

AFRICA CONFIDENTIAL

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BLUE LINES

The unilateral ceasefire by the M23 announced days after laying siege to Goma in eastern Congo-Kinshasa did not mean an end to fighting in the Kivus. M23 and the Rwandan army are continuing to push towards Bukavu in Kivu-Sud. Shortly before Africa Confidential went to press, Congo-K's Foreign Minister Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner urged the European Parliament to ensure that the EU immediately suspend all economic support for Rwanda. She also dismissed the M23 ceasefire as 'a farce'. Her speech was met with applause by MEPs. Few questioned her insistence that the Rwandan army and M23 are operating in lockstep. The question is, what, if anything, will the EU will do about it?

While Germany has suspended aid, and Belgium demanded the suspension of Europe's minerals-access deal with Kigali, other western governments have been reluctant to pressure President Paul Kagame. That lack of response by western governments, on whose behalf Rwanda's military operates as a security contractor in Mozambique and CAR, appears to be part of Kagame's strategy. Many anticipate that Rwanda and M23 will consolidate their grip on Goma and across the Kivus. Only a coordinated regional response is likely to restrain them. On 7 February, leaders from SADC and the EAC will meet in Tanzania to attempt to restart negotiations between Kigali and Kinshasa, which broke off in December.

SIERRA LEONE

President Bio keeps cocaine lord in the family

One of Europe's most wanted criminals is the partner of one of the President's daughters and has transferred his operations to Freetown

Sierra Leone has been in a state of shock ever since one of Freetown's most astonishing urban myths was confirmed as fact – that one of Europe's most dangerous criminals, convicted Dutch cocaine kingpin Jos Leijdekkers, or 'Bolle Jos' ('Fat Jos' in Dutch), is at large in Sierra Leone and believed to be running his business there.

Leijdekkers, 33, was captured on video on 1 January sitting next to and chatting with Agnes Bio, 30, a daughter of President Julius Maada Bio, only two rows behind the President and the First Lady Fatima Maada Bio, at a church service. Dozens of family members and top government officials, including the Chief Minister, David Sengh, were at the New Year's Day thanksgiving service in the President's home village of Tihun, Southern Province.

Agnes Bio is the partner of Leijdekkers and they have been pictured together in romantic settings on social media. She is a particular favourite of her father's, who has promoted her career in the foreign service. After serving as an 'advisor' in the foreign ministry, she is now accredited to Sierra Leone's permanent mission to the UN in New York, *Africa Confidential* has confirmed, and as such is immune from arrest or detention or having her bags searched on entry or exit from the United States.

Leijdekkers was sentenced in the Netherlands in absentia in June to 24 years in prison for smuggling seven tonnes of cocaine, robbery, and ordering a killing. Before Leijdekkers was identified in Sierra Leone, *Africa Confidential* was

investigating the involvement of top government officials there in cocaine smuggling. Like several neighbouring countries, Sierra Leone is no stranger to the cocaine trade (see box – Freetown, the cocaine entrepôt).

Sources in Freetown say the Dutchman took over Sierra Leone's existing cocaine smuggling network, and, deploying enormous bribes, recruited members of the country's national security infrastructure to provide logistical and security services.

MOVE FROM TURKEY

Leijdekkers ran his operation from Turkey until late 2022, according to media reports, when he disappeared. His presence in Sierra Leone became public after a video surfaced which was shot in the early hours of 1 January 2023 at Freetown's popular nightclub Scarlet, where he got into a scuffle with Hussein Fawaz, the nephew of Haj Fawaz, a prominent Sierra Leonean-Lebanese businessman, we hear.

According to a police statement, the fight began after Fawaz attempted to calm down a quarrel between a security guard and a man identified as 'investor and businessman Omar Sheriff'. Leijdekkers goes by this name in Sierra Leone, the authorities have acknowledged.

Leijdekkers is clearly identifiable in the video. He slapped Fawaz in retaliation and in the end, his bodyguard fired towards Fawaz, injuring his legs. Also in the video is a man accused of being a key operative in Leijdekkers's operation, Alusine Kanneh, Sierra Leone's Chief Immigration Officer. Kanneh has been MP for Nomo and Tonkia

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chiefdoms in Kenema District since 2012 and a deputy whip for the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) before he was catapulted into his current job by the President.

When the video surfaced, Kanneh was accused of being part of Leijdekkers's network. Kanneh denied the charge, saying that he was simply trying to separate the combatants and



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FREETOWN, THE COCAINE ENTREPÔT

Cocaine smugglers have long been sending the drug to Europe from South America via West Africa, including through Sierra Leone (AC Vol 48 No 13). In July 2008 then Transport Minister **Ibrahim Kemoh Sesay** was suspended and later sacked during an investigation into the arrival of 700 kilograms of cocaine in a twin-engined aircraft plane which landed at Lungi airport. He denied any wrongdoing and was not prosecuted for any criminal offence.

Fast forward to October 2023, when authorities in Antwerp intercepted a shipment of 7.7 tonnes of cocaine hidden between soya beans exported from Sierra Leone – the first in a series of similar incidents. Last December, Liverpool-based criminals were sentenced to long prison terms after importing £140 million worth of cocaine hidden in bags of gari that came from Sierra Leone.

On 20 September last year a private jet with a fake registration number landed without permission at Freetown. It carried four **Mexicans** and one **Dutch** national, who initially refused to submit their documents.

The captain, who claimed not to speak English, later explained that he had been paid US\$20,000 for a trip from **Liberia** to Mexico with the men. It was widely speculated that the jet had flown from South America loaded with cocaine but the authorities apparently found nothing suspicious and later released the men after they paid a \$100,000 fine.

Asked for comment on the incident, the US Drug Enforcement Administration told *Africa Confidential* at the time it, 'does not comment on ongoing investigations'. On 13 January 2025, **Guinean** authorities found seven suitcases with 180kg of cocaine and \$100,000 in cash in a Sierra Leonean embassy vehicle. The ambassador, **Alimamy Bangura**, was recalled to Freetown but the Guinean government would not let him go, we hear, and only relented when the Sierra Leone Foreign Minister **Timothy Kabba** came in person to bring him back.

Five days later, the Sierra Leonean police discovered an abandoned custom-built mini-submarine, of a type cocaine smugglers have used to transport cocaine from larger ships to the shore or between countries, at Black Johnson Beach, a famed natural beach. The police concluded that nothing of security interest was found after they examined the craft.

Experts on the smuggling say that once in Sierra Leone, the drugs will be hidden in containers bound for export to Europe or given to 'mules' to hide the drug on their person or in luggage, but myriad other means are used to get the drugs to their destination. ●

did not know either man. 'The malicious allegations suggesting that Hon. Kanneh has been associating with a wanted drug dealer are completely unfounded and fabricated to discredit his efforts,' he added.

As well as asking Kanneh to respond to the allegation about Leijdekkers, we invited him to react to *Africa Confidential's* discovery from public records that he had bought three properties in Delaware and Pennsylvania, in the **United States**, for US\$1.9 million between November 2022 and July 2024, asking how he could afford this on a civil servant's salary.

That July Kanneh had been in the US to meet members of the US Department of Homeland Security to liaise on deportations of Sierra Leone nationals. Kanneh did not reply to our email query, but when contacted by phone denied buying the properties, saying he would 'send all the evidences later'. By the time of publication these had not been received.

Another local official was identified to us as a pillar of Leijdekkers's smuggling network who has links to

the transport infrastructure of the country but whom we cannot name for legal reasons. According to members of Freetown's elite Leijdekkers's operations involve many members of the current administration linked to the President, whether by blood or otherwise, whom he has appointed to their present offices.

The Operational Support Division (OSD), the elite armed paramilitary force of the Sierra Leone police, shepherds Leijdekkers around in a convoy of luxury SUVs, we hear. Such escorts may be rented by individuals but this has to be approved by senior officers. He is usually accompanied by armed bodyguards, other sources said.

DISCOVERY

After the incident in the nightclub, it took the Dutch authorities at least another 18 months to confirm his presence in the country, Dutch prosecutors told Reuters news agency on 24 January. In response to the media reports about Leijdekkers, the government of Sierra Leone has asserted that throughout the festive season, the President 'attended numerous events', where he 'took

FAVOURITE DAUGHTER WHO WENT DUTCH

Agnes Bio, 30, is believed to be a special favourite of the President, who has several children by different mothers. Agnes is currently 'co-lead' of the Youth, Peace and Security team in the Sierra Leone Permanent Mission to the United Nations and accredited to the UN Security Council as a diplomat.

She runs the Agnes Bio Foundation which finances training and apprenticeships for young people. But her biggest extravagance may have been a huge party on 29 November last year, which was said to be an engagement party for her and her partner Jos Leijdekkers, the convicted drug smuggler. It was also a week after her birthday on 19 November.

Social media footage broadcast the next day which quickly went viral showed two of Africa's biggest Afrobeats superstars, **Tiwa Savage** and **Ayra Starr**, performing together at a private event the night before. For a private gig, artists of such stature could expect fees worth tens of thousands of dollars. The stars are believed to have flown in specially for the occasion on private jets. The video shows among the small audience **Isaac Bayoh** and **Shaekou Allieu**, both members of Sierra Leone's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, as well as **Zainab Kande**, Agnes's mother.

Agnes has appeared on platforms at side events during the UN General Assembly, including last year. She was recorded making a speech about her foundation seated next to the ex-UN diplomat, **Michael Keating**, former Special Representative of the Secretary-General in **Somalia** and current head of the European Institute of Peace.

It's unclear how the relationship between Agnes and Leijdekkers started. Agnes was born in 1994 in Ireland grew up in **Guinea, Morocco** and **France** and completed her education in **Switzerland** and Morocco.

Agnes's mother, Zainab Kande, was appointed Consul-General of Sierra Leone in Dakhla, the capital of Western Sahara, in 2021 when Morocco and Sierra Leone resumed diplomatic relations.

According to diplomatic sources, Morocco agreed to finance the consulate as part of a series of favours from the kingdom to Sierra Leone in exchange for President Maada Bio's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara.

Screenshots of Agnes's Instagram account show her and Leijdekkers together as a couple. There is no suggestion she is implicated in any suspected illegal activity connected with Leijdekkers. ●

photographs with many attendees', and 'has no knowledge of the identity and the issues detailed in the reports about the individual in question'.

Fatima Bio also took to social media to deny ever having been introduced to the 'white man' in the church video or knowing who he was. But a video recently surfaced showing a ceremonial harvesting of rice in Tihun in October, where President Maada Bio, Agnes, and Leijdekkers, among others, can be seen harvesting bunches of rice. Leijdekkers is seen in close proximity to the President.

