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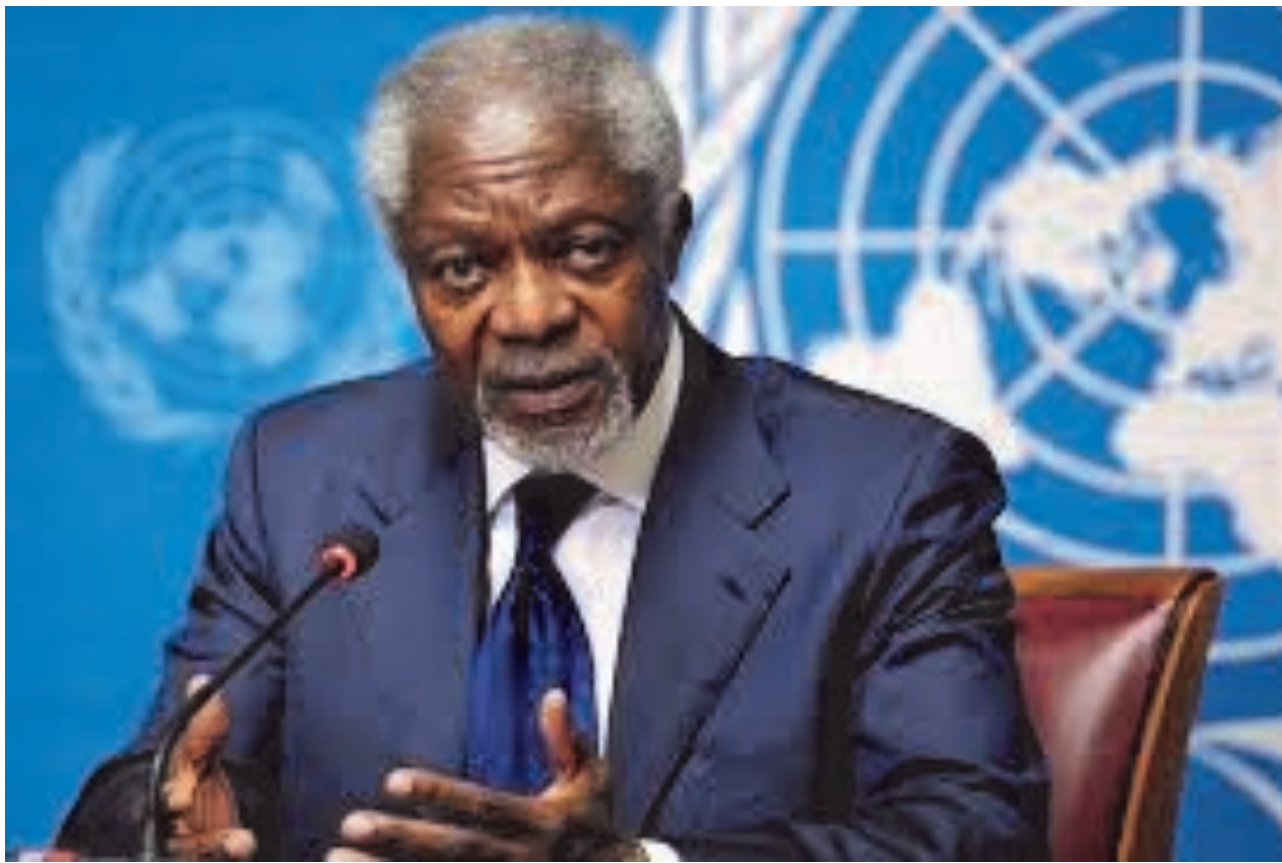
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First Black African United Nations secretary general Kofi Anan dies



The first Black African United Nations Secretary General and the first from among the ranks from within the organisation to hold that position, Kofi Anan of Ghana died recently after a brief illness. Anan was known for his peaceful approach to world issues. He and the United Nations were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 for the for having revitalized the UN and for having given priority to human rights. Considered Africa's most popular diplomat, Anan was born in Kumasi, Ghana and was 81 years old.



Femi Kuti says protests songs becoming boring

Because nothing seems to be changing for the better regarding the well-being of Africa's citizens at the hands of their political leaders, it is becoming boring to keep on protesting in songs.

Femi Kuti, the son of the legendary afrobeat king Fela Kuti, told the African World that while the struggle continues to free citizens from the corrupt grip of their leaders, it is natural to grow tired of doing the same thing if change is proving more and more difficult to attain.

"It's boring, just boring. I'd rather be singing about other things at this moment in my career," he said, nothing though he's happy that some countries like Rwanda are experiencing positive change after years of turmoil.

