. That night I realised this was no longer a political war – it was a campaign to exterminate my people. I decided to join the resistance. Better to die fighting, I told myself, than to be slaughtered in front of your parents like an animal.

After two years of war, a peace deal was signed in November 2022. But little has changed. Tigray's economy is shattered, its infrastructure remains in ruins, and the fear of another war lingers.

Before I left Tigray myself, I saw this exodus up close. I was on a recent trip to Semera, the capital city of Ethiopia's Afar region, which neighbours Tigray. At my hotel, I met dozens of Tigrayan youths with backpacks coming into the hotel to eat before continuing with their journey.

While eating shiro, one young man in his late twenties told me he was from Atsbi Wemberta and on his way to Saudi Arabia. "I see no hope in Tigray," he said. "People with money go to Kenya or Uganda, but I can only afford this route."

He had thought about migrating through Sudan and Libya, but said conflicts there made it too dangerous. Pointing to a group of young women nearby, he added that they too were bound for Saudi Arabia.

That evening I met my friend Awol*, a lecturer at Semera University. We talked about politics and the situation along the Semera-Djibouti road. "Migration is normal," he said, "but this is shocking. Every day Tigrayan youth arrive, rest a little, then continue toward Djibouti. Wallahi, I've never seen anything like it.

When I see those boys, I wonder who's left in Tigray."

The next day, I was on a bus to Aba'la near Mekelle. When the bus driver stopped for a break I ran into Berihuley*, a young man I'd met months earlier. He told me he had spent two-and-a-half years in Rago, on the Yemeni-Saudi border. Before that, he'd been working on a construction site in Saudi Arabia, without papers. He was deported, then tried to go back through Yemen, where he was shot by Saudi border guards. Eventually, he returned to Semera.

"Saudi Arabia isn't what it used to be," he told me. "Tigray's young people are desperate. We fought and sacrificed in the war and now we're exiles. Life abroad is a nightmare. That's why I decided to return home with the idea of dying in the land I grew up in. But things are worse now. Everyone knows how dangerous the road is – yet it's still full of Tigrayans trying to leave."

Echoes of the past

The next morning, on another bus ride, I saw a group of traffickers sitting with young Tigrayans by the roadside, right beside an Afar police checkpoint.

As the bus rolled on, I found myself thinking about history – about Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, the great 19th-century Tigrayan scholar who stowed away on a ship from Massawa, studied in Germany, and returned to serve Emperor

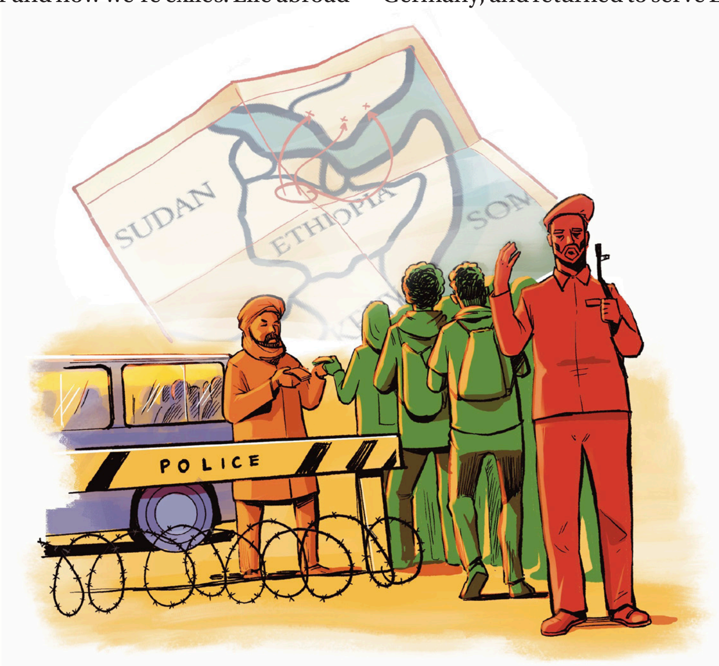


ILLUSTRATION: JUNIOR GICHUHI

The end: *One of the 90 Tigrayans who died when their boat sank off the Yemeni coast in August.* PHOTO: AFP

Menelik II. His story once symbolised the promise of Tigray's talent abroad returning home to help rebuild it.

Yet despite all of his successes, returning home to Tigray filled him with despair. Menelik II's rise marked Tigray's loss of power and prosperity.

Gebrehiwot writes about the collapse of Tigrayan society during Emperor Menelik's reign.

"You will not find a cultivated village anywhere you go. There are more ruins of ancient civilization than inhabited homes … Like a swarm of bees without a queen, they have been scattered in all four corners of the world without knowing their destination," said Gebrehiwot.