The extent of the Netherlands's interest in Leijdekkers is uncertain. State prosecutors in January told Dutch media they had known Leijdekkers's

whereabouts for six months. A spokesperson told Reuters, 'It is the highest priority of police and prosecutors to get him to the Netherlands to serve his sentence. We are doing everything we can in that regard.'

Yet the Netherlands does not have an extradition treaty with Sierra Leone, which, while it could voluntarily hand Leijdekkers back to the Netherlands, is not under any obligation to do so. A statement by Sierra Leone's ministry of information on 26 January said the government 'has not received any formal communication from any country or institution regarding this Jos Leijdekkers'. Information Minister Chernor Bah reiterated that

point on television and disclaimed any governmental knowledge of that name.

Leijdekkers has been officially wanted for arrest since May 2022. Last year, the Dutch authorities guessed he could be making between €840m and €2 billion a year from cocaine smuggling. Before moving to Turkey, he lived in Dubai.

The government statement on Leijdekkers concluded, 'The government of Sierra Leone strongly reaffirms its commitment to combating transnational crime, including drugs arms and human trafficking and all forms of terrorism. We are resolute in ensuring that our country does not become a haven for organised crime.' ●

COASTAL FRANCOPHONE AFRICA IN 2025

Economic hits before and after votes

After the youth revolution in Dakar last year, an octogenarian may be running in the Ivorian elections

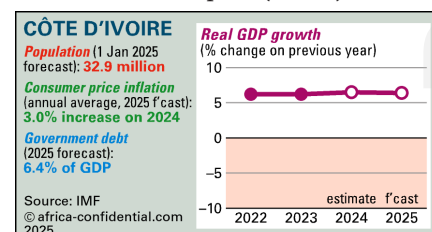
With voting nine months away, the campaigning and political tractations ahead of Côte d'Ivoire's presidential elections are under way. The outcome will reverberate across the region. President **Alassane Dramane Ouattara** embodies the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) establishment in its confrontation with the Sahelian junta leaders.

Ouattara's rebuilding of the economy

and his cautious political stance – but lacking genuine reconciliation after the civil conflict of 2010-11 – had earned him some respect. That was stretched after he abandoned his retirement plans and ran for a third term in 2020, following the sudden death of his chosen successor candidate **Amadou Gon Coulibaly** (AC Vol 61 No 15). The subsequent return home of Ouattara's longtime rival **Laurent Gbagbo** after his acquittal at the International Criminal Court fed

into the mood of consensus. However, 2025 feels different. This time Ouattara, should he decide to stand again, really does face the risk of being seen to seek one term too many (AC Vol 65 No 11).

Though most foreign observers tend to assume he will run again, some Abidjan political analysts are less convinced. They acknowledge that the president is under pressure from protégés in and around the ruling *Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix* (RHDP) who see



his continued rule as their best defence against any new government's anti-corruption campaigns – but wonder whether a man so aware of the high international regard in which he is held, and assured of a prestigious retirement role, will really want to be viewed through the same lens as Cameroon's Paul Biya (AC Vol 64 No 22).

Two names, both personally close to Ouattara, stand out. After a stint advising the IMF and World Bank, former prime minister Patrick Achi, who won his electoral spurs in La Mé in the otherwise largely opposition-dominated south, was on 7 January brought back into the heart of government as state (senior) minister and special advisor to the president, overseeing economic strategy. Vice-President Tiémoko Meyliet Koné, a former northern central banker technocrat, has increasingly represented Côte d'Ivoire at international events such as the Baku climate summit.

Even more important for Ivorian democracy is the state of the opposition. It can now present an equally credible lead candidate, the *Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI) leader Tidjane Thiam, back home after heading major European financial institutions such as Prudential and Credit Suisse (AC Vol 64 No 24). Despite a challenge from the also well-regarded former commerce minister, Jean-Louis Billon, one of the country's richest men, Thiam is highly likely to be confirmed as the PDCI candidate at its convention.

With his command of economic issues, and roots, like Ouattara, in a traditional royal family, Thiam may be the challenger that finally reassures the president that his legacy will be safe even if the opposition won. But will that be enough to convince Ouattara to step aside? Abidjan politicians believe that for that to happen Thiam may need to discreetly guarantee that there will be no witch-hunt of RHDP cronies.

Meanwhile, the president is moving early to prepare the electoral ground favourably for the ruling party, whoever its standard bearer may be. On New Year's Eve he announced that the Port Bouët French military base next to Abidjan airport – a totem of the former colonial power's regional presence – was to be handed over to the Ivorian military last month. With French troops gone from the central Sahel and now

departing Chad and Senegal, their continued control of this base would have been a serious electoral handicap for the RHDP.

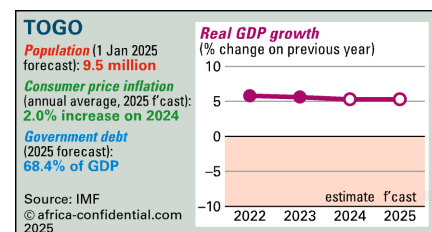
SENEGAL

In Senegal, Bassirou Diomaye Faye was elected last March in place of his legally barred patron Ousmane Sonko. The latter was then installed as prime minister, a role in which he is set to even more forcibly set the domestic agenda following November's legislative election victory for the ruling *Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité* (Pastef) party.

While the honeymoon for Pastef has not yet totally faded, life for Senegal's ruling party could get tougher over the months ahead as it makes the sort of spending cuts likely to dismay the voters who swept it to power last year (AC Vol 65 No 24). In September, Prime Minister Sonko announced that an audit by the *Inspection Générale des Finances* (IGF) had found that, over 2019-23, the fiscal deficit had averaged 10.1% of GDP – almost double the 5.5% previously reported by the administration of then President Macky Sall. The deficit for 2023 was around 10%, instead of the previously declared 4.9%, while central government debt had reached 83.7% of GDP by the end of that year, compared with the hitherto reported 73.6%. Moody's reacted by downgrading Senegal's sovereign debt rating from Ba3 to B1.

As a result, Finance Minister Cheikh Diba warned that Senegal's agreement with the IMF would have to be renegotiated, and the fund itself said 'audacious' reforms are required. A prime potential target are energy subsidies, which the fund has a track record of viewing as inefficient. But what may well be sound development economics could prove politically awkward for a government swept into office on a wave of public support, including a lot of votes from the middle class – who might lose out if the government follows IMF advice and prunes back general subventions, concentrating social assistance on the poorest. New National Assembly Speaker Malick Ndiaye may have his work cut out keeping the Pastef parliamentary caucus on side when the toughest decisions are taken.

The opposition are heavily outnumbered in the legislature, though they do have an intriguing new figurehead in the formidable lawyer Aissata Tall Sall, foreign and then justice minister under Sall. The government, however, will not be playing with kid gloves. On the grounds of a 13-year-old conviction for shooting, Justice Minister Ousmane Diagne recently forced the removal from parliament of Dakar's



mayor Barthélémy Dias – whom just two years ago Pastef had been happy to count as an ally when it needed his electoral support.

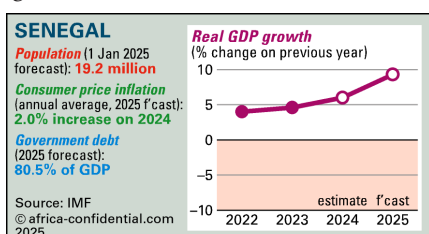
Well aware, that its currently buoyant support could fade as austerity bites hard, the new administration has concluded that it would be politic to broaden its engagement. At the Doha Forum last year, Faye met with the still self-exiled Karim Wade, a former would-be rival. Wade is well connected in Gulf business circles; could his assistance on that front presage a political rapprochement too?

TOGO

Political change of a less momentous nature looms on the horizon for Togo in 2025. Faure Gnassingbé looks set to relinquish the presidency that he has so tightly gripped since 2005 – but only to assume a beefed up premiership in which, under new constitutional arrangements, all executive powers will be concentrated (AC Vol 65 No 12). Nominally the choice of prime minister will lie with the largest group in the national assembly, which is Gnassingbé's *Union pour la République* (Unir). The ruling party controls 108 of 113 seats, and astute gerrymandering could ensure its dominance for decades.

The creation of a senate also does not offer much promise of greater balance or accountability. Some 41 members of the upper house will be chosen on 2 February by an electoral college of regional and municipal councillors. While opponents have managed to capture a few town halls, including central Lomé, they are too few to make much impact. Furthermore, with the remaining 20 senators to be appointed by the head of state, government dominance of the upper house is more or less guaranteed. Consequently, three major opposition parties have concluded that there is no point in taking part. These are Jean-Pierre Fabre's *Alliance nationale pour le changement* (ANC), the *Forces démocratiques pour la République* (FDR) led by Paul Dodji Apevon and the *Dynamique pour une majorité du peuple* (DMP), inspired by the late former archbishop of Lomé Philippe Kpodzro and now led by Brigitte Adjmagbo-Johnson.

The tightly controlled



monopolisation of power by Gnassingbé, as by his father and predecessor, **Gnassingbé Eyadéma** – 58 years in all – fuels continuing popular frustration, particularly in southern urban areas and around Sokodé in the centre north. Togo remains susceptible to explosions of opposition street protest as occurred in 2017-18 and again in 2020. The central actors in those dramas have left the stage. **Tikpi Atchadam**, charismatic leader of the *Parti national panafricain* (PNP), is in exile, while **Agbéyomé Kodjo**, who mounted an unexpectedly strong challenge in the 2020 presidential contest, died last March. Still, the underlying mood remains combustible and a new figurehead could emerge for a fresh upsurge in protest.

Even so, Gnassingbé feels sufficiently confident to devote significant time and energy to regional diplomacy, in particular mediation between Ecowas and the Sahel's military rulers, with whom he has cultivated friendly relations; indeed, foreign minister **Robert Dussey** recently speculated that Togo could even join the putschist-created *Association des États du Sahel* (AES) – a notion that sceptical observers see as a possible device to free Gnassingbé from any potential tightening of Ecowas governance rules.