His father, Fela, dedicated his life to protestations in his songs and at one point ran for the office of the presidency in Nigeria. His brother, Seun Kuti, is currently following in the footsteps of of Fela Kuti.

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Uganda protest artist to be flown to London

Ugandan firebrand politician Robert Kyagulanyi, popularly known as Bobi Wine, will be flown to London for specialized treatment after he was released on bail.

Bobi Wine, who can barely walk without the help of crutches, will be admitted at the Royal London Hospital where he will receive treatment after extensive torture while in jail for close to two weeks.

Norbet Mao, a Uganda politician and one of Bobi Wine's lawyers, said the MP for Kyadondo East and his colleague for Mityan Municipality Francis Zaake will both be treated at the hospital.



"We are in touch with a doctor Martin Griffin of London Royal Hospital who is supposed to receive both Zaake and Kyagulanyi," Mao told reports moments after the MPs were released on bail.

Meanwhile, the Ugandan army has released a statement claiming to have arrested the soldiers involved in the beating of the two law makers. "We have apprehended all the soldiers who were involved in the incidents and they have been brought to book," army spokesman Richard Karemiri was quoted.

However he failed to mention the detained soldiers, neither the action taken against them.

ANALYSIS: Where is Algeria in the Western Sahara dispute?

By Robert M. Holley

In 2007, shortly after Morocco tabled its initiative for autonomy to resolve the dispute in Western Sahara, David Welch, at that time the Assistant Secretary of State for the Middle East, told a Congressional committee that the United States welcomed Morocco's proposal and found it "serious and credible." Conversely, he testified, "the Polisario proposal does not seem, in our judgment, to contain new ideas." The Moroccan initiative was a substantial goodwill gesture to address repeated calls since 2003 from the Security Council for the Parties to move towards negotiating a "mutually acceptable political solution," meaning a solution that would require fundamental compromise from all Parties. Little has changed. Most of the international com-

munity still describes the Moroccan initiative in the same terms, "serious, credible, and realistic." And most still see nothing new in the Polisario's continued insistence on a referendum on independence that the UN Security Council abandoned as unworkable in 2003.

When the Security Council renewed the peacekeeping mandate for Western Sahara last April, it called for compromise, realism, and for the willingness of all Parties to show a greater commitment to finding a solution.

That "all Parties" phrase was pointed directly at Algeria, which continues to pretend that it has no intrinsic stake in this dispute. It claims it is only supporting the principle of self-determination. Nothing could be further from the truth and no one in the international community accepts the Algerian position at face value. Algeria has only been allowed to stand on this flimsy position because, until now, the international community has preferred to allow the situation in Western Sahara to remain stalemated rather than take firmer action to move it to a solution.

But it seems the political tides may be shifting in the Sahara.

The pointed call for greater cooperation from all Parties and the insistence on "realism" clearly signals that the international community is growing weary with Algerian intransigence and Polisario's continued insistence on ideas the Security Council has long abandoned.

Algeria arms, trains and diplomatically supports the Polisario, which resides on sovereign Algerian territory. Without Algerian support, Polisario would soon cease to exist. Everyone knows this and it now appears that the Security Council may be preparing to hold Algeria accountable.

Following the closed door briefing of the Security Council last week by the Secretary General's new Personal Envoy, Horst Kohler, Morocco's Ambassador to the United Nations, Omar Hilale, gave an interview to the press in which he insisted that Morocco would not agree to further negotiations unless Algeria was included as a direct participant in the talks.

This is no more than recognition of the reality of the origins and continuation of the dispute over Western Sahara. And it is a recognition of the self-evident reality that there can be no solution to this problem until Algeria is willing to assume its responsibility and sit down at the bargaining table to work out the kind of "mutually acceptable political solution" that the Security Council demands. Algeria can no longer pretend that it is not a direct Party to this issue and avoid its responsibility in finding a fair compromise political solution. Nor can the Security Council continue to accept that a solution is possible unless Algeria accepts its responsibility.

If it is serious about ending this problem, the Security Council must make clear to Algeria that lack of progress towards a negotiated solution will be placed squarely at Algeria's doorstep if it continues its attempts to avoid direct responsibility. If it is unwilling to assign responsibility for failure where it belongs, the Council should stop pretending that it is interested in a solution and make plain that it will only reengage in Western Sahara if or when it becomes clear that Algeria and the Polisario are prepared to take the kinds of meaningful steps towards compromise that Morocco has taken already. Morocco has laid a perfectly reasonable proposal for a compromise political solution on the table. There still has been no meaningful counter offer from either Algeria or the Polisario, as Assistant Secretary Welch made clear in his testimony before Congress in 2007. It's an old rule in diplomacy that you cannot substitute "nothing" for "something." The Security Council needs to tell Algeria and the Polisario that the time has come for them to get off the fence and put some realistic compromise of their own on the table if they don't like the Moroccan proposal. Then the Parties will have "something" to negotiate.

