

# The Continent

## Unlikely allies move to sink Mauritius' Chagos deal



ILLUSTRATION: WYNONA MUTISI



**COVER:** Most Africans would like their governments to stay out of foreign conflicts. But the US-Israel war on Iran has drawn in the island nation of Mauritius because the US needs its military base on Diego Garcia island in the British-administered Chagos archipelago. That appears to be stalling a treaty in which the UK was going to cede Chagos sovereignty to Mauritius (p12). Britain's far-right Reform party wants the archipelago to stay under UK control and has now allied with Chagossians excluded from the negotiations in a push to resettle the islands. Leading the "super, super, secret" resettlement mission is the colourful Misley Mandarin, a former London bus driver who now styles himself as "interim first minister" of the Chagos Islands. Cooking up a storm as a new resident on long-deserted land, Mandarin spoke to *The Continent* (p13).

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# THE WEEK IN BRIEF

## ETHIOPIA

### Not exactly Robocop, but close

Ethiopia has launched “smart” – unmanned – police stations in the Bole district of the capital Addis Ababa, the *BBC* reports. When a person reports an incident on the screen, an officer – who is a real person in a remote location, not a chatbot – pops up on the screen to take down more details and decide if further action is needed. For now, uniformed police officers are still present at police stations, to show



PHOTO: AMANUEL SILESHI/AFP

*Pony club: Mounted policemen parade through Addis Ababa in Ethiopia.*

people how the technology works, “until they get used to it”.

## MIGRATION

### UK emulates US with blanket visa ban

The United Kingdom has halted study visas for nationals of Cameroon, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar. Authorities say some applicants “abuse” legal migration routes as a back door to claim asylum in the UK. Government data shows 39% of the 100,000 asylum seekers in 2025 arrived in the UK through legal routes such as study visas, with the four countries accounting for a significant share of the recent increases in claims, *The Guardian* reports.

## BUSINESS

### Showmax pivots to showing zero

Canal+ plans to discontinue African streaming platform Showmax “in the near future”, *Business Insider Africa* reports. Showmax briefly led Africa’s streaming market in 2023, with a roughly 40% share, ahead of Netflix’s 35%, but posted a \$308-million loss in 2025. The platform was developed by MultiChoice, which Canal+ bought for \$3-billion. Regulators required Canal+ to continue funding entertainment reflecting South African culture, but that wasn’t enough to save Showmax.



## HEALTH

### Anti-obesity drugs may also treat addiction

Popular anti-obesity drugs such as Ozempic may help to reduce addiction and deaths linked to substance use, a new study published in the *BMJ* has found. Researchers analysing health records of more than 600,000 US military veterans found people on the medications were less likely to develop substance-use disorders and were at 50% lower risk of dying from substance abuse. Ozempic was originally developed to treat Type-2 diabetes, but became popular among well-heeled people looking to lose weight in a hurry.

## SENEGAL

### President and PM bromance on the rocks

Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko may withdraw his party from government and return to opposition amid growing tensions with President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, *Semafor* reports. Sonko said taking his party out of its “soft power-sharing situation” with Faye remained an option if disagreements continued. The rift comes as Senegal holds debt-restructuring talks with the International Monetary Fund. Sonko backed Faye as the presidential candidate in the 2024 elections, after being jailed by the previous government.

## BOTSWANA

## Rare earths jackpot may lift diamond blues

Canadian mining company Tsodilo Resources has announced a significant discovery of rare earth and critical minerals in Botswana. The deposits include 15 rare-earth elements, copper, cobalt, nickel, vanadium and silver, reports *Business Insider Africa*. Botswana hopes critical minerals will diversify its economy beyond diamonds and attract investment as it repositions itself in the geostrategic competition in which major powers, including the US and China, are racing to secure supply chains.

## DRUGS

## West Africa faces extensive drug crisis

A new report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime warns that synthetic drugs have become West Africa's most urgent public health and security challenge. Researchers say the influx of substances like tramadol, synthetic cannabinoids and nitazenes, and methamphetamine, is overwhelming states' capacity to respond. The networks selling the substances are increasingly decentralised, technologically agile, and connected to global markets. The researchers said addiction and related harms fall disproportionately on young people.



PHOTO: GEORGE OSODI/AP

*Precarious economic footing: A woman walks along oil pipelines in Warri, Nigeria.*

## ECONOMY

## Mixed fortunes for Africa as oil prices spike amid Iran war

A surge in oil prices driven by the United States and Israel's war with Iran could benefit a few African oil exporters but will likely hurt most economies on the continent, according to a *Bloomberg Economics* report. If prices stay near \$85 a barrel, exporters such as Angola, Nigeria, and Ghana may see improved current account balances. However, net oil-importing economies such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, and Kenya could face higher import costs and significant economic strain.

**BENIN**

## Bon voyage, Boni Yayi

Former president Boni Yayi has stepped down as leader of the opposition Les Démocrates, citing health reasons. The 72-year-old said he wanted to “fully dedicate this new phase of his life to rest” and will hand interim leadership to party structures. His departure comes at a difficult moment for the party, which holds no seats in parliament after losing to President Patrice Talon’s bloc in January elections. Talon’s government is also on edge after a failed coup attempt in December.

**BURUNDI**

## Journalist jailed for WhatsApp freed

Sandra Muhoza, a Burundian journalist who was jailed in April 2024, has been released on parole, one of her lawyers said on Wednesday. Muhoza, who works for online outlet *La Nova Burundi* was sentenced to four years in prison for “undermining the territorial integrity of the nation and racial hatred”. She shared information in a private WhatsApp group about the government allegedly distributing arms. Prosecutors authorised her provisional release and she returned home this week.