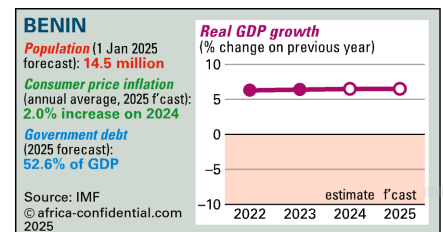
Meanwhile, at the 15 December Ecowas summit in Abuja, he and Senegal's President Faye, the bloc's envoy to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, persuaded leaders of fellow coastal states that there might still be

some hope of brokering a compromise with the Sahelian regimes. As a result, Ecowas agreed that the Sahel states' 29 January withdrawal would only become definitive six months after that date (AC Vol 66 No 1).

BENIN

The Sahel issues have economic importance for Benin, which is still struggling to persuade the hard-headed junta in Niger to agree to a full reopening of their shared border crossing at Gaya-Malanville. Until this happens, the port of Cotonou will continue to miss out on the profitable Nigérien trade that was previously a major source of income and is now diverted through Lomé in Togo. For President **Patrice Talon**, this is more than an irritant at a time when he is already under increased pressure. The challenge to his rumoured ambitions for a third term now extends beyond the opposition *Démocrates* to encompass some parliamentarians in the *Bloc Républicain* party of **Abdoulaye Bio Tchané**, his planning minister and a key architect of the economy's resilient performance in recent years. Talon has managed to bludgeon electoral law changes through parliament that reinforce his capacity to manipulate the 2026 parliamentary polls in his favour. The aim is to crush the *Démocrates* and thus eliminate any barriers to removing the term limit blocking his path to a third term (AC Vol 65 No 12).

In 2024, the sacking of cousin and key adviser **Johannes Dagnon** and



arrest of close business ally **Olivier Boko** – after their own presidential ambitions had become apparent – showed Talon's determination to maintain control (AC Vol 65 No 20). Still, it remains to be seen whether that will translate into running again, or whether the president will feel sufficiently comfortable to entrust a protégé, such as finance minister **Romuald Wadagni**, to continue his legacy. Talon's choice may hang on the public mood. There is growing resentment at the privileges granted to his favoured commercial operators and the strong performance of the *Démocrates* in the January 2023 parliamentary election was a clear warning to the president.

Talon must now decide how best to protect his interests. Running again could further enrage public opinion, but, as has been seen in similar cases elsewhere, backing a successor is not risk-free. For example, **Mauritania's Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz** discovered this after stepping aside in 2019 for confidant **Mohamed Ould Ghazouani**. Their subsequent falling out culminated in Abdelaziz receiving a five-year sentence for corruption. ●

KENYA

Still the kingmaker

The coalition building ahead of 2027 may be shaped by Raila Odinga's fate in the AU elections in Addis Ababa in mid-February

The coalitions that will contest Kenya's general elections in August 2027 are rapidly taking shape. For President **William Ruto**, the first step involves integrating the Amani National Congress party of Prime Cabinet Secretary, **Musalia Mudavadi**, into Ruto's United Democratic Alliance (UDA). This move, slated to be formalised later this month at a national delegates convention, has been in the works for some time. It cements Mudavadi's position as Ruto's most trusted ally in the government, despite Mudavadi delivering only a modest portion of Luhya votes in Western Kenya to Ruto in 2022.

The UDA, having jettisoned its

deputy leader **Rigathi Gachagua** last year, now plans to hold the postponed county and ward elections in April (AC Vol 65 No 12). And the opposition is uniting behind a common cause to make Ruto a one-term president.

Gachagua, impeached at Ruto's behest last October on an improbable charge sheet that included supporting the Generation Z protests, has not gone quietly (AC Vol 65 No 20). He believes that having delivered three quarters of the vote in central Kenya for Ruto, his support base remains intact. He has given several speeches, many in church and at his Nyeri home and held rallies with the likes of Wiper party leader **Kalonzo Musyoka** and the National

Rainbow Coalition-Kenya's **Martha Karua**, both former running mates of **Raila Odinga**.

Karua says that she still has presidential aspirations. Musyoka, who has been working with Democratic Action Party-Kenya leader **Eugene Wamalwa**, the other principal left in *Azimio la Umoja* after Karua quit the coalition last year, also intends to run in 2027 (AC Vol 65 No 25). Since Gachagua was impeached and did not resign – though a court case contesting his impeachment is still pending – he cannot run for office in 2027.

The 'one-term' tagline has been designed to plug into Ruto's deep unpopularity. More than 80% of Kenyans are unhappy with the direction of the country, according to recent Infotrack polls.

The question is where this leaves Odinga, the perennial presidential candidate and kingmaker. Logically, Odinga and most of his Orange Democratic Movement, including the five ODM officials now in Ruto's cabinet, would back the president. **Junet**

FOR THE POLITICAL CLASS IT'S ALL ABOUT 2027

Despite his unpopularity, President **William Ruto** remains the favourite to win another term in 2027. On a recent tour of Western Kenya, **Raila Odinga's** stronghold, Ruto declared with characteristic bravado that he would defeat his rivals 'by early morning on voting day'. Much hinges on whether African leaders vote for Odinga to replace **Moussa Faki Mahamat** as Chair of the African Union Commission at the AU summit on 15 February.

Ruto and Odinga have campaigned vigorously for the post, starting with a launch event last August attended by four East African presidents and Nigeria's former president, **Olusegun Obasanjo** (AC Vol 65 No 18). Ruto hosted a 'retreat' of six African leaders in late January to discuss future AU reforms under Odinga. All candidates claim to have accumulated public endorsements and support from numerous leaders but the election is a secret ballot so not all the promised votes will materialise. **Djibouti's** Foreign Minister, **Mahmoud Ali Youssouf**, is widely regarded as the front-runner, having conducted a more discreet but no less diligent campaign than Odinga (AC Vol 66 No 3).

The escalating crisis in eastern **Congo-Kinshasa** is likely to cost Odinga votes. Kenya had been relying on the eight members of the East African Community uniting behind their man. However, the refusal by Congo-K's President **Félix Tshisekedi** to attend an emergency summit called by Ruto, as the current Chair of the EAC, and a regional split between support for **Rwanda** and Congo-K, suggests that the EAC vote will fragment (Dispatches 31/1/25).

Though Odinga has repeatedly said that winning the AUC job in Addis Ababa would mean taking a sabbatical rather than exiting Kenyan politics, few doubt that interim Orange Democratic Movement leader **Peter Anyang' Nyong'o** would remain in office if Odinga is elected for a five-year term. Aside from the five ODM ministers, Ruto's electoral strategy for 2027 hinges on Odinga's ability to secure support from Western and Coastal Kenya with him. A defeat in Addis would compel Ruto to offer Odinga another senior role. But it would also give him the chance to return to the opposition.

Unlike **Musalia Mudavadi**, Odinga has hedged his bets by ruling out an ODM merger with the United Democratic Alliance and promising to run a full slate of candidates in 2027, potentially paving the way for an ODM presidential candidate. Now 80, Odinga's chances of becoming president almost certainly ended with his defeat in 2022. But he is still the kingmaker. ●

Mohamed, officially the opposition leader in the National Assembly, has become one of the government's most vocal supporters. ODM supporters of the government are set to be rewarded in a recomposition of National Assembly committees before parliament returns from recess on 11 February.

The likes of **Babu Owino** and **Caleb Amisi**, two of ODM's younger MPs, who voted against Gachagua's impeachment and who have publicly criticised the Ruto government, are among a group expected to lose their seats on influential Public Investments committees.

YOUTH MOVEMENT

In the third corner is **Fred Matiang'i**, the Interior Cabinet Secretary in Uhuru Kenyatta's government, who appears to be positioning himself as the candidate for the Gen Z movement. He, like Mount

Kenya businessman **Jimi Wanjigi**, another close Kenyatta ally, has taken on high-priced lobbyists in the **United States** to promote his cause.

The youth activist movement, whose ability to drive popular protests across the country brought down Ruto's Finance Bill last June and came close to toppling his government, has been quiet in recent months. This silence is partly due to the public fear caused by a wave of abductions, estimated at well over 100, primarily targeting young people, allegedly at the hands of the police and security services.

But the movement, which has been effective in raising funds as well as mobilising street protests, has been carefully considering its transition into electoral politics. Organisers tell *Africa Confidential* that to be viable in 2027, they will need to enlist some

high-profile politicians. Busia Senator **Okiya Omtatah**, a regular presence at Gen Z rallies and a skilful campaigner, lacks name recognition. By contrast, **Matiang'i**, one of Kenyatta's more combative ministers, is viewed as both effective and untainted by corruption.

He also has the formal support of the Jubilee Party, the movement established by Kenyatta and Ruto ahead of the 2012 elections but reduced to a rump by Ruto's UDA in 2022. On their own, none of these camps would have the resources or the ethnic base to seriously challenge Ruto. While maintaining the central provinces around Mount Kenya is likely to be Ruto's main challenge, **Karua** could bring only a small number of votes to Odinga's ticket. Ruto's new Deputy President, **Kithure Kindiki**, also from central, is a more experienced campaigner than Gachagua. ●

UGANDA

The Muhoozi succession recasts Kampala's regional policy

President Museveni is planning his seventh presidential term but his son and heir apparent unsettles neighbouring states

As President **Yoweri Museveni** lays the groundwork for a seventh term next January, a pressing question is whether he will manage to control his mercurial son and heir apparent, General **Muhoozi Kainerugaba**. Muhoozi, who heads the Uganda People's Defence Forces, has alienated some of Uganda's

neighbours such as **Kenya** and won over others such as **Rwanda**.

As reports emerged on 4 February that Uganda is sending 1,000 troops into eastern **Congo-Kinshasa** to areas controlled by the Rwandan-backed M23, regional officials were trying to work out what role they might play. Ugandan and

Rwandan troops have clashed before in Congo-K, further complicating national security. Given Gen Muhoozi's close ties to Rwanda's President **Paul Kagame**, this operation looks to be a pre-emptive move to protect borders and trade routes.

After the M23 was pushed out

of Congo-K in 2013, some went into Uganda and others to Rwanda. Most of those in Uganda have crossed back into Congo-K over the past decade.

Before this latest deployment Muhoozi had said he would expel 'white mercenaries' (a reference to some of the **Romanian** fighters that Kinshasa had hired) from Congo-K. He then vowed to visit his 'big brother' **Félix Tshisekedi**, Congo-K's president, and called Kagame his 'uncle' and a 'man of peace', a reference to the collapsed peace talks between the two over the Kigali-backed M23 militia's incursions in eastern Congo-K.

Congo-K's Foreign Minister **Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner** described the threat of invasion and inference that Kinshasa was responsible for continuing the war as 'unacceptable' and threatened to cut diplomatic ties with Kampala.