A century later, the region regained influence under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who was Tigrayan. His two decades at the helm brought relative stability and development – and accusations that Tigrayans were concentrating power and wealth amongst themselves. That ended when Ethiopia's current prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, ascended to power.

Today, Tigray is broken. Its leaders are divided, some aligning with Addis Ababa, others with Eritrea. Another war looms, one that could pit Tigrayans against each other. I fought once to defend my people; I will not fight again in a war that will destroy what remains. That is why I left.

At the airport in Mekelle, I thought again of Gebrehiwot Baykedagn. Like him, I long to study abroad and return home to rebuild. But I fear that when I do, I will return to ruins, just as he did.

Zeywegih Leyti is a Tigrayan writer. For his safety, we have published this piece under a pseudonym. Names marked with an asterisk are also pseudonyms

REPORT

The Belgian prince, the national park, and the bitcoin mine

Emmanuel de Merode's controversial stewardship of the DRC's iconic Virunga National Park is giving him even greater powers.

PHOTO: ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP

OLIVIER VAN BEEMEN

VIRUNGA National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the most beautiful places on Earth, boasting active volcanoes, dense rainforests, and a great variety of wildlife, including the rare okapi and the endangered silverback gorilla. It is the oldest and one of the most iconic national parks in Africa, founded in 1925 as Parc Albert by the Belgian colonialists.

But there's not much to celebrate in the year of its centenary. A large chunk of the park is currently occupied by the March 23 Movement (M23), a rebel militia backed by the government of neighbouring Rwanda. The park is home to another 2,000 to 3,000 militants belonging to an estimated 50 different armed groups – some with an ideology, others just ordinary bandits.

In this context, the Virunga Foundation, headed by Emmanuel de Merode, is generally considered a beacon of hope and stability. This Belgian aristocrat – who holds the honorary title "prince", but is not a member of his country's royal family – has managed the park since 2008 in a public-private partnership with the Congolese government. The EU has been his most generous supporter, with $180-million, and counting, in donations.

De Merode's park rangers are tough on poachers and farmers who try to grow their crops inside the park – although

PHOTO: ALEXIS HUGUET/AFP

On the lookout: *Virunga Park rangers patrol for poachers, but some say they overstep their powers.*

the boundaries of the park are often disputed. Many local residents around the park are unhappy with the rangers' harsh attitude and say it actually adds to the violence.

"The park is a nightmare for us," said François Kamaté, a climate activist in the region. "There is no good dialogue between the park and residents. This creates permanent tension."

For some people, the involvement of a Belgian prince leaves a bitter aftertaste that is reminiscent of the country's colonial past. "Our ancestors were chased off their land without any compensation to make way for the park," said Lwambo Mupfuni, the chairperson of a youth organisation. "And now our park is headed by a Belgian prince. Does that mean it is still of Belgian heritage?"

The economy of ecology

To tackle poverty, insecurity, and unemployment, part of the prince's mission is coming up with development projects designed to stimulate the local economy.

Tourism was considered a pillar in this model. By targeting wealthy, international guests, park management hoped to create jobs and generate its own income. The EU invested more than $3-million to build a luxury safari lodge and other tourism facilities. On Tripadvisor, an Australian tourist called the lodge "paradise on Earth". But, overall, visitors and revenue have been disappointing.

In 2018, two British tourists and their Congolese driver were kidnapped in the park and a ranger who tried to defend them was killed. The industry was hit again by an Ebola outbreak in 2019 and the park closed at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

A second pillar of Virunga's economic stimulation programme is hydroelectric power stations, which are supposed to generate jobs and industry. Three plants have now been completed with a fourth one under way.

The hydroelectric project has been running for more than 10 years, but results are – yet again – far below expectations. The goal was to connect one-million local residents with cheap energy by 2020 and create 60,000 jobs. But today, only 39,000 households are connected – of a population of five million – and fewer than 12,000 jobs have been created.

One of the power stations – Luviro, to the west of the park – was intended to supply electricity to the nearby city of Butembo, but a grid connecting the plant to the city was never built. Now a competing electricity company is operating there.

De Merode came up with a new plan for this "surplus" hydroelectric power: a Bitcoin mine, opened by the French entrepreneur Sébastien Gouspillou – also known as the "Bitcoin Indiana Jones" for his crypto dealings in Siberia, Tajikistan, and Paraguay.

Ten shipping containers, each containing up to 500 special computers for mining Bitcoins, have been installed in the rainforest. Most of the proceeds go to Gouspillou's company.

***No spark:** A power station in the park was supposed to supply electricity to the city of Butembo.*

Expanding influence

Despite its limited economic impact, Prince Emmanuel de Merode continues to tout the "Virunga model" as a success, and both the Congolese government and the EU appear convinced: they've recently granted him sweeping new authority.