Tanzania: Anti GBV campaign heats up in Dar es Salaam market places

THE global champion for gender equality, UN Women, has promised to continue supporting Tanzania in the fight against gender-based violence (GBV) in market places after being satisfied with the progress of the just ended 'Mpe-Riziki Si Matusi' campaign in Dar es Salaam.

'Mpe-Riziki Si Matusi', campaign aims to eradicate all types of GBV and allow women to participate freely in various economic activities for their own personal gain and contribute in the national income.

It was jointly sponsored by UN Women and UN Trust Fund and implemented by the Dar es Salaam-based non-governmental organisation Equality for Growth (EfG) and held in Ilala and Temeke district markets.

After being told that the campaign helped in reducing GBV acts by over 80 per cent in the markets, the UN Women Executive Director, Ms Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said she was impressed by the situation, promising to extend the campaign country-wide.

"I have heard you women expressing how you are capable of contesting and win various leadership positions in the markets. Keep it up to make women have representatives everywhere, and always consider solidarity," she said during the campaign celebrations in the city on Tuesday.

Ms Mlambo-Ngcuka urged men to avoid brutality on women, and instead they should collaborate with them in various social and economic activities to support their personal and the national gains. EfG Executive Director, Ms Jane Magigita chipped in and said that women were always on the front line in the fight against poverty, but GBV pose serious barriers.

Before the campaign implementation, GGV rate was 96.77 per cent in market places. According to her, both sexual and cash corruption, verbal and physical violence including sexual harassment and insults were among serious barriers women face in markets.

"We have witnessed enormous changes among women traders in markets. Through the campaign, we offered genderbased education for 17,907 male and female traders, we conducted the research in December last year and found that 92 per cent of women were trading freely," said Ms Magigita.

About 89 per cent women accessed their economical rights, 70 per cent were able to contest for various leadership positions, 83 per cent were involved in decision making activities and 91 per cent have access to legal assistance after facing violence.

There was an increase of women in market leadership system, from 14 to 26 per cent, while women hold top positions in some of the markets. The next 'Mpe-Riziki Si Matusi' campaign beneficiaries are Dodoma and Shinyanga regions from next month, said the EfG boss.



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Angola to rebury Jonas Savimbi

Angola's government has said it will soon exhume and give a "dignified burial" to Jonas Savimbi, a national icon killed at the end of the nation's lengthy and brutal civil war.



The rebel turned opposition leader was buried in a rural area in 2002, without the honors that many Angolans felt he deserved after a lifetime of resistance, first against Portuguese colonial repression and later against the nation's socialist government.

Even the government's harshest critics — among them, human rights activist and journalist Rafael Marques de Morais — say this is a welcome step by President Joao Lourenco, who took office just over a year ago.

"I'm not cynical about this," Marques tells VOA. "It's really important that it be done."

Fascinating, complicated man

Savimbi is regarded by many Angolans as a liberation hero for leading the fight against Portugal for independence, which came in 1975. He then founded the UNITA party and led a bruising 26-year civil war against the socialist government, which has been led since independence by the ruling People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola.

Savimbi nearly won a presidential election in 1992, but some analysts say his refusal to accept the results prolonged the war. He was killed in 2002, at the age of 67, in a battle with government troops. His body was quickly buried nearby.

Alex Vines, head of the Africa Program for think tank Chatham House, says Savimbi was a fascinating man — and he can see why former President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos wanted him to sink into obscurity. Dos Santos ruled for nearly four decades before stepping down last year.

"I met him several times," Vines said of Savimbi. "He was extremely charismatic, rather authoritarian. People around him were very afraid and very obsequious with him. But you did feel the charisma. It is like a number of figures that I have met over my career who have been very controversial, involved in human rights abuses, but yet they were tremendously charismatic."

Reburial for reconciliation?

Savimbi, too, was accused of human rights abuses during the lengthy war that ended in 2002 with his death. The conflict saw the deaths of more than half a million Angolans and shattered the nation's infrastructure.

Marques says a proper burial for Savimbi might help close the division between the ruling party and the opposition in Angola. Such divisions are common across Africa, he says.

"And, so, there is never a sit-down between broth-

ers and sisters to build a country together," he told VOA. "And it's always the ruling party thinking everyone is the enemy, and those in the opposition thinking the ruling party is the enemy, and that's

what plagues most of the political systems in Africa, when parties think of themselves as the state."