Until this latest exchange, Muhoozi has directed most of his energy towards local politicians. He threatened on social media in early January to behead opposition leader **Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu**, aka **Bobi Wine**.

Ahead of next year's elections, Museveni is marginalising and repressing the opposition. Violent crackdowns of opposition protests and rallies by law enforcement have increased in recent months (Dispatches 23/7/24).

Bobi Wine, who leads the National Unity Platform and took 35% of the vote in 2021, has recovered from wounds sustained after being hit by a gas canister fired by security agents in Kampala in August while he was addressing a meeting of NUP supporters. Undeterred, he confirmed his plans to challenge Museveni in 2026 just weeks later.

Wine says he will seek to agree a 'coalition of the willing', probably with himself as the presidential candidate. He says he is ready to extend an olive branch to **Mathias Mpuuga**, the former opposition leader who was criticised by the NUP leadership for accepting US\$130,000 in cash as a 'service award' from the national parliament last year.

CRACKDOWNS

Following the assault on Wine, a **United States** State Department spokesperson told journalists that Washington was 'concerned that violence against opposition voices means the democratic space continues to shrink in Uganda'.

The initial stages of the trial of fellow opposition leader **Kizza Besigye**, who was abducted by Ugandan security forces in Nairobi and arraigned on weapons possession charges in December, began on 7 January. This suggests that the repression will only intensify. Besigye now faces a series of

charges, including inciting protests and treachery (Dispatches 17/12/24). On the opening day of the trial, one of Besigye's lawyers, **Eron Kiiza**, was arrested and convicted of contempt of court charges, which are widely believed to be fabricated.

Besigye's Forum for Democratic Change is also involved in coalition talks with Wine. FDC spokesperson **John Kikonyogo** says that his and other opposition parties must resolve their 'internal contradictions' by the end of January before then working on a coalition agreement.

In the run-up to the 2021 elections, engineers from **China's** Huawei helped the authorities in hacking the communication systems of key opposition figures, including Wine. Huawei also supplied cameras equipped with facial recognition technology, aiding authorities in identifying and arresting hundreds of opposition activists.

Similar crackdowns on opposition activity are likely in the coming months. A **Russian** contractor, Joint Stock Company Global Security, is now deploying digital number plate recognition technology to bolster Museveni's surveillance arsenal.

While Museveni attempts to repair the diplomatic damage caused by his son, he will hope that a second **Donald**

Trump presidency will lift the sanctions imposed by the US State Department last May against Parliamentary Speaker **Anita Among** and Finance Minister **Amos Lugolobi**. Officials also hope that Trump's promise of transactional diplomacy, which overlooks issues like LGBT rights will restore Uganda's access to the African Growth and Opportunity Act.

Trump's predecessor **Joe Biden** had suspended Uganda's access over its latest anti-homosexuality bill, noting that the government had 'engaged in gross violations of internationally recognised human rights' (Dispatches 9/11/2023).

Elsewhere, Muhoozi will continue to cosy up to Russia and China, while Museveni continues to court the **United Arab Emirates**.

In January, Uganda formally became a partner country of the expanded BRICS group, alongside the UAE. This move marks a symbolic shift away from the US and Europe, despite the bloc's lack of a cohesive stance on trade and a raft of other policies.

Last year, Museveni awarded a medal of honour to **Mohammed Bin Maktoum**, a UAE-based businessman with ties to the royal family. As Chair of Alpha MBM Investments, Bin Maktoum has pledged to build Uganda's planned 60,000 barrels per day oil refinery, a

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project which has been stalled for years.

The UAE backs the Rapid Support Forces led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemeti' in Sudan and has been relying on Uganda to extend support to the group. Barak Orland, an Israeli arms dealer and friend of Muhoozi's, has been using his company, BAR Aviation, to move arms from UAE to

Uganda and Sudan.

Museveni has long had an awkward relationship with Kenya's President William Ruto, exacerbated by Muhoozi's tweets, claiming that under his command, the Ugandan army could capture Nairobi in less than two weeks (AC Vol 63 No 21). He also stated that if former President Uhuru Kenyatta had

sought a third term, he would have won.

However, there have been hints of rapprochement. Museveni was hosted by Ruto and Raila Odinga at a Luo community cultural event over Christmas and has been a prominent supporter of Odinga's bid to become Chair of the African Union Commission in February. ●

RWANDA/CONGO-KINSHASA

After seizing Goma, Kigali's rebels head south

Angola could play key role as the Paul Kagame-Félix Tshisekedi conflict threatens the region

When the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) and its Congolese allies, the M23 militia, captured Goma, the capital of Kivu-Nord province, over the weekend of 25-26 January, they exposed the collective breakdown of Congo-Kinshasa's national security forces, the UN peacekeeping force and the mission sent by the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

As those forces attempt to regroup against the backdrop of unheeded calls for a ceasefire, the RDF and M23 are pushing south, towards Bukavu, the picturesque capital of Kivu-Sud. On 31 January, local sources reported that the RDF is amassing more troops at Cyangugu, right on the border with Bukavu in south-western Rwanda.

The RDF is estimated to have at least 5,000 soldiers in eastern Congo-K. Rwanda's government repeatedly denies this, indifferent to the fact that its army's presence in Congo has been acknowledged and criticised by UN agencies, several African governments and Rwanda's western allies in the United States, France, and Britain.

The M23's conduct in areas under its and the RDF's control suggests it intends to stay put, and to establish its own administration. The *Alliance Fleuve Congo* (AFC), a political movement ostensibly headed by Corneille Nangaa, a former president of the Congo-K's electoral commission, has positioned itself as the civilian wing of the M23. It has already begun filling administrative positions vacated by fleeing government officials.

PAST LIVES

Much of this is a rerun of the late 1990s, when the RDF and the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD), a Rwanda-backed Congolese political party/militia, conquered much of eastern Congo. They established an

administration there, and used the territory as a launch pad to conquer the whole country.

This time, Nangaa has stated the AFC's intention is to 'liberate' Congo-K, prompting claims that Kagame is again planning regime change. Nangaa may be betting that growing Congolese opposition to President Félix Tshisekedi's efforts to finagle a third term in power could translate, despite widespread Congolese hostility towards Rwanda, into popular support for the AFC (AC Vol 66 No 2).

If regime change is the plan, Kagame may recall the earlier project when Rwandan and Ugandan troops marched across the country in 1997 to oust Mobutu Sese Seko, installing Laurent-Désiré Kabila in his stead.

Kabila stayed loyal to Kigali for a few months. He quickly realised that he would never be accepted by the Congolese people as a legitimate president if he maintained his ties to Rwanda. Kabila soon pivoted, expelling the RDF and courting the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR) an anti-Kigali militia that helped organise the genocide in 1994, killing over 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in Rwanda.

Nangaa was angered by western states sanctioning him as head of the Electoral Commission for engineering Tshisekedi's rigged electoral victory in 2019, in cahoots with outgoing President Joseph Kabila. Months later, those same governments recognised Tshisekedi's win, and hailed Kabila for stepping down.

Were Nangaa, or anyone from the AFC, to be installed by the RDF/M23 as Congo-K's president, they would face the same challenge as Laurent-Désiré Kabila.

Kagame's war aims are probably closer to the tactics of Russia's Vladimir Putin in Ukraine's Donbas. That is,

conquer the Kivus militarily, install a Rwanda-friendly administration, ensure that more natural resources, particularly minerals, flow from the Kivus into Rwanda. Then, Kigali could announce the territory's incorporation into Rwanda at a later date (Vol 65 No 23).

If this is the plan, it is going quite well. The RDF is on course to conquer as much of the Kivus-Nord and Sud as it wants. Kinshasa's troops, *Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo* (FARDC) are poorly equipped and morale is rock bottom. The Romanian mercenaries that were deployed to assist have had zero impact.

Similar problems have undermined the SADC Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (SAMIDRC). It has been outgunned by the RDF's sophisticated weaponry; for a while it slowed the RDF/M23's advance but failed to halt it.

The installation of a Rwanda-friendly administration in the conquered territories is proceeding apace. On the Gisenyi-Goma border, Rwandan officials are stamping passports using Congolese *Direction Générale de Migration* (DGM) stamps, while M23 guards look on. And the RDF/M23 continue to capture areas rich in mineral deposits, redirecting many Congolese mineral value chains into Rwanda. Expect a significant jump in Rwanda's exports of gold, tin, and tantalum this year.

MUTED RESPONSE

Yet incorporating the Kivus into Rwanda will require African and international acquiescence, and, preferably, agreement. The US, France, Britain, the UN Secretary-General, and the African Union have denounced the RDF's belligerence in Congo-K, demanding that Kagame withdraw his forces. But only Britain has threatened, albeit even half-heartedly, to cut some of

the aid flows that finance over a third of Kigali's budget.

Western governments' weak response has raised the ire of the Kinshasa street. Protestors have picketed several embassies, western and African. But there were no protests outside the embassies of Russia and China, whose governments have refrained from condemning Rwanda.

The UN Group of Experts (GoE) report on Congo-K on 27 December, detailed the extent of the RDF's deployment in eastern Congo. No one on the UN Security Council, including any of the permanent five, called for action against Kigali.

Such a weak response may have convinced Kigali that its annexation of the Kivus will not be seriously opposed by the Council. Renewed acts and talk of territorial expansionism by three members of the Council – China, Russia and the US – would reinforce such a conclusion (AC Vol 66 No 1).

Historically, the African Union has opposed changes to the continent's borders. But it finally endorsed South Sudan's secession. That could set a precedent both in Congo-K and in Somaliland, whose goal of independence from Somalia has the backing of some in the new US administration.

Southern Africa poses a more significant obstacle, as in 1998. It was to defend the territorial sovereignty of another SADC member that Zimbabwean and Angolan forces were deployed in Congo-K to block the RDF and RCD's advance in what expanded into regional war, drawing in tens of millions of people from 1998-2002. That stage in the conflict started when Angolan and Zimbabwean troops decisively defeated their Rwandan and Ugandan counterparts who had launched Operation Kitona, a series of lightning strikes on airfields and ports in western Congo in 1998, aimed at

regime change in Kinshasa.

It now clear that today's South African National Defence Force (SANDF), Tanzanian and Malawian armed forces, whose troops constitute the SAMIDRC, are incapable of repeating such a feat.