**SOMALIA**

## Green light for new constitution, orange for polls

Somalia’s parliament has approved a new constitution, introducing direct public elections for legislators, a significant change from the current clan-based representative system. The president will continue to be elected by parliament. The amendments also extend terms for legislators and the president (currently Hassan Sheikh Mohamud) from four to five years. This means the next election, scheduled for May or June this year, will be delayed until 2027. Not everyone is happy: opposition leaders have rejected the



PHOTO: HASSAN ALI EMI/AFP

**Stay put:** Somalia’s President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s term has been extended by a year.

changes, citing lack of consensus and risks to federal balance.

## NEWS

## NIGERIA

# Shia Muslims decry US-Israel strikes on Iran

Protesters are framing the demonstrations as ‘standing up to aggression’, rather than as a sectarian issue.

HUSSAIN WAHAB IN ABUJA

SHIA MUSLIMS in Nigeria staged protests this week after the United States and Israel launched attacks on Iran. Local media reported demonstrations in Lagos, Niger, Kebbi, Kaduna, Sokoto and Kano states.

Iran is the global centre of Shia Islam. An estimated three to seven million Shia Muslims live in Nigeria.

Popoola Moshood, a Shia from southwestern Nigeria, spoke with anguish about the attacks on Iranian leadership, describing former Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed in a missile strike, as “a man of honour” and a martyr.

A law student in Sokoto, who asked not to be named, described Iran’s retaliation as a matter of sovereignty, while acknowledging civilian casualties.

“People don’t really care whether [Iranians are] Shia or not. Many just see it as standing up to aggression.”

Nigeria has Africa’s largest Shia population, but they are a marginalised minority. In 2019, the government



PHOTO: AMEER NAMEEY/REUTERS

**Standing up:** Shia Muslims, at a protest against Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s killing, in Kano, Nigeria.

designated the Islamic Movement of Nigeria – the country’s most prominent Shia organisation – as a terrorist group and banned it. The move followed a series of deadly clashes between the group’s followers and Nigerian security forces in the mid-2010s.

Despite the polarised online rhetoric, Khaleefah Isma’il Adeyemi Yusuf, an imam in Abuja, does not expect current tensions to escalate to 2010s’ levels. He said conflict between Sunnis and Shias in Nigeria had been driven by local dynamics rather than Middle Eastern rivalries. A countrywide sectarian crisis is unlikely unless domestic political actors deliberately inflame it, Yusuf said. ■

# UGANDA

## The central bank is going for gold, no matter the cost

A new scheme to buy bullion is going ahead, despite global conflict and uncertainty creating a seller's market.

SOITA KHATONDI WEPUKHULU

THE BANK of Uganda is pushing ahead with its plan to buy 100kg of gold from licensed domestic suppliers between March and June. This is the pilot phase of its new strategy to diversify its reserve assets beyond foreign currency.

Gold prices have been skyrocketing since early 2024. As United States economic policies became chaotic, investors and central banks diversified from US government bonds to “safe haven” investments like gold, which is selling at \$5,118 an ounce, compared to about \$2,300 a year ago.

Higher prices make the bullion-buying policy more expensive for Uganda's central bank. But its research and economic analysis director, Adam Mugume, told *The Continent* the bank

was playing the long game and planned to hold the gold for 20 to 30 years.

The bank intends to buy from local producers and will offer only Uganda shillings to discourage speculators who might import expensive gold for resale.

Gold is Uganda's largest export earner, but also one of its largest import bills. This is because most of the exported gold comes from other countries for refining in Uganda before being re-exported. The central bank's bullion-purchase scheme is a rare instance of prioritising local producers over importers.

As a regional war emerges in the Middle East after Israel and the US attacked Iran, even buyers with foreign-market access have welcomed the scheme. “Our buyers in the international market like the United Arab Emirates may be too affected by the conflict to maintain the volume they're buying,” said Josephine Aguttu, secretary of the Tiira Small-Scale Miners Association. ■



**Pan to mine:** An artisanal miner in Busia, Uganda.

# DRC

## Rubaya collapses yet again, entombing hundreds more lives

M23 rebels are blaming government drone strikes for the latest disaster at the fragile coltan mining site.

**AJABU ADOLPHE IN GOMA**

MORE THAN 200 people, including children, are feared dead after a landslide in Rubaya in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. This is the second major collapse at the coltan-mining site in recent weeks. A landslide there killed hundreds of people on 28 January.

Local sources said the ground gave way at about 3pm on Tuesday, burying miners and women who had been selling goods nearby. Rubaya lies about 60km west of Goma, and has been under the control of March 23 Movement (M23) rebels since April 2024.

Aimé Nsabimana, the rebel-appointed Rubaya mayor, confirmed the Tuesday disaster, saying excavations were continuing and that he had no further information.

Ombeni\*, a survivor of previous Rubaya landslides, said the site had become a burial ground. "Some bosses don't want the victims to be pulled out of the rubble for fear of having to pay for their funerals," he told *The Continent*.

When rebels established a parallel

administration across much of the Kivu provinces early last year, the DRC ministry of mines declared the Rubaya perimeter a "red zone", banning mining there. Despite this, coltan continues to be extracted from the site and exported via Rwanda.

Even before the rebel takeover, the mountainous area – worked by thousands of unmechanised diggers with little safety oversight – had suffered severe erosion and was considered too fragile for the mining expansion seen in the past decade.

After the January landslide, the Kinshasa government launched an offensive against the M23 in Rubaya. The rebel administration has blamed the government drone strikes for triggering Tuesday's landslide.