Vines agreed that lack of recon-

ciliation is an issue that plagues many African nations, and that the proper treatment of major figures matters. In Mozambique, he said, the government's decision to give burial honors to longtime rebel leader Afonso Dhlakama, who died earlier this year, was an important gesture.

"There is some echo, I think, in Mozambique with what's happened in Angola," Vines said. "And maybe, just maybe, that what has happened in Mozambique helped focus further President Lourenco and some of his advisers' attentions that it was time to do something similar in terms of reconciliation, of the body of Jonas Savimbi."

But Marques says this move is about more than one man. If anything, he says, Savimbi's reburial could open the door for countless others.

"It's important to acknowledge that many tens of thousands of Angolans perished in this war, and it's important that the government goes beyond returning the body of Savimbi, so that a process of issuing death certificates to the soldiers on the government side and the UNITA side, who died in the war, that the people who died in the war are properly accounted for," he said.

Southern Africa region exploring gas reserve use

Southern Africa is exploring ways of harnessing the potential of the massive reserves of natural gas that exist in the region.

Chairperson of the SADC Energy Ministers, Hon. Jeff Radebe told a recent Ministerial Workshop on the Regional Gas Infrastructure and Market Development that harnessing natural gas would improve the energy situation in the region, and contribute to the regional energy mix, which is dominated by coal.

Southern Africa has some of the largest deposits of natural gas in the world.

Angola has natural gas reserves estimated at 11 trillion cubic feet (tcf), while Mozambique has more than 180 tcf of gas discovered and there is potential for this to be doubled by 2030.

The United Republic of Tanzania has made significant gas discoveries and currently has more than 57 tcf of proven gas reserves.

In Namibia, there is about 1.3 tcf of proven gas re-

serves with an estimated potential of 9 tcf.

Development of the Kudu gas project is expected to address some of the energy challenges in Namibia.

Gas produced from the Kudu field will be transported through a 170-km pipeline to a power station that will be built and situated at Uubvlei, approximately 25 kilometres north of Oranjemund in southern Namibia.

The National Petroleum Corporation and its partners including NamPower will be responsible for the drilling of production wells, installation of sub-sea equipment and the floating production system, and gas production, as well as conditioning and transportation of the gas to the power plant.

Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe have unconventional gas reserves in significant quantities in the form of coal-bed methane and shale gas.

To fully realize this potential, there is need for SADC to develop innovative methods of exploring the resource.

"The natural gas reserves within the SADC region present a significant opportunity for industrialisation that can boost economic growth, create much needed jobs and attract new investments in the region and increase significantly energy access," Radebe, the South African Energy Minister, told a regional workshop held in June in Johannesburg.

This enormous opportunity can only be realised if the region develops the requisite gas processing, transportation and distribution infrastructure to supply the regional market so that SADC will not only limit itself to being a gas exporter."

In this regard, one of the plans being explored by SADC is the possibility of establishing a SADC natural gas industrial complex designed to interconnect the gas production value chain in the region.

This will involve making significant investments to set up gas processing, transportation and distribution infrastructure that would efficiently link gas production centres to local and regional energy markets.

Examples of successful regional gas projects in Africa include the gas pipeline from Mozambique (Temane/Pande) to South Africa (Secunda) as well as the West African Gas Pipeline, involving Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Ghana.

In addition to developing a natural gas industrial complex, there is need for SADC to put in place viable and vibrant "policy and regulatory frameworks to make the development of this infrastructure a reality as well as attract investment.

"The economic benefits of gas extraction, infrastructure and market development in the SADC region is to stimulate productive activity and contribute positively to gross domestic product (GDP)," Radebe said.

The energy ministers noted that exploitation of the vast reserves of natural gas, shale gas and coal-bed methane that are available in SADC Member States would result in significant job opportunities and contribute billions of dollars to the regional GDP per year.

Natural gas has various potential uses in SADC. It can be used to generate electricity or as chemical feedstock in industrial processes or as fuel for vehicles. Another potential use of gas is in the production of fertilizers.

Therefore, the exploration of natural gas, presents a significant opportunity for SADC to address its energy challenges and move forward the industrialisation agenda and deepen integration.

One of the key advantages of gas is that it has a low carbon emission profile, making it a cleaner energy source when compared with other fossil fuels. In addition to this, it is also affordable, secure and reliable.

Burundi: Tanzania, Burundi Miss Deadline On Double Taxation

Tanzania and Burundi missed the July 18 deadline set by the region's heads of state to ratify the East African Community Multilateral Double Taxation Agreement.

Regional businesses said the delay in implementing the agreement signed eight years ago is denying the region investments.

Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda have ratified the agreement.

Peter Mathuki, East Africa Business Council ambassador to the EAC, said harmonising fiscal policies to remove tax distortions within the region is integral to achieving the EAC Treaty's objectives of a Single Market and ensuring free movement of goods, services and labour.

"Fiscal harmonisation to eliminate tax distortions is a prerequisite to a successful and functioning Single Market," Mr Mathuki told an EABC consultative meeting on harmonisation of domestic taxes in Nairobi last week.

"The EAC partner states behave like competitors, not partners," he added.

Under the EAC Customs Union, the partner states apply the same import duty on a product imported into region. This is implemented through application of the East African Community Common External Tariff (CET).

However, under the same Customs Union, partner states have retained the mandate of domestic taxes such as income tax, value added tax and excise duty.

In this regard, the duty structures and rates

are developed and managed at the national level based on policy priorities of the country at the given time.

"This freedom of developing and managing domestic taxes at national level has resulted in huge differences among the tax systems of EAC partner states, resulting in unfair tax competition, discrimination, distortion and unequal treatment of taxpayers, goods and services in the region," Mr Mathuki said.

The EAC took its first step to harmonise fiscal policies when partner states signed the Agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes on Income in November 2010.

The parties to the agreement are Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and the Tanzania. If ratified and implemented, the agreement is expected to increase investment in the region primarily through eliminating double taxation, limiting discriminatory tax treatment and providing tax certainty through transparent and predictable tax allocation rules.

The 2010 EAC Multilateral DTA covers taxes on income imposed on behalf of the contracting state or its political subdivisions, irrespective of the manner in which they are levied.

However, the agreement provides that for it to enter into force all contracting parties shall ratify and notify each other of the completion of the procedures.

Ratification of the agreement

"The remaining partner states have been re-

minded by the EAC Council of Finance and Economic Affairs to still ratify the agreement but they are in the process of ratification. We have already identified a number of challenges standing in the way of tax harmonisation including fears by governments that it may deplete the revenue base, especially in the case of excise, and strong lobbying by some private sector stakeholders due to fear of competition," said Gabriel Kitenga, chairman of EABC working group on domestic taxes.

The working group notes that the inconsistency of composition of negotiating teams and failure by stakeholders to list their fears of what tax harmonisation will bring were standing in the way of the DTA becoming a reality for member states.

Mr Kitenga noted that the partner states should apply the principle of variable geometry, which allows for progression in cooperation among groups within the community for wider integration schemes in various fields and at different speeds.

He said that intra-EAC trade would double in two years if the agreement is implemented.



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OPINION: How Cameroon can achieve land reform transparency

By Téodyl Nkuintchua, Sam Szoke-Burke
And Horline Njike

Who benefits when land contracts become transparent?

Cameroon's Code on transparency and good governance is finally here. The law promises to remove the shroud of secrecy that has hovered over contracts and concessions, the government has signed



with natural resource investors.

The law presents a major opportunity for the improvement of good governance in Cameroon.

One key feature of the new law is that contracts that the government signs with investors exploiting natural resources must now be made public.

If read literally, the law should also require the publication of investor-state contracts for land-based investments, such as agriculture and forestry projects, which would be an important advancement in the fight for transparency.

While there will be a lot of important discussion around what this means for the extractive industry in Cameroon, the importance of this new law for transparency of land-based investments should not be overlooked.

Who benefits from contract transparency?

The new law is good news for Cameroon's land sector. Land owners, investors, and public officials can look forward to more efficient negotiations and monitoring processes.

Government agencies will also benefit from making contracts publicly available. For example, regulatory bodies, such as the Directorate General of Taxation, will be able to quickly obtain the terms of contracts signed by the government when they monitor investment projects within their remit.

Contract transparency is also critical for the local communities who are affected by land-based investments, and whose livelihoods depend on the sustainable management of their lands and resources.

Local communities are usually kept in the dark about deals the government has struck with specific investors, and struggle to discover what rules the investor is bound by.

Is the investor required to consult with the community? What land specifically is the investor allowed to use? Are there any limits on the amount of water or chemicals the investor can use? Answers to such questions, if not in national laws, will often be in contracts negotiated between the government and private investors. Thanks to the new law, these contracts should now be made public.

We have been involved in investigating the extent to which communities in Cameroon know about forest contracts that could directly affect them.

In almost every case, community members had not seen a copy of the contract affecting their lands.

They were left guessing the number of classrooms, hospitals, hangars or roads, to be built by nearby companies. This was a major source of tension, and even local conflict.

Making these contracts public can help to reduce local conflict by managing people's expectations, creating opportunities for communities and encouraging investors to honour the contracts they sign.