In a social media post on 29 January Kagame denounced the SAMIDRC for displacing what he called 'a true peacekeeping force' from the East African Community (EAC). Instead it was a 'belligerent force engaging in offensive combat operations to help the DRC government fight against its own people... while also threatening to take the war to Rwanda itself,' said Kagame. He went on to threaten South Africa, arguing it was 'in no position to take on the role of peacemaker or mediator. And if South Africa prefers confrontation, Rwanda will deal with the matter in that context any day'.

In the latest fighting in Kivu-Nord, 13 South African soldiers have been killed. Kagame's social media posts add insult to injury.

Unlike Rwanda's thin-skinned president, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa is rarely provoked by insults. And he doesn't want South Africa's G20 presidency this year to be marred by the country being further dragged into Congo-K's war.

That may be difficult to avoid. If the SANDF deployment in eastern Congo-K is not rapidly reinforced, then many will conclude the RDF has defeated South Africa. This would be humiliating for Ramaphosa but also toxic for him back home, where he heads a fractious coalition government.

ANGOLAN INTERVENTION

Angola's President João Lourenço, the officially designated AU mediator between Kinshasa and Kigali, demanded on 29 January that the RDF leave Congo-K. Tshisekedi flew to Luanda

to see Lourenço that day. Reports are emerging that, like Laurent Kabila, Tshisekedi asked for Angola to deploy troops to repel the RDF.

Campaigning in eastern Congo-K for his re-election as president in 2023, Tshisekedi said that before him the country had lacked a leader who could stand up to Kagame, whom he compared to Adolf Hitler. The RDF/M23's capture of Goma and much of North Kivu has exposed the Congolese president to ridicule by his opponents. Insiders say that Tshisekedi is so distraught now that 'he is not even eating fou-fou'.

A risk for Lourenço in deploying Angola's troops to fight the RDF, aside from the cost and the casualties, is that his army might not win this time.

A quarter of a century ago, many Angolan soldiers had come straight out of their conflict with Jonas Savimbi's *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA). For the last two decades, they have been in the barracks and used mainly to repress political dissent. The RDF has been buying the latest military tech, and has been running counter-insurgency operations in Mozambique and Central African Republic, apart from its fight in the Kivus.

Yet if Angola enters the fray, it would challenge Kagame diplomatically and militarily, forcing him to backtrack or double down. Kagame's instinct is usually the latter. But he is cautious enough to recalculate when the costs of pressing on look too high.

Those costs could include Angola making a credible threat of military intervention and the US, Britain and the European Union cutting aid and ending their special ties with Kigali as a 'security partner' across the region. If all that came together it might just be enough to induce Kagame to order the RDF's retreat. But that is not immediately on the cards. ●

US/AFRICA

Washington lobbyists win African clients

As Donald Trump consolidates power, governments are hiring start-ups and established Republican lobbyists

Amid uncertainty about aid and security policies, a flurry of lobbying contracts with foreign governments, many of them African, have been filed under the US State Department's Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) since Donald Trump won the 5 November

presidential election. Trump's first presidential victory in 2016 shook up the US lobbying industry, prompting the emergence of new spin firms run by Trump campaign aides.

Eight years on, he has captured most of the Republican Party's machine. Yet few of the big K-Street lobby shops in

Washington DC are identifiable as pro-Trump. Reflecting that shift, Trump no longer talks about 'draining the swamp', at the heart of which was the revolving door of politicians and staffers leaving Congress for K-Street. A minority of the latest contracts have gone to established Republican firms such as BGR Group and the Florida-based Ballard Partners, whose founder, Brian Ballard, raised more than US\$50 million for Trump last year (AC Vol 65 No 23).

Some Trump-linked firms such as Ballard are wary of taking on clients who could find themselves in the crosshairs of the president. We hear that Denmark's government, now facing attempts by Trump to purchase

SUDAN LOBBYISTS IN WASHINGTON GAIN IN GEOPOLITICAL FIGHT

The Biden administration's belated sanctioning of both sides' leaders in **Sudan's** disastrous civil war has not changed many facts on the ground but it has triggered a battle between lobbying firms in Washington representing the protagonists, and their regional sponsors in Abu Dhabi, Cairo and Riyadh.

The latest African contract for Florida-based Ballard Partners founded by **Brian Ballard**, a close ally of President **Donald Trump**, is a six-month deal with Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) leader **Abdel Fattah al Burhan**, with the US\$300,000 fee paid upfront in October. We hear that **Saudi Arabia** paid the lobbying fee on behalf of Burhan.

Filings made under the Foreign Agents Registration Act show Ballard's staff lobbying the office of **Chris Coons**, the senior Democrat on the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, on 16 January, the day before the US issued sanctions against Burhan. Getting those sanctions lifted will be Ballard's first task.

Saudi Arabia, along with **Egypt** and **Turkey**, is a key supporter of Burhan and the SAF. That pits Saudi Arabia and allies against the **United Arab Emirates** which, aided by **Kenya** and **Uganda**, is the main supplier of cash and weapons to **Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemeti'** and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Washington's sanctions against Burhan in the final days of **Joe Biden's** presidency followed a week after sanctions against Hemeti and six companies based in the UAE. One of the sanctioned companies is linked to Hemeti's business partner, Abu Dhabi's national security advisor **Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed**, the brother of UAE Vice-President **Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahayan**.

The sanctions were a rare wake-up call to UAE President **Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahayan** (MBZ) and family, who had assumed they would continue to enjoy impunity for their military and gold-trading operations in Africa. Until his last days in office, Biden had demurred from confronting MBZ over the mounting independent evidence that the UAE was fuelling Hemeti's military campaign in Darfur, which had killed thousands and is tipping the country into famine.

Biden's sanctions followed pressure from US Senator **Chris Van Hollen** (Democrat-Maryland) and Representative **Sara Jacobs** (Democrat-California) to provide an assessment to Congress of the credibility of the UAE's assurances that it had not and would not supply weapons to the RSF. Biden's intelligence report pointed to the lack of credibility in the UAE assurances. That triggered the sanctions against Hemeti and could mean further problems for the UAE-RSF relationship.

US law requires congressional review of major arms deals, allowing senators to call for votes on rejection resolutions to block such sales. All major US arms sales are subject to review by Congress and senators can vote to reject specific sales. Resolutions approving such sales have to pass both houses of Congress and can override a presidential veto.

In November, Van Hollen and Jacobs introduced a bill in Congress to block a \$1.2 billion deal for Guided Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, Army Tactical Missile Systems, and support services from Lockheed Martin and L3Harris Technologies. 'The UAE is an important partner in the Middle East, but the United States cannot turn a blind eye to its aiding and abetting the suffering in Sudan,' said Van Hollen.

President Trump and his family enjoy closer relations with MBZ than Biden, but Abu Dhabi isn't taking any chances. Lobby firms in Washington are talking about a 'major initiative' by the UAE to push back against the reporting of its role in Sudan and deter further actions in Congress. ●

Greenland and the prospect of trade tariffs if they reject his demands, has been turned down by Ballard.

Apart from a new contract with **Sudan's** military regime (see box), Ballard's clients in Africa include **Liberia** and **Congo-Kinshasa**. The firm also has contracts with **Japan** and **Guatemala**. Of the contracts with start-up lobby shops in Washington, the most eye-catching is **Kenyan** businessman **Jimi Wanjigi's** \$525,000 with Arsenal Government and Public Affairs, led by Republican strategist **Christopher Neiweem**.

In his FARA filing, Neiweem states that his initial task will be setting up meetings with Congress and the President Trump's staff so that Wanjigi can discuss his plans to run for President of Kenya. One of Kenya's wealthiest men, Wanjigi has never seriously run for high office before. But he advised former presidents **Mwai Kibaki** and **Uhuru Kenyatta** and Prime Minister **Raila Odinga**. Now he is at odds with the current government. He was arrested last year after being accused by President **William Ruto's** government of financially supporting the Generation Z protest movement (AC Vol 65 No 23). A

presidential bid for Wanjigi is a long shot but could feed into some realignments in Nairobi.

The other big winner has been BGR Group, a pro-Republican firm founded by **Ronald Reagan-era** Republicans in the 1990s and which has offices in Washington and Austin, Texas. (Dispatches 24/9/24). It landed a \$600,000 a year contract with **Somalia** in December. BGR already had **Algeria** on its books and has taken on **Panama**, now facing threats from Trump to reclaim the Panama Canal, on a contract worth up to \$2.5m, and **Qatar**, another key geopolitical player in the Horn of Africa, on a \$420,000 annual retainer.

SOMALI CHALLENGE

The contract with Somalia will be led by **Lester Munson**, a Republican staffer and former senior USAID official in the **George W. Bush** administration, and **Scott Eisner**, a former staffer for **John McCain**, the late Republican Senator and presidential candidate.

In addition to President **Abdelmadjid Tebboune's** government in Algiers, BGR has previously represented **Saudi Arabia**, scrapping

the contract shortly after the murder of *Washington Post* journalist **Jamal Khashoggi** in 2018. It was also the go-to lobby shop for **Russian** oligarchs and firms linked to President **Vladimir Putin**. It is currently on retainer for the government of Hong Kong.

It may struggle to boost Somalia's government in Washington, which Trump has described as a 'failed state'. On 12 December, a resolution seeking US recognition of Somaliland as an independent state was introduced in the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee by Pennsylvania Congressman **Scott Perry**.

Though the resolution is unlikely to advance to a vote, it reflects a Republican view that Somaliland's democracy should be rewarded. Somaliland supporters argue that closer ties with Hargeisa would be useful to the US, in terms of its geopolitical competition with China.

J. Peter Pham, the top nominee as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs also supports independence for Somaliland (AC Vol 65 No 24). Eight years ago, Algeria and its allies in the Polisario Front were helped by Senator

James Inhofe (Republican-Oklahoma) to block **Pham's** nomination for the top Africa job on the grounds that he was too pro-Morocco. Apart from Inhofe's death in 2024, that scenario is unlikely to be repeated over the Somalia-Somaliland issue. Mogadishu lacks the financial resources and the political support to push back against, at least, a more sympathetic hearing for Somaliland.

Other African leaders such as **Congo-Brazzaville's** President **Denis Sassou-Nguesso**, one of the most prolific African clients on K-Street, are taking a bet on start-ups. Sassou-Nguesso has contracted **GlobalPoint**, another newcomer.

Sassou-Nguesso has previously paid

top dollar to lobbyists to campaign against 'vulture funds' to help win debt relief and run election campaigns. But his contract with **GlobalPoint** is a modest \$20,000 a month for a four-month trial (AC Vol 58 No 19).