This week the United States imposed sanctions on Rwanda's defence forces over their support for the rebels. Kigali called the sanctions "one-sided" and said they "unjustly" targeted one party in the conflict. ■

\*Name changed for security reasons

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COMMENT



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# MAURITIUS

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## Confusion in Port Louis over Chagos deal

The US-Israel war against Iran has added a new layer of complexity to the long-awaited handover agreement.

LORRAINE MALLINDER

UNTIL RECENTLY, it seemed the United Kingdom and Mauritius were finally close to sealing a deal on the Chagos Islands after more than three years of arduous negotiation.

But United States President Donald Trump's disapproval of the handover, and his row with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer over the legality of strikes on Iran from the Diego Garcia base, has raised fears over the deal's future.

The US established Diego Garcia, a powerful and strategically located military base, nearly six decades ago – with British approval. The island is part of the Chagos archipelago, administered by the UK. After a 2019 ruling by the International Court of Justice that the UK should relinquish control of the archipelago, the British government negotiated a treaty to cede sovereignty

over the islands to Mauritius. To guarantee continued US access to the base, the UK agreed to pay an average of £101-million (\$135-million) a year to maintain a lease on Diego Garcia for the next century.

On Tuesday, the Mauritian government issued a statement criticising the recent US, Israeli, and Iranian attacks with “no legal underpinning under international law”. It also noted there was “no visibility” on when the Chagos treaty would come into force.

The statement followed last week's indication from a UK foreign office minister that Britain was “pausing for discussions” with the US, which his government later denied. In a prelude to the current confusion, talks scheduled for 23 to 25 February between Mauritian and US officials on Chagos security matters had already been postponed.

Speaking to newspaper *L'Express*, Mauritian attorney-general Gavin Glover said his country was “collateral damage” in a “tug-of-war” between Trump and Starmer. A government source said there were no signs Port Louis was mulling direct negotiations with Washington.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam said Mauritius faced a budget hole of 10-billion Mauritian rupees (\$211-million) as the UK's first cheque for the Diego Garcia lease had been “delayed”. ■

INTERVIEW

# ‘Super secret’ Chagos mission: Meet Nigel Farage’s man on the inside

Chagossians were expelled from their home in the late 1960s. Against the backdrop of Trump’s war on Iran, Misley Mandarin is attempting to resettle the archipelago, which is home to a very powerful US military base. He has found some unlikely allies.



## LORRAINE MALLINDER

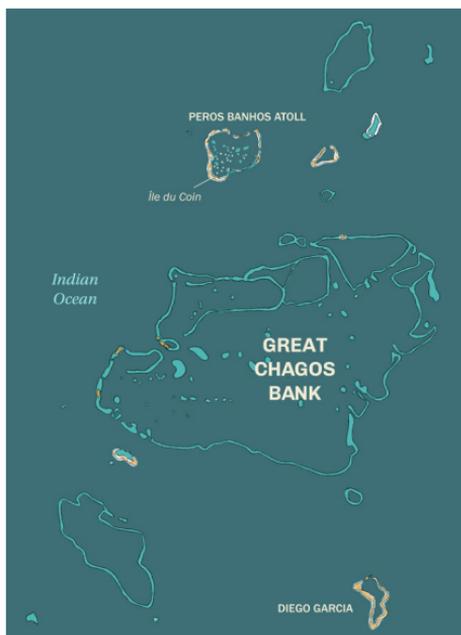
WHEN THE United States and Israel started blitzing Iran last weekend, eyes turned to the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean. The British-administered archipelago is home to a strategically vital US air base on the island of Diego Garcia. Would US President Donald Trump be using it in his “Operation Epic Fury”?

It’s fair to say Trump probably didn’t give a damn about Misley Mandarin’s opinion. But the self-styled “interim first minister” of Chagos, who recently upped sticks from Britain in a “super, super secret” mission to take up residence on the long-deserted Peros Banhos atoll, gave Washington his official “blessing” anyway.

*The Continent* spoke via WhatsApp to the 47-year-old Chagossian in his base camp – little more than a few tents, with a solar generator and a Starlink satellite connection enabling him to beam reels to his 10,000 Facebook followers. He quit his job as a bus driver in London to come here, determined to halt Britain’s plan to hand over what he considers to be his land to Mauritius after a long-running decolonisation battle.

“We’re British citizens, here. We’re not moving,” he says.

Mandarin wants the land of his forebears to remain under the rule of Britain, the former colonial ruler that booted out about 1,500 native Chagossians, including his own father, to make room for the US military base in the late 1960s. The removal consigned



Chagossians to a miserable fate in newly independent Mauritius.

Now on home turf, Mandarin, his 72-year-old dad, and two other Chagossians have dodged immediate deportation: they’ve obtained an injunction from a British court allowing them to stay until a hearing on 13 March. Since their arrival, two more Chagossians have joined them.

“We can do self-determination right now. We don’t want to cut any links with Britain. We’re not looking for independence,” Mandarin says. “The next generation will decide on independence.”

### Marriage of convenience

Life at Île du Coin, the largest islet on the Peros Banhos atoll, is simple.

The daily routine revolves around catching fish and finding a supply of fresh water. The new residents collect overnight rainfall in tarpaulin sheets to drink. Bathing involves a dip in the sea to wash off dirt, followed by a splash of precious rainwater to rinse.

Mandarin appears to be relishing the experience. Soon after his arrival, the former army cook, who has bags of swagger, posted a video of himself cooking up “naan fromaaz”, or cheese naan, in a skillet on a makeshift stove. “Pa bizin madam isi mwa!” he jokes. I don’t need a wife here!

The Chagossians arrived on the island on 16 February, accompanied

by former army officer Adam Holloway, a former Conservative member of parliament who recently defected to the radical right Reform UK party.