Citizens of Cameroon more generally will also benefit from the law's high standards.

For instance, there will be increased public scrutiny of how the government manages the revenue it collects through taxes paid by companies.

So, what is the current state of contract transparency for agricultural and forestry projects?

Some land contracts from Cameroon are already publicly available.

Columbia University's OpenLandContracts.org website currently hosts 10 agricultural contracts and decrees from Cameroon,

for instance. And other contracts can be found in other regional and national websites. But this represents a tiny part of the information that currently exists.

We estimate that more than 200 forestry projects and some 60 agricultural projects—all of which will have types of government contracts—are currently on the books in Cameroon. The current difficulties faced in accessing contracts has been a barrier for communities wanting to protect their rights, and for the government's attempts to achieve responsible investment.

Encouragingly, some of Cameroon's neighbours already make some contracts available.

The government of the Democratic Republic of Congo posted all of its forestry concessions online. The Republic of Congo, like Cameroon, publishes some contracts in hard copy in its journal officiel, though not systematically. Further afield, Liberia also publishes its forestry contracts, and Sierra Leone has committed to disclosing the majority of its agricultural contracts.

Transparency of contracts and public revenues will not solve the wide array of challenges related to encouraging responsible agricultural and forestry investment in Cameroon. But it can help ensure that all stakeholders are better informed, leading to more productive public dialogue and more inclusive participation in investment planning.

Transparency is also good for business, say the heads of various mining firms and public officials from around the world.

Everything appears to be lined up for Cameroon to advance on contract transparency; we now wait to see if the government will fulfill this promise.

Téodyl Nkuintchua is an Anthropologist and Regional Technical Advisor in charge of Development and Advocacy at the Field Legality Advisory Group (FLAG), Cameroon. Sam Szoke-Burke is a Legal Researcher at the Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment. Horline Njike is an Environmental Lawyer and Secretary General at FLAG, Cameroon.

Truth and reconciliation needed in Central African Republic



A U.N. human rights official is urging the government of the Central African Republic to establish, without delay, a truth and reconciliation commission as a pathway to peace.

Marie-Therese Keita-Bocoum welcomes progress made in institutional reforms this year. But, she says authorities in the Central African Republic have to do much, much more to repair the country's chronically troubled security and political situation.

Speaking Wednesday to the U.N. Human Rights Council, she said escalating attacks by armed groups are traumatizing the population, which is losing trust in the ability of the government to protect it. She deplores the hate speech employed by several factions, which, in many cases has a dangerous religious component.

Keita-Bocoum condemns the growing number of what she calls odious attacks against aid workers and U.N. peacekeepers. She says it is vital to bolster protection for human rights in the country, in particular, economic and social rights.

She says the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an important element in this mix. She speaks through an interpreter.

"The government shared with me its determination to develop a transitional justice strategy, which would consist of dealing with the mass atrocities committed in the past, establishing culpability, guaranteeing non-repetition of conflict, and restoring trust and national social cohesion. It includes judicial and non-judicial mechanisms including the truth commission, institutional reform and reparation," she said.

Keita-Bocoum says the willingness on the part of the government deserves stepped-up support from the international community.

"The situation in the C.A.R. is becoming unbearable. It reveals more than ever the urgent need to simultaneously bolster protection of civilians, humanitarian aid, combating impunity, and peace initiatives and development," she said.

The C.A.R. ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva, Leopold Samba, agrees with the independent expert's assessment of the situation and is appealing for greater international support.

He calls the displacement of 600,000 people and the deaths and injuries of some 4,000 people in the C.A.R.'s long-running civil war unacceptable. Samba says additional measures are needed to restore peace throughout his country's battered national territory.

Hippo kills Taiwanese tourist in Kenya

A Taiwanese tourist was on Saturday evening attacked and killed by hippo on the shores of Lake Naivasha in Nakuru County. Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) said the tourist was taking pictures when the attack occurred.

KWS said Mr Chang Ming Chuang, 66, was pronounced dead on arrival at the Naivasha District Hospital.



His colleague Mr Wu Peng Te, 62, who survived the tragic encounter is recuperating at Lake Naivasha Sopa Resort.

KWS said they are tracking the killer hippo.

Nigeria: Why the air we breathe could kill us

Climate change and air pollution could be conspiring against the continent, and fuelling new levels of death and disease.

The dark-grey clouds slunk low over the city, like streaks of charcoal smeared across the sky.

For more than two years, residents of Port Harcourt, in Nigeria's south, have woken up nearly every day to this - a skyline dusted in soot, which often blots out the sun and coats cars, buildings, and streets in a fine layer of gritty black dust.