Vanguard Africa, the non-profit firm whose founders include long-time US Democratic party strategist **Joe Trippi** and **Bruce Fryer** has joined forces with regular partner **Future Pact** to campaign for the release of **Niger's** ousted President **Mohamed Bazoum**. In detention in Niamey over 18 months, Bazoum has fallen out of the international spotlight. His position hasn't been helped by the US government's negotiations with

the Niger junta on renewing the lease on its \$100m drone and surveillance base in Agadez. Bazoum's legal team includes veteran US human rights lawyer **Reed Brody**.

Seeking US investment, **Togo's** Chamber of Commerce has inked a \$360,000 contract with **Yorktown Solutions**, whose president, **Daniel Vajdich**, is a Republican foreign policy expert. Yorktown's other clients include **Ukrainian** state entities and **Morocco**.

Reflecting both commercial interests and regional security crises, the next countries in line for lobby contracts in Washington include **Nigeria**, **Angola**, **Congo-Kinshasa**, **Rwanda** and **Uganda**. ●

BURKINA FASO/MALI/NIGER/RUSSIA

Sahel-exit tests western miners and Russia's military muscle

Everybody is losing as the Sahelian juntas break with the Ecowas bloc – except for the jihadi militias

The crowds in Ouagadougou, Bamako and Niamey celebrating their countries' break with the regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) on 29 January belie the mounting pressures the juntas face. Local activists say that many in the region fear the divorce will cause more economic chaos, but they generally back the juntas' nationalistic stance, especially against **France**.

Alongside economic hardships, security is deteriorating across the region. The Sahel is reckoned by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) group to have suffered the highest number of terrorist attacks in the world in 2024, pushing the Middle East into second place. And the Brussels-based International Crisis Group reports that jihadist attacks have spread since military officers seized power in the Sahel, ostensibly to boost security.

That's why **Ghana's** President **John Dramani Mahama** has appointed his former security coordinator **Larry Gbevlo-Lartey** as Accra's envoy to the Sahel juntas to restore military and economic cooperation.

Ghanaian security services have

sounded alarms about spillover jihadi attacks from Burkina Faso into northern Ghana. Captain **Ibrahim Traoré**, the military leader in Burkina Faso, makes ambitious pronouncements but has presided over the loss of control of about two-thirds of the country. Mahama invited Traoré to his inauguration, where he garnered cheers in Accra for his nationalist stance; they may have been less impressed by his regime's brutal crackdown on oppositionists and civil rights campaigners.

The juntas' formal break with Ecowas removes the last brick of West Africa's security system which had helped knit the 16-member bloc together when it was founded 50 years ago. **Nigeria**, **Ghana** and **Senegal** formed a regional peacekeeping force in the 1990s to counter militia leaders such as **Charles Taylor** and **Foday Sankoh** in **Liberia** and **Sierra Leone** (AC Vol 40 No 2).

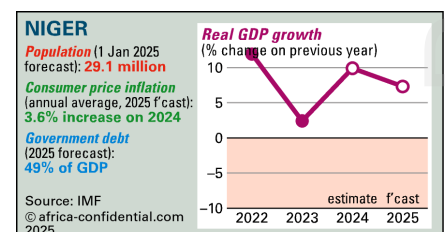
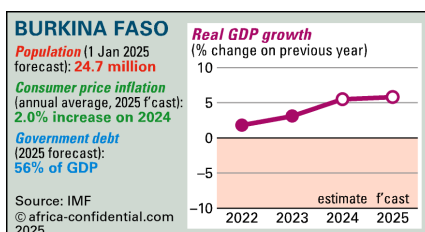
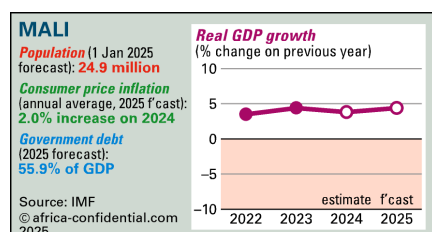
Military cooperation widened between coastal West African and Sahelian states when **Moammar el Gaddafi's** overthrow in **Libya** in 2011 triggered the southwards migration of myriad jihadist fighters. Several regional counter-insurgency forces

were set between West African states working in the Sahel alongside the UN and European Union states. One by one, the Sahelian juntas exited from those agreements.

The expulsion of the French troops won the juntas more credibility but they paid some logistical costs. Civilian governments such as **Chad**, **Côte d'Ivoire**, and **Senegal** followed, a tad more diplomatically. Niger is still in delicate negotiations with the **United States** about the US\$100 million drone and surveillance base at Agadez.

For western states, the biggest blow is that Russia has moved its Wagner mercenaries to replace the old military cooperation deals. Washington wants to keep its Agadez base running and avoid it falling into Russian hands. That's why it has changed its negotiating tactics in recent months.

To cement the divorce the juntas created the *Alliance des états du Sahel* (AES) in July 2024. With **Russian** backing, the confederation is a mutual security pact. The AES has held ministerial meetings, aligned telephone systems and created a customs clearance system with **Togo**, while touting plans for a joint passport, currency and airline



(AC Vol 65 No 14).

On the military front, there have been a few token joint operations. Given the likelihood of reduced Russian backing and multiple domestic crises, security could become still more problematic.

The overthrow of **Bashar al Assad's** regime in Syria undermines Russia's ability to prop up the juntas. It was primarily from the Khmeimim air base in Syria that Russia flew out mercenaries to the Sahel and took in gold and diamonds. If Russia loses Khmeimim and its Tartus naval base on the Mediterranean, then Moscow loses its ability to sustain military activities in Africa.

MALI IN 2025

On 20 November, General **Abdoulaye Maïga** replaced **Choguel Kokalla Maïga** as prime minister, completing the militarisation of Mali's government. As a result, self-promoted General **Assimi Goïta's** junta has no excuses left for failing to address the major crises on security, the economy and electricity cuts (AC Vol 65 No 10). All three provoke mounting public anger.

In September the first big attack on the capital Bamako in nine years hit the National Gendarmerie School and airport. It killed more than 80 and was claimed by the *Al Qaida*-affiliated *Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen* (JNIM). Tuareg rebels struck Russian mercenaries in Libya in February and again at Tinzaouaten, a town on the border with Algeria, also in September, killing at least 80 civilians and around 50 Malian soldiers (AC Vol 65 Nos 5 & 16 & Dispatches 14/8/24).

As the investment climate worsens, the junta has resorted to cruder tactics. In 2022, when it took 49 Ivorian peacekeepers hostage, it wanted – but did not get – the arrest of former ministers and deposed president

Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's son **Karim** (AC Vol 63 No 19). Now it wants money. As a result, it arrested local and foreign managers of Barrick Gold and Resolute Mining. They were released after a ransom of hundreds of millions of dollars was paid in cash, money that may have gone straight into Wagner's pockets.

The junta's latest stunt has been issuing an arrest warrant for Barrick CEO **Marc Bristow** for money laundering and other offences. It then helicoptered out some \$250 million of Barrick's gold stockpile from its sprawling Loulo-Gounkoto complex (AC Vol 66 No 2). Barrick responded immediately by suspending operations and the two sides reopened negotiations on 27 January.

The debacle at the state electricity utility *Énergie du Mali* (EDM) has seen ministerial heads roll (AC Vol 64 No 15). Since the coups, EDM's losses have more than doubled to well over \$400m in 2023. To divert attention from calamitous mismanagement, energy minister **Bintou Camara** claimed 59 tankers had disappeared between the oil depot at Balingué and EDM facilities.

This was debunked by a local media outlet, *Joliba FM*; the junta rewarded its diligence by closing it down. **Camara** was replaced in November. **Maliens** still make do with a few hours of electricity per day.

BURKINA FASO IN 2025

On 6 December, the previously untouchable Prime Minister **Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla** discovered that sycophancy doesn't guarantee your job. **Rimtalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo**, a former director of national broadcaster RTB, and then culture and tourism minister, is his successor. General **Célestin Simporé**, until now the head of the joint chiefs-of-staff, was appointed defence minister.

Other than rotating ministers, Captain **Traoré** has been blaming others for his failure to restore security. He targets France, the United States and **Benin** – but most barbs have been directed at Côte d'Ivoire, home to some four million Burkinabè migrants.

One notorious event last year will remain associated with Traoré's rule: the 24 August massacre at the town of Barsalogho. Soldiers ordered civilians to dig defensive trenches, Traoré's latest wheeze, and then abandoned them. JNIM struck and killed 400. Outraged Burkinabè hold Traoré responsible. In response, his regime pursued its civilian critics. Respected human rights activist **Guy Hervé Kam** was apprehended in January and has not been seen since. **Serge Oulon**, managing editor of the reliable investigative journalism publication, *L'Événement*, was kidnapped in June; the paper has been forced to close.

NIGER IN 2025

Niger's economic fortunes look better than those of its AES partners. First, the border with Nigeria has reopened, allowing trade to flourish as it did before the July 2023 coup. Second, the dispute with Benin over the China National Petroleum Corp-operated pipeline from its Agadem oil field to the Beninese port of Sèmè-Kpodji looks resolved. Third, having asked the French uranium mining company Orano to leave, the Nigerien government can choose who will replace it. General **Abdourahamane Tiani's** junta may well decide that a Chinese firm is its best bet (AC Vol 65 No 23).

The security situation in Niger was improving at the time of the coup. This has since been reversed, although insecurity has not reached the horrific levels it did in Burkina Faso and Mali. Risks remain though: Islamic State is still active in the volatile Tillabéri Region, from where **Tiani** hails. ●

CAR/RUSSIA/AFRICA IN 2025

The year of voting dangerously

Accommodating one of Russia's most profitable African operations, Touadéra balances foreign interests as he dismantles the local opposition

This year should be the year of elections in the Central African Republic. Local elections, already rescheduled four times, are due in July, with a general election following in December. But despite the presence of 16,500 UN peacekeepers, over 1,000 Rwandan troops, and Wagner

mercenaries, delays are expected for a variety of reasons.

First, the money to mount polling operations isn't there, despite promises from France and the *Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation en République centrafricaine* (Minusca).

Another disincentive is that there is little percentage for the opposition to compete on a far from level playing field, which may even threaten supporters of President **Faustin-Archange Touadéra**.

Touadéra hasn't said yet whether he will seek a third term of office, but it is likely given the provisions of the controversial new constitution voted in on a questionable basis in August 2023, which excludes hundreds of thousands of potential voters due to a new definition of citizenship (AC Vol 64 No 22).