Reform, which is surging in the polls, is leading opposition to a bilateral treaty that would see Britain cede sovereignty of Chagos to Mauritius, while paying an average of £101-million (\$135-million) a year to maintain a lease on Diego Garcia over the coming century.

Negotiations began after the International Court of Justice ruled in 2019 that Britain should transfer sovereignty of Chagos to Mauritius “as rapidly as possible”.

The sleek yacht that brought the



**Base camp:** Misley Mandarin has pitched his tent at Île du Coin on the Peros Banhos atoll.

group on the five-day journey from Sri Lanka and travels back and forth with supplies was paid for by British-Thai businessman Christopher Harborne, a mega-donor to Reform. Its name is *No Excuse* – as in, “no excuse for us not to stay on Chagos,” says Mandarin.

Reform UK and the Chagossians make for curious bedfellows. On the one hand, we have a political party that has floated plans to create a Trump-inspired, ICE-style agency to carry out mass deportations in Britain.

On the other, there’s Mandarin’s dad, finally back home after being brutally evicted from his atoll at the age of 14.

“I will not go back to England. I want to die here,” said Michel Mandarin, as he set foot on his cherished Chagos soil.

The unlikely pairing has had cause for joint celebration. Two days after they arrived, Trump withdrew his approval for the UK-Mauritius transfer treaty, which was supposed to provide legal certainty for the base in a hypothetical world governed by the rules-based international order.

It turned out the president was annoyed at British Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s refusal to sanction the use of Diego Garcia for the Iran offensive. “DO NOT GIVE AWAY DIEGO GARCIA!” he told the British prime minister.

The treaty was paused.

Then war broke out – and a beleaguered Starmer agreed to “defensive” strikes from Diego Garcia.

On Île du Coin, war seems like a distant prospect, even if it is less than 200km away from Diego Garcia. As

Tuesday drew to a close, there had so far been neither sight nor sound of the US’s deadly B-52, B-1, and B-2 bombers in the slightly overcast skies.

### **Kicking the can**

Mandarin left Mauritius at age 22. He joined the British army in a bid to improve his lot and later became a bus driver in south London. He says he felt like a second-class citizen in Mauritius, with “no opportunity to progress”.

Rights groups have charted how evictees from Chagos struggled to cope in Mauritius, many of them ending up trapped in an urban nightmare of poverty, mental illness, and addiction – with little sympathy from their hosts. Many Chagossians left for Britain after securing citizenship rights.

## **Chagossians struggled to cope in Mauritius, many trapped in a nightmare of poverty, mental illness, and addiction.**

Now the fate of their homeland is being decided by a treaty negotiated over their heads. Last year, a UN committee on racial discrimination warned that the treaty could perpetuate “long-standing violations” of Chagossian rights.

The treaty says Mauritius is “free” to resettle islanders on any of the Chagos islands – except Diego Garcia. But there is no binding obligation for it to do so, and the exclusion of Diego Garcia rankles.



**Beachhead:** Misley Mandarin flanked by an American and a British Indian Ocean Territory flag.

The deal also includes a £40-million trust fund to be managed by Mauritius, which has been criticised as a ruse by Britain to avoid paying proper compensation.

“People talk about decolonisation, but if Britain did the wrongs, Britain should repair the wrongs – not kick the can to Mauritius,” says Mandarin. “Or they will get away with it.”

One of the reels he has filmed on Île du Coin features an industrial oven that was used by colonial officials to burn the islanders’ dogs before they were evicted. Officials threatened the islanders with the same fate if they refused to leave. Britain must pay compensation, he says.

### ‘Belongers’

Mandarin’s joint odyssey with Reform UK has provoked mixed feelings among the Chagossian diaspora in Britain, Seychelles, and Mauritius.

“He’s put us back in the centre of the story, but will we be overshadowed by Reform’s agenda?” asked one Chagossian in the English town of Crawley – home to a 3,500-strong Chagossian community – who is also opposed to the deal.

As the treaty was being negotiated, Chagossians’ concerns were largely swept under the carpet as a complicating factor in a pragmatic decolonisation drive.

The hard right has capitalised on the deal's major flaw, positioning itself as the main champion of Chagossians, just as their ancestral land finds itself embroiled in a conflict that could upend the global order.

One video recently posted by Reform leader Nigel Farage saw him express outrage after being “denied access” to Île du Coin for the delivery of “humanitarian” supplies to Mandarin and his men, racking up a cool 4.7-million views on X.

Asked whether he is being used by Reform and its supporters, Mandarin is sanguine. He says he also contacted the

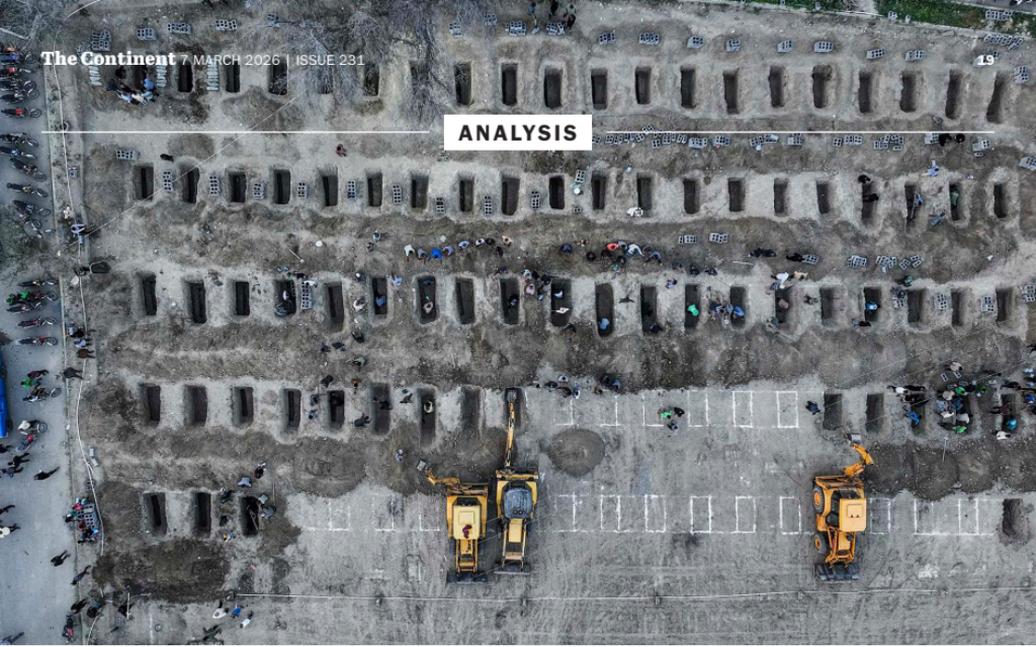
left-wing Green Party for support, but it never replied. “Only Reform responded. At the end of the day, it’s politics. You have to make your own judgements for the sake of your people,” he says.