In May, the Virunga Foundation was quietly assigned the management of the more than 550,000km² Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor. It's a protected zone covering nearly a quarter of the DRC – an area almost the size of Kenya and home to more than 30-million people. The EU has pledged another $90-million for the project.

De Merode insists it has local support, but many people on the ground remain deeply sceptical.

"The Parliament has not even been able to debate this large-scale project," said MP Robert Agenong'a, a member of the environmental committee of the Congolese national assembly.

"The population has absolutely no say in the matter."

Almost a year later, the details about how the area will be managed, and what powers De Merode and his supporters will have, remain murky.

The Virunga Foundation and the Congolese conservation institute ICCN refused to answer our questions on this.

The prince was not available for an interview. ■

A version of this story was previously published on the investigative website *Follow the Money*

DATA

African girls are breaking the class ceiling

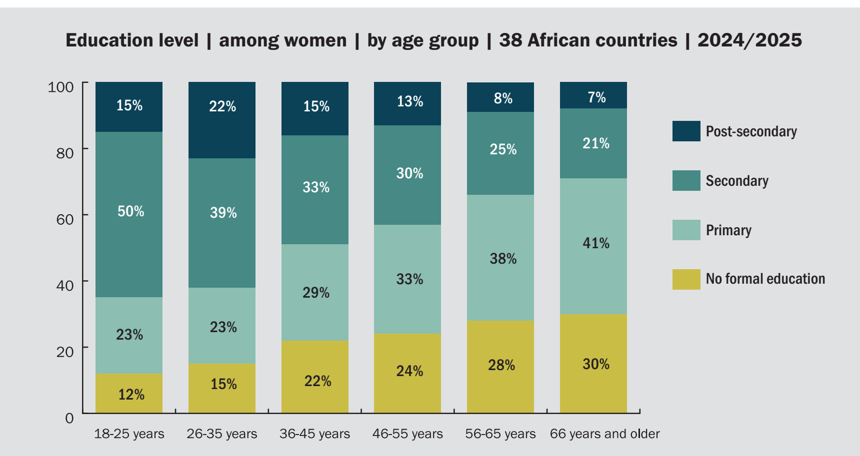
LAST week, we looked at the barriers girls face in getting an education. This week, we're following it up with a more positive story: education rates among African women have been rising.

Across our sample of 38 African countries surveyed since the start of last year, 18% of women have never gone to school, while 38% attended secondary school and 16% have some form of tertiary education.

Each generation is more educated than the one before. Among women older than 65 years, 30% lack formal schooling; this drops with each age cohort to 12% of women aged 18-25.

Youth are more than twice as likely as elderly women to have gone to high school (50% vs. 21%) or beyond (15% vs. 7%). Post-secondary education is even more common among women aged 26-35 years (22%) – maybe because they've had more time to enrol at a university or polytechnic.

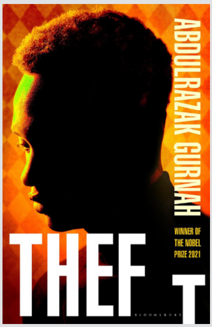
Over-time analysis confirms the overall trend. Across 27 countries surveyed consistently since 2011, the share of women without formal schooling fell by five percentage points, while the share of those with secondary and post-secondary education is up by seven points.



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.

TC BOOK REVIEW

BY JACQUELINE NYATHI



What gets lost along the way

Entwined characters and convoluted histories make for a compulsively readable novel.

THE PARALLEL lives of two boys, Karim and Badar, intersect in this novel. Karim is born after his mother, Raya, marries an older man to protect her family's honour. She later flees to Dar es Salaam and remarries. The 14-year-old Badar is employed by Raya and her husband, where he unwittingly becomes part of a secret. When things come to a head, Karim steps in to rescue him.

The brilliant Karim is without a mother's love during his formative years, but has many advantages over the orphaned and impoverished Badar. The latter's story is one of endurance; the former's the evolution of one of Africa's future Big Men, with all the moral corruption that entails. None of this, Gurnah suggests, is inevitable, leaving readers to reflect on the forces shaping each of these men's lives.

The women of the novel provide some of these forces: Raya, Karim's mother and Badar's employer; Badar's stepmother, helpless in the face of her husband's silent rage; and Fauzia, the loved one who becomes a wife.

Theft is a quiet novel of some beauty, focused on character studies, with Gurnah musing on human frailty. It's suffused with a sense of place, particularly the countryside and Zanzibar's old town. Gurnah also comments on the destructive influence of tourism and "white saviourism" on Tanzanian and Zanzibari culture. Whereas we often hear about the harmful nature of tourism, Gurnah reserves most of his wrath for the condescending aid workers who helicopter in and leave a trail of devastation behind them.