A further shadow over any electoral process is the spillover from the turmoil in Sudan and Chad. Central African Republic-based militias which moved into those conflict zones on the

promise of pay and plunder may return to their old bases, with destabilising consequences. Already, the dearth of profits and lethality of conflict in Sudan is driving many of them back to CAR.

The fiscal position is not helped by the refusal of Touadéra's government to change its policy, despite pressure from the IMF under its Extended Credit Facility of 2023, on oil product imports, and a contract with the small Cameroonian company, Neptune Oil. Disagreements over the contract may have led the Fund to withhold the third tranche of the ECF in November.

Whatever the reasons, the state remains heavily dependent on foreign subventions on which it has little effect. The state cannot break out of its tiny fiscal base, as revenue from the major exports, diamonds, gold, and timber, is controlled by Wagner or other predators.

The absence of electricity, due to its very high cost, also increases insecurity in many areas, which militias trained by Wagner or the predatory *Forces Armées Centrafricaines* (FACA – the national army) take advantage of.

UNITY FOR SOME

President Touadéra's speeches promote national unity, but he has doubled down on dismantling the opposition. By amending Parliament's rules, the presidential party, *Mouvement Cœurs Unis* (MCU), has been able to co-opt or intimidate opposition MPs until there is no longer an opposition group in the chamber.

The *Mouvement de Libération du Peuple Centrafricain* (MLPC) especially has been weakened by Touadéra's bribing of defectors, because he is afraid of their potential impact at the local elections.

Foreign partners see a regime in slow collapse. Money is the primary motivation, meaning any agreement can be challenged (AC Vol 65 No 17).

This was the background to President Emmanuel Macron's attempt to reconcile with Touadéra at their summit in Paris in August last year, which was mostly about repairing Macron's damaged ego and giving further room to Paul Kagame's continental ambitions.

Paris provided €10 million to Bangui in budgetary support but it will not go far and Paris has now lost its ability to persuade Brussels to pick up the tab for France's choices of political allies in Africa.

RUSSIAN TO HELP

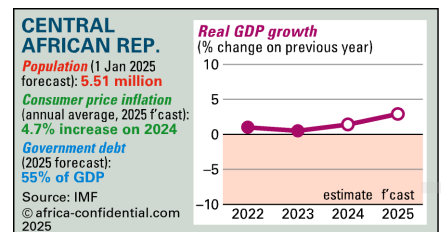
Wagner is best set to take advantage of this fragility. The profitability of its operations here allowed it to resist pressure from the GRU, Russian military intelligence, to be folded into the state intelligence and covert action apparatus like the rest of the Wagner Group (AC Vol 65 No 12).

Wagner has its own CAR clientele that help it to control the presidency, monitor relations with western states, and force back into line anyone who shows autonomy in the security apparatus.

President Touadéra, in an unexpectedly deft display of ability to manipulate allies and enemies, has been able to keep ruling the country by playing his allies against each other, internally as well as externally.

He keeps President Mahamat Idriss Déby 'Kaka' sweet by allowing the Chadian army to cross the border to protect the cattle herds of its generals, in return for which Ndjamenas neutralises armed CAR groups attempting to find sanctuary in Chad.

Good relations with Wagner keep him at peace with Wagner's ally, General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemeti', leader of one side in the Sudanese civil war while Touadéra stays the right side of the other side, the Sudan Armed Forces, by potentially, we hear, offering



it the opportunity of using CAR territory against its rival.

It is a delicate and dangerous game, and several analysts are impressed by Touadéra's ability to play it without it exploding in his face (AC Vol 65 No 23).

It is some achievement to be as warmly received by President Macron as by President Vladimir Putin, to be friendly with Angolan and Rwandan presidents, and he is celebrating the consolidation of Chad-CAR cooperation. He is even trying to mobilise the influential lay Catholic charity Sant'Egidio to get Ali Darassa, the main armed groups leader, into new talks.

By allowing the Chadian army to cross the border to protect the livestock of its generals and smuggling gold into Chad, Bangui got Ndjamenas support to arrest rebel leaders, stop providing sanctuaries for opponents, and curb arms trafficking. Its business deals tied Wagner with Hemeti.

The United Arab Emirates is aware of these movements and is sending an important delegation in Bangui in January, a second visit in less than six months.

Regardless of Touadéra's juggling skills, many of CAR's militias may return home no matter what he does and then he would be presented with huge problems. Internally, Touadéra shows no such deftness and the fate of the population and their desire to participate politically appears irrelevant to him. ●

DISPATCHES

ZIMBABWE

Veterans turn on Mnangagwa regime

5 February

Growing divisions in the army and among war veterans, coupled with criticism from the vice-president, threaten the president as unease about corruption mounts

The rift between factions in the Zimbabwean army, as well as veterans of

the 1970s war of liberation, and President Emmerson Mnangagwa appears to be broken beyond repair (AC Vol 65 No 23). Similarly, Mnangagwa's relationship with his Vice-President, former General Constantino Chiwenga, who led the 2017 coup that ousted Mnangagwa's predecessor Robert Mugabe, is also in a precarious state.

At a press conference in Harare last week, a group of liberation veterans led by Blessed Runesu Geza, popularly known in Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) circles as 'Bombshell', demanded Mnangagwa's resignation, accusing him

of grand corruption and incompetence. Meanwhile, at a funeral days later, Chiwenga took up a similar theme, pointing to 'corrupt tenderpreneurs' who had grabbed state funds.

'During the war we referred to them as leeches, those who grow big tummies through ill-gotten wealth and questionable morals,' he added. In response, the audience of mourners, most of them ZANU-PF supporters, shouted the name of Wicknell Chivayo, a controversial businessman and close associate of the president (Dispatches 29/10/24).

Chiwenga and many in the army

flatly oppose attempts by Mnangagwa and his allies to extend his tenure as president, a battle that seems to dominate the coming months (AC Vol 66 No 1). Last October, delegates at the ZANU-PF annual congress passed a resolution calling for Mnangagwa to stay on beyond the end of his second term in 2028 (Dispatches 6/11/24).

SOUTH AFRICA/US

Trump wages economic war over land bill

5 February

The White House has halted funding to Pretoria but Ramaphosa has downplayed the move's impact as speculation grows about Musk's influence

South Africa is the first African country to be specifically targeted by the new US President, Donald Trump. On 3 February, Trump announced the halt of all funding for Pretoria, citing the recently signed land expropriation bill. The bill, which was signed into law just a week ago by President Cyril Ramaphosa, permits expropriation without compensation only when it is 'just and equitable and in the public interest,' such as in cases where land is not being used or developed.

The bill is much softer than many in Ramaphosa's African National Congress would like, but it is opposed by the ANC's main coalition partner, the Democratic Alliance (Dispatches 28/1/25). Yet Trump's targeted aid cuts angered politicians across the spectrum. Later, on 3 February, DA leader John Steenhuisen added his voice to opposition Trump's move.

Suspensions that Trump's favoured choice for US Ambassador to Pretoria, Joel Pollak, helped inform the targeting of South Africa has triggered another political spat: Pollak has called on South Africa to align itself with the US on China and Israel if it wants to benefit from Washington's aid programmes. Married to a South African, Julia Bertelsmann, Pollak, previously worked as an advisor to Tony Leon, a former leader of the DA.

Blame has also been flung at Elon Musk, the Tesla boss who is now leading Trump's new Department of Government Efficiency. Musk has described USAID as a 'criminal organization' that 'needs to die' on his social media platform X.

Musk, whose estranged father Errol was a member of the anti-

apartheid Progressive Federal Party, has previously falsely claimed that Ramaphosa's government is guilty of 'genocide' against white farmers in the country. Trump's trade war imposed tariffs on Canada, China and Mexico over the weekend, with the threat of levies on the European Union looming.

International Relations and Cooperation minister Ronald Lamola has said that the White House is yet to formally confirm the funding freeze. Ramaphosa, meanwhile, has played down the economic importance of the move, stating on 3 February, that 'the US remains a key strategic political and trade partner for South Africa,' but that Pretoria receives 'no other significant funding' from the US beyond money under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.

In an executive order on 20 January, Trump announced a three-month freeze on US aid spending (Dispatches 28/1/25 & AC Vol 66 No 2). Initially, the only exceptions were military aid to Israel and Egypt, with whom the US has long-standing military agreements, and US contributions to emergency food assistance.

However, following a panicked reaction from several developing countries, including many in Africa, who warned that thousands of patients would immediately lose access to lifesaving medication, an exemption for programmes tackling HIV/AIDS was announced on 29 January.

UGANDA

Museveni defies Supreme Court over Besigye charges

5 February

The president has ignored an order from the Chief Justice to release the opposition leader, who was abducted by security forces, and transfer his trial to a civilian court

President Yoweri Museveni has defied a Supreme Court judgement ordering the release of opposition leader Kizza Besigye and mandating that Besigye can only be tried in a civilian trial. Last week, the Supreme Court in Kampala halted Besigye's trial before the General Court Martial, ruling that civilians cannot be tried by a military court. Besigye and two allies have been arraigned on charges of weapons possession and treachery.

All charges, ongoing criminal trials, or pending trials before the

courts-martial involving civilians must immediately cease and be transferred to the ordinary courts of law,' ruled Chief Justice Alfonse Owiny-Dollo.

Besigye was abducted by Uganda's security services in Nairobi on 16 November and secretly returned to Uganda from Kenya. He was charged four days after his disappearance, having had no contact with his family or lawyers (Dispatches 14/1/25). His lawyers, led by National Rainbow Coalition-Kenya leader Martha Karua, visited the Uganda Prisons Service headquarters on 3 February to demand his immediate release (Dispatches 17/12/24).

However, there is little sign that Besigye will be released from detention. Army spokesperson Colonel Chris Magezi responded to the Supreme Court ruling by insisting that Besigye and his fellow accused would not be released until they had faced 'the full extent of the martial law'. Museveni has accused the Court of being misguided and defended the military court process as a 'useful instrument for stability'.

SOUTH AFRICA

Land law poses first major test to coalition

28 January

The ANC faces a careful balancing act as Ramaphosa signs the controversial 'expropriation without compensation' bill

President Cyril Ramaphosa's decision to sign a controversial Expropriation Bill into law is likely to be the first major test to his governing coalition. Signed on 23 January, the new law, which has been in the pipeline for five years, replaces the apartheid era Expropriation Act of 1975 and sets out how the government can expropriate land in the public interest.

The centre-right Democratic Alliance (DA), on which Ramaphosa's majority relies, has instructed its lawyers to build a case against the bill, stating that the party has 'serious reservations about the procedure as well as important substantive aspects of the Bill'.