He views the upcoming hearing as a potential “turning point in our fight”. The injunction barring their removal was granted on the basis that their location was too far from the base to pose a security threat.

“If the court says they can’t remove us, then maybe more people will come,” he says. “This is our people. This is our time. We’re not visitors – we’re belongers.” ■



**Daylight shrubbery:** Île du Coin, the largest islet on Peros Banhos atoll, is 200km from Diego Garcia.



*No hallucination: Mass graves prepared for victims of the Minab bombing.* PHOTO: IRANIAN PRESS CENTER/AFP

# A 21st-century forever war – powered by Claude

The scale and speed of the assault on Iran was only possible thanks to the US and Israeli militaries' integration of AI tools.

**SIMON ALLISON**

ON SATURDAY, the United States and Israel went to war in Iran. Between them, they struck more than 2,000 targets within 24 hours.

This is unprecedented. Almost.

For even the largest militaries, it would be an impossible task to identify, select, and then precisely locate such a high number of targets. But the US military had some help. Claude, the “next generation AI assistant” built by Anthropic, was instrumental in the

planning of “Operation Epic Fury”.

Anthropic is one of the world’s leading AI companies. Along with Palantir, another Big Tech company, it has been working with the Pentagon since 2024 to embed its systems in military decision-making.

“The AI machine is making recommendations for what to target, much quicker in some ways than the speed of thought,” said Craig Jones, an academic at the University of Newcastle who studies automated kill chains.

Similar AI systems have been used

by Israel to co-ordinate its bombing campaign in Gaza – among the most destructive in human history.

### Target malpractice

Among the first locations hit during the US and Israel’s aerial bombardment of Iran was the Shajarah Tayyebah primary school for girls, in the southern town of Minab. When the bombs hit that Saturday morning, school was in session: 165 people were reportedly killed, mostly young girls between the ages of seven and 12. Another 96 were severely injured. Both Iran and Israel have denied responsibility. The US has said it is “looking into” allegations that the school was destroyed by one of its missiles. Perhaps, given the volume of the bombardment, it has lost track.

It is too soon to know why the school was targeted – or whether it was an error. Either way, the US military’s reliance on AI raises difficult questions.

AIs get things wrong all the time. Perhaps it’s an extra finger in an AI-generated image, or a “hallucinated” reference in a research report. Or, perhaps, an algorithm sends a missile to the wrong address.

That’s why Anthropic chief executive Dario Amodei has said that weapons “that take humans out of the loop entirely and automate selecting and engaging targets” are simply not reliable enough. That position – along with Anthropic’s refusal to allow Claude to be used for mass domestic surveillance (although it is just fine with foreign surveillance) – led to the Pentagon cancelling a \$200-million contract with the company on Friday, the day before the attacks on Iran began. The Department of War immediately signed a new deal, minus any ethical guardrails, with OpenAI.

Anthropic’s confrontation with the Pentagon has burnished its reputation as an apparently “ethical” AI company.



*Too little, too late: Anthropic chief executive Dario Amodei has ended the AI firm’s partnership with the Pentagon, citing ethical ‘red lines’.*

PHOTO: ALEX WONG/  
GETTY IMAGES VIA AFP

But its models remain wired into the kill chain. Critics argue that even within Anthropic's "red lines", there is enormous potential for abuse. Even a "human in the loop" does not necessarily prevent mistakes – raising questions about who, exactly, is responsible when these mistakes result in fatalities.

Last year, Francesca Albanese, the United Nations special rapporteur for Palestine, accused Amazon, Google, and Microsoft of being "complicit in genocide" for providing cloud-storage systems to the Israeli military. Anthropic's integration into the US military has been much deeper.

**Even a 'human in the loop' does not necessarily prevent mistakes – raising questions about who, exactly, is responsible when these mistakes result in fatalities.**

While Israel and the US are waging an AI-powered war, Iran is responding with a technological revolution of its own. The Islamic Republic has pioneered the production of low-cost, one-way attack drones, most notably the Shahed-136, which costs just \$34,000 to produce and as much as \$4-million to shoot down.

Iran has aimed more than 1,000 drones at neighbouring Gulf states since Saturday. Hundreds have been shot down, but even the most sophisticated air defences struggle with their sheer volume, and dozens have struck their

targets, causing more damage to US allies than anticipated. Significantly, at least three Amazon data centres were targeted in Dubai and Bahrain.

**Artificial impunity**

Tech evangelists promise that artificial intelligence will, one day, cure cancer, end poverty, and greatly increase our quality of life. But so far the new technology's most obvious impact has been on warfare.