The title echoes across the novel – "theft" doesn't refer only to the literal stealing of possessions, but that of potential and personal independence. ■

The Quiz

1. Has Alassane Ouattara been president since 2014 or 2010?
2. Who is Ethiopia's prime minister?
3. How many colours are on Angola's flag?
4. Taye Atske Selassie is the president of which country?
5. Which Tanzanian city's name loosely translates to "place of peace"?
6. In which country is the Okavango Delta (pictured) located?
7. True or false: Guinea-Bissau is sometimes called Guinea-Conakry.
8. Agadez is a city in which country?
9. True or false: Marrakesh is Morocco's capital city.
10. In which country is the Virunga National Park?

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
"Guinea a chance to shine – I know my African countries!"

PHOTO: SERGIO PITAMITZ/VWPICS/ UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

COMMENT

‘Trade not aid’ isn’t a panacea

Africa’s trade with the world is falling and its share of foreign direct investment is minuscule.

L. MUTHONI WANYEKI

EVEN in its heyday, “aid” was often (correctly) criticised as too little, too conditional, and too patronising to be the path to African prosperity. But “trade not aid”, a response flung around as the alternative, has underdelivered so far.

So says the African Export-Import Bank. Its *Africa Trade Report* last year shows that trade between Africa and the rest of the world – already low – was down 6% in 2023. Exports dropped by 9%. Imports fell by 3.7%.

Africa’s trade with the rest of the world still suffers from deep-rooted problems that began with slavery, continued under colonialism, and persist today. Inside our countries, rural areas supply the cities. Those cities, in turn, serve foreign powers and economies.

We often blame our own elites for corruption and greed – and rightly so – but in truth, they are only small players in a bigger system, living off the scraps while the real wealth flows outwards. They facilitate plunder but are not its ultimate beneficiaries. The beneficiaries are found wherever the plunder is put to productive use.

The *Africa Trade Report* is upbeat about the potential of the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement. Intra-Africa trade still accounts for only 16% of all African trade. That percentage is rising, but too slowly. We seem unable to wean ourselves off commodity exports to foreign markets.

And, despite heavy public debt supposedly incurred to address that very problem, intra-African infrastructure is still poor. Only five economies account for half of intra-Africa trade, with South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya dominating. Realistically, intra-Africa trade is a hoped-for, future destination. But to use another cliché of indeterminate origin: hope is not a strategy.

Next up: How about foreign direct investment (FDI) to create or boost local industry? Well, again, more hope. Africa receives just over 3% of global FDI. Just over 3%. Only two African economies – Botswana and Mauritius – are deemed “investment grade” by ratings agency S&P. The same sub-structural logic with which trade siphons out of, rather than enriches Africa, also underlies global investment calculations.

Think lithium, which is now critical for batteries fuelling the so-called energy transition. This paraphrased quote, from a story last month in Kenya’s *Daily Nation,* is an illustrative example on FDI:

Extractive: *Burkinabé granite mineworkers earn a few euros a day to enrich non-African owners.*
PHOTO: JOHN WESSELS/AFP

"American mining company Kobald Metals, linked to Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates, says it has inked a deal that could allow it to mine lithium in the DRC, the first fruits of Donald Trump's forays in Kinshasa. The company is about to acquire 17,000 mining concessions in the DRC. But the company is coming to an area where China currently reigns supreme."

Investment used to go to oil and gas. Now it's going to rare earths and critical minerals. But, as in the past, it continues to be neither by nor for us. It's coming to extract resources, in their raw form, for productive uses outside the continent.

The significant benefit goes to the likes of Bezos and Gates, the people who own those productive uses. Sure, our governments will get royalty pittances. The functionaries in our governments will get their commissions, facilitation fees, kickbacks, or whatever they're called. But in all likelihood, the communities in which the rare earth and critical minerals are found will get a big, fat nothing. Except for the inevitable environmental messes, human rights abuses and violations, and so on that accompany extraction.

No doubt money will be made from Africa with foreign direct investment and trade in whatever it extracts. But, barring radical resets in the global sub-structure, African governments, companies, and publics won't be making it. Nor significantly benefiting from it. Decades from now Africans will ask, "Where's the money?" and the answer will still be: "Not here." ■

Dr. L. Muthoni Wanyeki is a Kenyan political scientist

Big Pic

Renewal: Nanan Awoulae Désiré Amon Tanoé, king of the N'Zima people of Grand-Bassam and president of the Chamber of Kings and Traditional Chiefs of Côte d'Ivoire, arrives for the celebration of the annual Abissa festival.

PHOTO: SIA KAMBOU/AFP

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