But it isn't just the grime that bothers Briggs Bieye, a doctor at the government hospital at the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. Nearly as soon as the soot began blanketing the city in 2016, he started to notice a sudden uptick in patients complaining of serious breathing problems.

Given what he knew about the dangerous connections between air pollution and many of these conditions, Bieye found it hard to believe the timing could be a coincidence.

And so, one morning this April, he slipped a protective paper mask over his nose and mouth and marched with thousands of others to Government House, the seat of the state administration here.

The protesters carried signs reading "My life matters" and "Stop the soot". "Save our lives!" they chanted. "The soot is killing us!"

A long-time social activist, over the past year, Bieye has become a central figure in a growing movement of doctors here, who have joined with local civil society activists to demand government officials do more to stop Port Harcourt's soot crisis.

They argue that the poisonous clouds hanging over the city - thought to be caused mostly by the glut of legal and illegal oil refineries in the area - aren't just an environmental emergency. They are a health catastrophe too.

Already, local doctors say they have seen an increase in acute respiratory infections among young children in the city, and fear even more significant long-term health consequences such as a rise in birth defects and certain cancers if the clouds don't clear.

"I know my job is at risk, but I don't mind," Bieye says. For him, being a doctor has always been about advocating for the health of his community - whether that's by treating a patient, joining a strike against deplorable working conditions in hospitals, or answering health questions on popular radio programmes. Since his medical school days, when he was the secretary general of the student union, Bieye says he has always blended medicine and

activism.

"Joining the anti-soot campaign, therefore, was inevitable because keeping silent meant I was mortgaging not only my conscience but also the health of vulnerable children, women and the elderly."

Civil society organisations march through the streets of the city to draw the attention of the authorities to the black-soot rain in Rivers State. (Innocent Eteng)

In 2016, state and local governments declared the soot an "emergency situation", but many activists say that, since then, there has been little concrete action.

So the city's doctors took matters into their own hands.

On a recent day here, Uyobong Uko stood in front of a group of school children to give a presentation on how to protect themselves from soot - something he does about once a week as a form of personal activism.

As he spoke, he knelt down and pressed his palm against the ground.

"This is what you are inhaling," he told the kids as he rubbed the crusty dirt into his hands. "This is going straight into your lungs."

Uko, a scientist and veterinary surgeon, says his intention isn't to scare anyone but to make people safer.

"They need to begin to wear nose masks, support their parents to clean the windows and close the doors when they are in the house," he says. "They need to play less outdoors and play more indoors, cover themselves properly, wash their hands with soap and water as often as possible, wash their playthings. That is what we are doing from now henceforth."

Like many doctors here, Uko is particularly worried about the impact soot could have on the city's children.

Already, there is some evidence of the particular risks they face. According to a study from the community health department at the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, the prevalence of acute respiratory infections (ARI) among children under five jumped nearly 50% between 2015 and 2016. The study hasn't been published yet, but it is the only research that has been done in the area.

"The later period coincides with the emergence of black soot in Port Harcourt. This may account for an increase in [the] number of ARI cases among under-five children," writes paediatrician Agnes Fienemika, who conducted the study of about 11 000 children at the state-owned Braithwaite Memorial Specialist Hospital between September 2015 and December 2016.

Lower respiratory infections such as bronchitis and bronchiolitis accounted for almost one in every five deaths among children under five, according to 2015 World Health Organisation (WHO) statistics. The body estimates that poor air quality causes more than a half a million deaths from respiratory infections annually.

Fienemika was moved to conduct her study, she says in the research document, because she knew that, if activists wanted to prove to government that soot was dangerous, they needed hard evidence on their side.

"[We] can't be silent, we have to be proactive, we have to act," she writes. "What I want ... is for us to be proactive because [soot] is everybody's problem."

But even as doctors here have waged educational campaigns and conducted research to show the health dangers of soot, they have also found themselves on the front lines of a broader protest movement to demand government accountability for the soot crisis.

Soot, as Bieye often explains on radio shows and to government officials, can be a stealthy killer.

"As a doctor, I see cases of upper respiratory tract infection, I see cases of bronchial asthma, cases of pulmonary diseases, and you say I should keep quiet?" he says.

The sticky black dust is made up of tiny particles of charred acids, chemicals, metals, soils and dust. It is created in the burning of fossil fuels and other noxious materials. Each individual fleck of soot is

just a thirtieth of the diameter of a single human hair, which allows it to enter into people's lungs easily and deeply when they breathe in dirty air. From there the particles can slip into the bloodstream, and are linked to a long list of dangerous breathing ailments, including respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and asthma, according to research published in *The Lancet* medical journal in 1995.