For those with access to them, AI systems like Claude make it dramatically easier to bomb hundreds of targets at the same time – and much harder to figure out who is accountable when something goes wrong. On Truth Social, US President Donald Trump – who has promised to stop wars, not start them – posted approvingly that technology and munitions now mean wars "can be fought 'forever,' and very successfully".

We are not far from a time when AI not only parses data to select targets, but actually chooses when to pull the trigger. One day, when – if – war-crimes investigators are able to pin down exactly who is responsible for killing the young girls in Minab, tech bosses may find themselves implicated alongside military and political leaders. ■

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Simon Allison is *The Continent's* International Editor. This article is co-published with *Coda Story*, a newsroom that tracks the patterns that explain the headlines. *The Continent* is partnering with *Coda Story* to expand our international coverage

## PHOTO ESSAY

# Hauling ass

The beasts of burden lightening Lamu's load.

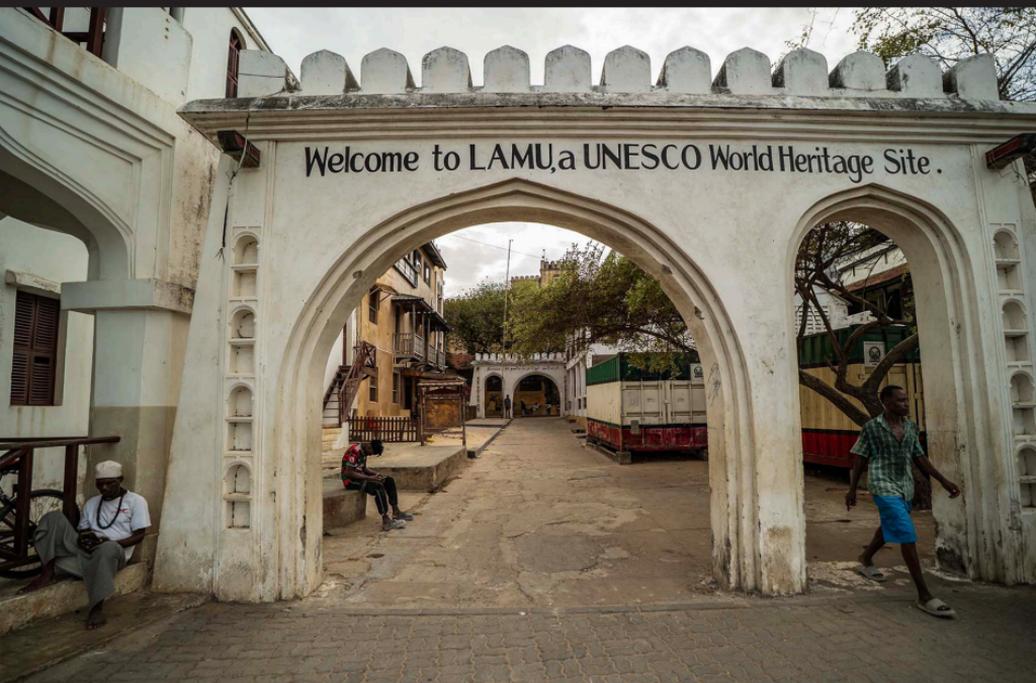


**ALL PHOTOS: KELVIN JUMA / THE CONTINENT**

ONCE the most important trade hub on East Africa's Indian Ocean coast, Lamu Island was established in the 14th century. Many old coral-stone buildings are still standing, their ornate doors and shaded verandas reflecting centuries of Swahili architecture and craftsmanship. Unesco considers it the best-preserved historic Swahili settlement and it is said to be Kenya's oldest continuously

inhabited town. Lamu's streets are too narrow for cars. Navigating them is possible only on foot – or by donkey. The island is home to about 3,000 donkeys, which people rely on for commuting and transporting building material, refuse, trade goods and everyday supplies. So integral are donkeys to Lamu life that they are given as presents at weddings and other important ceremonies.









## FEATURE



ALL PHOTOS: ON OUR RADAR/FULLER

## Sierra Leone fights to keep its mothers alive

**A year after global aid cuts, a Freetown hospital's funding crisis risks reversing the country's progress on maternal mortality.**

**ESTER PINHEIRO AND ERICA HENSLEY**

SONITA KAMARA (pictured above) was in obstructed labour, a life-threatening complication in which the baby cannot pass through the birth canal despite strong contractions. She was rushed to Princess Christian Maternity Hospital, the busiest maternity and newborn hospital in Sierra Leone.

She needed an emergency caesarean

section. But the surgery could not begin until Kamara's family was sent across Freetown to find hospital supplies – sutures, anaesthetic, and IV fluids – from private pharmacies.

The baby was delivered safely and transferred a few metres away to the special-care baby unit at Ola During Children's Hospital for oxygen. Days later, mother and child were discharged.

Happy endings like this were much

rarer not long ago. Before 2020, Sierra Leone had the world's third-highest maternal mortality rate. Since then, deaths have fallen nearly 80%, from 1,680 per 100,000 live births to 354 in 2023, according to the latest World Health Organisation estimates.

Now, that progress is at risk of reversal.

### **Donor retreat and conditional return**

Foreign aid – which at times exceeded 10% of Sierra Leone's GDP – has been credited with helping more women and babies survive childbirth.

The special-care baby unit at Ola During was built, and is maintained, by the United Kingdom-funded Saving Lives in Sierra Leone programme. It trained midwives, provided contraceptives and established several neonatal units. It began 2023 with a budget of £35-million (\$47.3-million), which was supposed to run for five years.