Signing the bill will appeal to the African National Congress's left and is a clear attempt to win back voters who previously shifted their support to Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and former President Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party. This shift contributed to the ANC's worst performance since the end of apartheid in last May's general

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election (AC Vol 65 No 19).

The new law allows for expropriation without compensation only where it is 'just and equitable and in the public interest', such as in cases where land is not being used or developed, and the ANC faces a careful balancing act in selling the bill without alienating the DA, particularly party leader and Agriculture Minister **John Steenhuisen** (AC Vol 65 No 15).

Deputy Public Works and Infrastructure Minister **Sihle Zikalala** has been quick to frame the law as part of the liberation struggle for the black majority in South Africa.

The EFF, however, insists that the bill is a 'legislative cop-out' and will not deal with the issue of restitution.

RWANDA/CONGO-K

Kagame crosses red line as his forces back seizure of Goma

28 January

Fears of a regional war rise as Rwandan-backed M23 militia captures Congolese city amid international condemnation

Kenya's President **William Ruto** has telephoned Presidents **Félix Tshisekedi** and **Paul Kagame** to invite them to an emergency summit in Nairobi on 29 January as M23 militia fighters, backed by troops and artillery from

neighbouring Rwanda, seize control of Goma, the capital of the mineral-rich Kivu-Nord province in eastern Congo-Kinshasa.

Following weeks of the M23's steady territorial gains in the Masisi region surrounding Goma, along with the increasing control over coltan and tantalum mines, the deployment of about 4,000 Rwandan troops across the border, as reported by the UN marks the most brazen move by Kagame. He has continuously denied supporting the M23 militia despite multiple reports from the UN and western intelligence agencies and aerial photographs showing collusion between M23 and Rwandan forces (Dispatches 7/1/25).

Regional officials say that M23's push to seize Goma was deliberately made ahead of a United Nations Security Council meeting on 27 January. Gunfire was reported on the streets of Goma and the city's international airport was evacuated over the weekend.

The response will be a major test of the international the UN Security Council, which will be under pressure to impose harsh sanctions on Kigali.

UN Secretary-General **António Guterres** was 'deeply concerned by the escalating violence' said a UN spokesman, and 'reiterates his strongest condemnation of the M23 armed group's ongoing offensive... with the support of the Rwanda Defence Forces.'

The fighting risks causing a major humanitarian crisis with a large-scale evacuation effort already under way. Aid agencies have been warning for weeks that M23's recent gains had effectively cut off supply routes to Goma.

Meanwhile, UN officials reported that camps around the city accommodating 300,000 people quickly emptied. Goma's population numbers over one million.

On 26 January, 13 soldiers from South Africa, Malawi and Uruguay, who were part of the Southern African Development Community and UN forces deployed to assist the Congolese army, were reported to have been killed.

Last week, Turkish President **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan** became the latest international leader to offer his services as a mediator following the collapse of the latest peace talks brokered by Angola in December (Dispatches 17/12/24). However, as a major investor in Rwanda, Turkey is unlikely to be viewed in Kinshasa as a neutral player.

US/AFRICA

Rubio deals hammer blow to US aid

28 January

An executive order from President imposes a 90-day freeze on most foreign funding – except military aid

Within hours of entering the White House, President **Donald Trump** issued an executive order for a three-month freeze on all foreign aid. This move seemed certain to result in major cuts to the US\$68 billion annual US foreign aid budget and the \$8bn allocated by the Biden administration in aid for sub-Saharan Africa in 2024.

However, officials say privately that the directive issued by Secretary of State **Marco Rubio**, interpreting Trump's order, is far more radical than they had anticipated (AC Vol 66 No 2).

Rubio issued a 'stop-work' memorandum to all US agencies on 24 January and its scope applies both to ongoing and future projects. The only exceptions are military aid to Israel and Egypt, and US contributions to emergency food assistance.

'No new funds shall be obligated for new awards or extensions of existing awards until each proposed new award or extension has been reviewed and approved,' says the memo to staff.

Senior diplomats issued the 'stop-work' instructions to embassy and local agency staff on 25 January, *Africa Confidential* has learned.

That may have long-lasting implications for US aid programmes even if most initiatives are unfrozen in April and major job cuts, particularly in US Agency for International Development, are now expected. Elsewhere, the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization, which leaves a \$1.2bn budget hole, is expected to have an immediate impact on the response to the mpox pandemic in central Africa.

While Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials briefed last week that they do not expect their own programmes to be significantly affected, Africa CDC's **Ngashi Ngongo** told journalists that the loss of US funding means that 'it is time for some of the African member states to think the financing of public health'. ●



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POINTERS

Nigeria

PLAYING THE NUMBERS GAME

■ Political pressure is mounting on Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics ahead of the imminent release of its GDP rebasing data. The statistical exercise could more than double the country's official economic output of around US\$250 billion (AC Vol 66 No 1). This would result in a significant reduction in its debt-to-GDP burden.

Political opponents of President **Bola Tinubu** caution that the GDP rebasing exercise will be used to spin a narrative of economic growth and greater prosperity. They warn that the new exercise will involve recalculating the consumer price index, which determines inflation. According to them, this new method will downplay an inflation rate that has spiralled since the abolition of fuel subsidies and the floating of the naira in mid-2023.

The rebasing exercise is a routine practice. The UN recommends that countries rebase their national accounts every five years and Nigeria's last rebasement was in 2014. But some economists are unimpressed. They argue that with a population of over 220 million, Nigeria should have the continent's biggest economy. They also point out that both GDP per capita and GDP growth per capita indicate a decline in living standards.

Some question the morality of including the economic contributions from prostitution and other illegal activities as well as e-commerce and digital sectors. However, other jurisdictions, including the EU, also count illicit activities in their data.

We hear that morale at the once-respected Statistical Bureau has plummeted due to what some officials perceive as its overt politicisation.

Rwanda/ European Union

MINERAL RICHES

■ The European Union's desperation to catch up with China's mineral access is so great that it is willing to overlook evidence of mineral smuggling by M23 in eastern **Congo-Kinshasa**. This issue is likely to worsen as the Rwanda-backed militia group seized more mining sites in Rubaya and Masisi, closing in on Goma in December and January. It finally seized control of Goma on 27 January.

The EU Commission is resisting pressure from MEPs to suspend its MoU with Rwanda, following Congo-K's Foreign Minister **Thérèse Kayikwamba**

NEWSMAKER: LISSU RAGES AGAINST THE CCM MACHINE

After seizing control of the opposition *Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo* (Chadema) party, **Tundu Lissu** now faces the gargantuan task of taking on President **Samia Suluhu Hassan** and the *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (CCM) machine.

Lissu ousted long-time leader **Freeman Mbowe** by a tight 51.4% to 48.2% margin in a vote among opposition party delegates in late January. Previously Mbowe's deputy and the leader of Chadema's activist wing, Lissu is far more outspoken and a more natural campaigner than Mbowe. He is almost certain to be the party's presidential candidate in October, if he wants the job.

His election signifies a major change in direction for Chadema and may reflect a sense of desperation following the rigged local elections by CCM last November, where over 99% of municipal seats were won by the ruling party.

Mbowe has led the party for over 20 years and Lissu's most potent line of attack – though hotly denied by Mbowe, who was jailed by former President **John Magufuli** on trumped up terrorism charges – was that he had been far too conciliatory towards a CCM machine that has been in power since independence (AC Vol 46 No 19). Despite the narrow margin of victory, Mbowe graciously accepted defeat and promised his support. Keeping Chadema's liberal wing on board will be vital to the party's success in the presidential and parliamentary polls.

Lissu narrowly survived an assassination attempt in 2017, widely believed to have been orchestrated by Magufuli. After undergoing multiple surgeries to remove the bullets from his body and a lengthy convalescence in **Belgium**, he briefly returned to Tanzania to contest the 2020 presidential election against Magufuli, securing 13% of the vote. He then spent two years in exile, returning in 2023 only after obtaining guarantees of his safety from Samia (Dispatches 1/2/23).

Lissu would be a plausible candidate in a fair – or even a somewhat fair – election. But few believe that any form of competition will be permitted by CCM's iron grip on the state, including the electoral authorities. Almost all opposition candidates were disqualified from standing in the municipal polls, and the electoral register was defrauded (AC Vol 66 No 1).

The chances of a repeat of **Edward Lowassa's** 40% vote share against CCM's **Jakaya Kikwete** in 2015 being allowed to happen in October are almost zero. The more pragmatic approach would be to focus on rebuilding Chadema's parliamentary numbers, which collapsed from 73 seats in 2015 to 20 out of 293 seats in 2020, amid a ban on opposition campaigning imposed by Magufuli.

After promising to reopen political space following the repression of the Magufuli regime – releasing Mbowe from prison, lifting the ban on opposition political rallies and gradually opening up the media sphere – Samia's government launched a brutal crackdown in 2024 (Dispatches 7/3/22).

Several senior Chadema officials were murdered last year, while both Lissu and Mbowe were among a group of senior party leaders who were arrested and assaulted by officers at a planned rally to mark National Youth Day in August (AC Vol 65 No 17). ●

Wagner's demands for a 'total embargo on exports of all minerals labelled as Rwandan, in particular coltan and gold'.

It says that 'the EU is keen to work with partners that share our commitment to the sustainable and responsible development of raw material supply chain,' adding that 'the EU and Rwanda are working on a joint roadmap, that would provide us with tools and ways to address concerns regarding traceability, transparency and reporting'.

Alarmed by the prospect of an industrial squeeze between the **United States** and **China**, the EU is rushing for minerals, particularly coltan, cobalt and lithium, essential for batteries for electric vehicles (AC Vol 65 No 20).

After passing its Critical Raw Materials Act in 2023, the commission has brokered deals with **Zambia**,

Botswana and **Congo-Kinshasa**. However, eyebrows were raised in March 2024 when the EU announced a 'minerals-access' agreement with Rwanda, despite Rwanda's limited mineral resources and Congo-K's President **Félix Tshisekedi** labelling the deal with Kigali as 'a provocation' (AC Vol 65 No 6).

The commission also touted its initiatives at the annual Mining Indaba in Cape Town, hosting an event on 3 February. In promotional materials ahead of the Indaba, it highlighted 'EU initiatives aimed at promoting investment in Africa's mining sector' and argued that its 'minerals-access' pacts focus on 'responsible mining practices, environmental sustainability and local capacity building'. It has been negotiating minerals access with **Tanzania** and **Uganda**.