Then, in February 2025, Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced a cut in UK aid from 0.5% to 0.3% of gross national income. By late 2025, the Center for Global Development was reporting that the Saving Lives programme had been “quietly” axed, its remaining £17-million reduced to £1-million. Activities could be wound down this month.

“The sudden nature of these cuts is a huge blow,” said Dr Nellie Bell, head of paediatrics at Ola During. “We are already stretched... but we are going to see an increase in mortality in all those [special-care baby] units, for sure.”

The withdrawal coincided with cuts by the United States. In the year before the

Donald Trump administration cancelled 83% of global USAID programmes, Washington provided \$3.2-million for reproductive health in Sierra Leone – about 14% of spending in that subsector. In July, the health ministry told Human Rights Watch that US cuts amounted to a \$45-million reduction in projects in the broader category of maternal, child, and adolescent health.

Facing a funding crisis, Sierra Leone signed a bilateral agreement with the US in December through which Washington will conditionally provide \$129-million over five years. The conditions require Sierra Leone to co-invest about \$44-million and to commit to “significantly reducing long-term US burden” by assuming most commodity, workforce, and laboratory costs by 2030.

### **Sierra Leone signed a bilateral agreement through which Washington will conditionally provide \$129-million over five years.**

The US has signed similar “America first global health strategy” deals with 18 other African countries. An analysis by Fòs Feminista described the strategy as “a vehicle for advancing US military and commercial interests through increasingly coercive tactics”.

Zimbabwe withdrew from negotiations, arguing the deal unfairly linked mineral access to health aid, and activists in Kenya accused their government of agreeing to share citizens' personal data.



*On the brink: Dr Rosetta Cole performs resuscitation on Sonita Kamara's baby.*

### Chasing a self-sustaining system

One way to replace lost aid or meet Washington's co-investment demands is taxation. Sierra Leone has proposed new levies intended to "yield 1.5% of GDP in additional revenues by 2027".

Yet raising taxes on paper is easier than collecting them.

"Implementation depends on the capacity of national revenue institutions. That can take years," said Abou Bakarr Kamara, a senior economist at the International Growth Centre in Sierra Leone. OECD data shows Sierra Leone collects taxes equal to about 11% of GDP, below the African average of 16%.

Despite the challenges ahead, the country's health ministry is still projecting confidence.

"We are not assuming the health sector will collapse," said Dr Mustafa Kaba, deputy chief medical officer for clinical services at the ministry. "It is a moment

to realign, adjust to realities, and strengthen innovative health-financing schemes ... We want a resilient system that depends on itself."

Freetown Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyers is less sanguine. "I am not a fan of aid dependency," she said. "But when aid is removed in the context of weak governance, mismanagement, and corruption, you increase the population's vulnerability."

For the mothers, babies, and overstretched staff at Princess Christian and Ola During hospitals, the decisions of two men – the US president and the British prime minister – have turned their lives and daily work into a potentially deadly test case in the global debate on aid dependency. ■

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This story is by Fuller, a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to global reporting about women and gender inequality

## FEATURE

# Chibok survivors' 11-year nightmare ends in limbo

The crisis has not ended for Rahilla Iliya and her six children, who went from being Boko Haram captives to unsupported refugees in Diffa, Niger.

**ADAMU ALIYU NGULDE IN MAIDUGURI**

RAHILLA ILIYA was 16 when armed men broke through the gates of Government Girls Secondary School, Chibok, late at night on 14 April 2014. Together with 275 other schoolgirls, she was forced into the darkness, bundled onto a truck, and driven into the forests of northeastern Nigeria.

The kidnapping triggered global outrage and the viral #BringBackOurGirls campaign. But international attention quickly faded. Some of the girls were rescued or escaped in the years that followed, but Iliya disappeared into Boko Haram's shadow world.

Over the 11 years she was held captive, she was forcibly married to eight different Boko Haram fighters, handed from one to another as each "husband" died in combat. She was moved repeatedly between camps deep inside the Sambisa Forest and along the Nigeria-Niger border.

"Each day came with uncertainty and I had to learn how to survive in a place where I did not belong," Iliya told *The Continent*. "I cried many times, thinking

about my parents and wondering if I would ever see them again."

In that life of sexual slavery, bombardments and displacement, Iliya gave birth to six children: Musa, now nine; twins Fadil and Fadila, eight; Mukhtar, six; Isa, four; and Habib, two, all of whom were born into captivity. "I was raising children in the bush," she said. "I didn't know how to be a mother, but I knew how to protect them."

Then, in early 2025, Nigerian Army jets struck the Boko Haram enclave where Iliya and her children were being held. Amid the chaos, gunfire, and explosions, she gathered her children and they ran, reaching a river near the Nigeria-Niger border. She paid a fisherman 8,000 naira (about \$6) for passage across, into Diffa in Niger.

## Abandoned yet again

Iliya remains in Diffa, surviving on informal support and the goodwill of local residents. Despite her status as a verified Chibok survivor, Nigerian authorities have offered no assistance or counselling, nor a plan for reintegrating Iliya and her children into society.



*Reclaiming dignity: Rahilla Iliya with two of her children, after escaping Boko Haram in Nigeria.*

The children, born as captives and now living in a foreign country, exist in a legal and social limbo, unregistered and vulnerable. “I escaped the forest but I did not return home,” Iliya said.

Nigeria’s crisis of mass kidnappings has escalated in the 12 years since the Chibok abduction. Boko Haram and its splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province, continue to abduct women and girls in the northeast. Armed criminal gangs operating across north and central Nigeria kidnap children for ransom with near impunity.

Like Iliya, the abductees who escape face a different kind of captivity: continued isolation because of stigma from communities that label them “Boko Haram wives”. Psychological care and reintegration programmes are sporadic at best, compounding their plight.

Faruq Mustapha, who works with

survivors in Gagamari, Diffa, through the NGO Plan International, said escapees were often given only immediate humanitarian support such as food, medical care, and temporary shelter. “After the initial help, many survivors are left to depend on family members, who may already be struggling,” he said. “There is also limited access to mental health services in rural communities.”

Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad region need a stronger system and better co-ordination between governments, NGOs, and community leaders to support people like Iliya. “Long-term rehabilitation programs, education support, and economic opportunities are key to helping survivors regain stability and dignity,” Mustapha said. ■

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This story was published in collaboration with Egab

DATA

# Africa aligned on being nonaligned

ANOTHER SUPERPOWER, another war – the United States and Israel have attacked Iran, which has lashed out across the Middle East with reverberating geopolitical ramifications. How do Africans view this conflict?

We can't be sure but, if another ongoing conflict is anything to go by, Africans may want nothing to do with it.

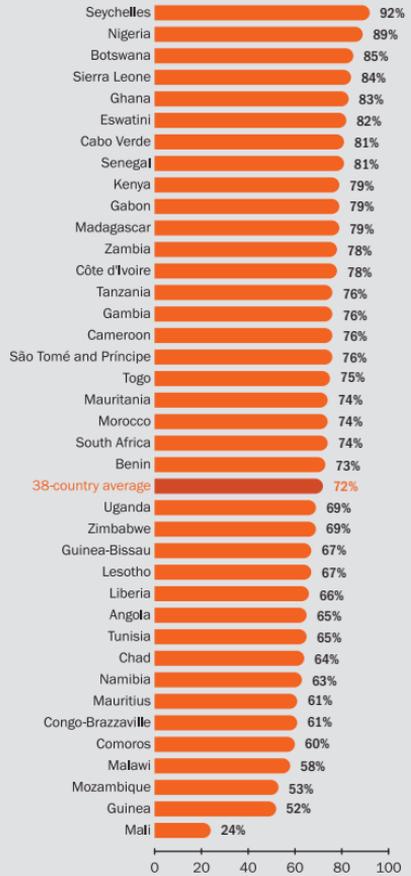
In 2024/25, we asked citizens across 38 countries about their views on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On average, seven in 10 say they have heard about the war, including more than nine-tenths of Cabo Verdeans (98%), Seychellois (94%), and São Toméans (91%).

Respondents who had heard of the war were asked whether their country should stay neutral or take a side. In 37 of 38 countries, majorities prefer nonalignment, led by Seychelles (92%). Overall, 72% want to stay out of the war.

The outlier is Mali, where 72% say the state should side with Russia, possibly reflecting the effect of Russian influence operations or appreciation for Russia-backed military action against rebels.

The Malian result does skew the overall continental figures slightly in favour of siding with Russia (14%) over Ukraine (8%). ■

Be neutral in Russia-Ukraine war | Among respondents who had heard of the war | 38 African countries | 2024/25



**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.



# MUSIC REVIEW

BY WILFRED OKICHE



## Legendary collab hits turbulence

Two of our faves decide to make music together. Instant success, right? Not so fast.

AFROBEATS superstar Wizkid is the crown prince of Nigerian pop music. He has taken the sound to more frontiers than those who came before him. He's faced stiff competition from his peers but Wizkid has found some kinship with the next generation of performers.

His smash hit *Essence* introduced singer Tems to a wider audience and on

two songs with the red-hot Asake – *MMS* and *Bad Girl* – he showed he can ride the next wave.

Now Wizkid and Asake are trying to build on the chemistry of their previous work with a new four-song joint EP. *Real, Vol 1* – produced primarily by Magicsticks, with support from 4Tunes and LOL – is a curious entry into their canon.

The EP struggles to justify its existence. The opener *Turbulence* is a bit of a snoozer, with the two stars coasting lazily on their charms. The lead single, *Jogodo*, plays like a solo Asake vehicle, with its percussive instrumentation, amapiano-inflected groove and saxophone closer, but the other songs operate in the low-vibration territory that Wizkid has clung to of late. When the tempo accelerates on the final *Alaye*, the vibe feels formulaic.

Granted, the brisk run-time – under 11 minutes – immediately puts it on the defensive, but it remains the case that both acts have made juicier party songs elsewhere.

There is some curious experimentation on *Iskolodo*, which samples Latin pop and jazz but manages to fit the result within the project's Afropop remit.

Familiarity is a useful tool but on *Real, Vol 1* it comes off as a gimmick, a disservice that sidesteps Wizkid and Asake's strongest material and recycles the middling tier.

This one won't stand the test of time. ■

# The Quiz

- 1 In which country will you find the Royal Mausoleum of Mauretania (pictured)?
- 2 What is the former name of the African Union?
- 3 From which empire did Ghana gain independence?
- 4 Which country did Mauritius gain independence from in 1968?
- 5 True or false: Niger is a coastal country.
- 6 Conakry is which country's capital city?
- 7 True or false: Robert Mugabe was Zimbabwe's first president.
- 8 Makossa is a genre and dance from which country?
- 9 Adama Barrow is which country's president?
- 10 Name the South African footballer who captained Leeds United in 1998.



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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

"Experts say a mausoleum is not a German museum for small rodents. But I think it could be if it really tried."

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# Big Pic

**Dunelight:** J Fritz Rumpf's *Shapes and Patterns of the Desert*, showing the Sossusvlei dunes in Namibia under a morning glow, won the landscape section in the open category of the Sony World Photography Competition.

PHOTO: © J FRITZ RUMPF, WINNER, OPEN COMPETITION, LANDSCAPE, SONY WORLD PHOTOGRAPHY AWARDS 2026



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