Globally, outdoor environmental pollution - to which soot is a major contributor - killed more than 4.2-million in 2016, according to a 2018 WHO fact sheet. About 90% of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries such as Nigeria. Nearly every person in Nigeria, 94% of the population is exposed to levels of soot that exceed WHO guidelines, the World Bank's Little Green Data Book 2015 shows.

Globally, the rest of the world is not far off - almost nine out of 10 people on the planet breathe air that doesn't meet WHO standards.

And industrial cities such as Port Harcourt are at particular risk.

For decades, this bustling city has been the epicentre of Nigeria's massive petroleum industry. Flanked by both legal and illegal oil refineries, belches of black smoke on the horizon have long been a regular feature of life here.

But in recent years, as Nigeria's government has cracked down on illegal oil refiners, it has burned many of their operations to the ground, coughing even more soot into the air. Many activists and academics suspect this is why a perpetual blanket of soot now hangs over the city.

"We all point to sources starting from the refineries [that] are visibly polluting," says Nnimmo Bassey, director of the Health of Mother Earth Foundation, a local environmental think-tank. "We are [also] seeing the way the military burn those [illegal] facilities."

That, in turn, has sent levels of air pollution soaring.

The levels of air pollution "for Port Harcourt are way off the [safety] chart", said Rabia Said, a physicist at Bayero University in northern Nigeria who studies the soot crisis in Port Harcourt, at a public forum on the issue in 2017.

This smog isn't just clogging the city's lungs, it could also be fuelling increases in cancer risk. Soot as well as petroleum coke - a substance produced by oil refineries - are both on a list of 36 substances found in the air that the International Agency for Research on Cancer had said either cause cancer or are likely to.

Over the past three months, there have been several large protests in the city. Doctors have been among both the organisers and the participants, wearing T-shirts reading #STOPTHESOOT as they marched through the smoggy streets.

For many doctors, this was a familiar position to be in. For years, the healthcare sector has been the site of repeated strikes for better wages and working conditions and, paediatrician Fienemika notes, many doctors are intimately familiar with using protests to hold their government to account.

"So many of us are putting our lives, our careers and everything we have worked for on the line to ensure that the people of Rivers State and their environs get good health," says Uko, the veterinarian.

And at least on some levels, their activism seems to be working. The Rivers State government is now suing the central government for its silence and violation of citizens' right to a clean environment. And Nigeria's Parliament has also ordered an environmental audit into the crisis.

But in Port Harcourt, these initial victories have not dulled the fight for local doctors.

At the recent protest attended by Bieye, the government hospital doctor and the deputy governor, Ipalibo Banigo, eventually emerged from Government House to address the demonstrators.

They were directing their anger to the wrong people, she explained. They needed to make their complaint to the national government in Abuja, not to her.

But before she could finish, her voice was drowned out by a rising chant.

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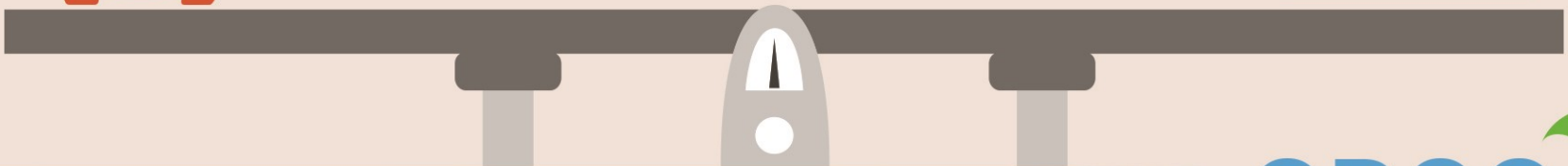
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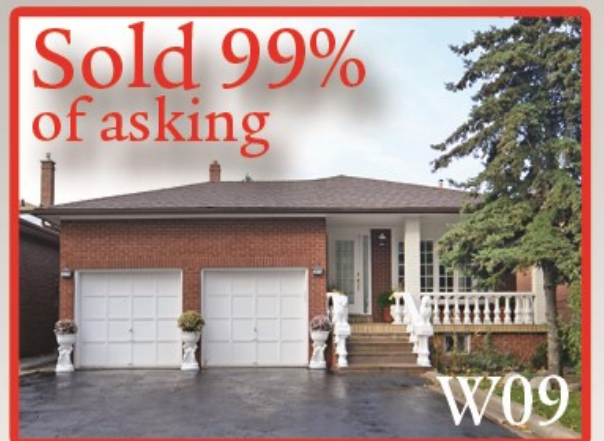


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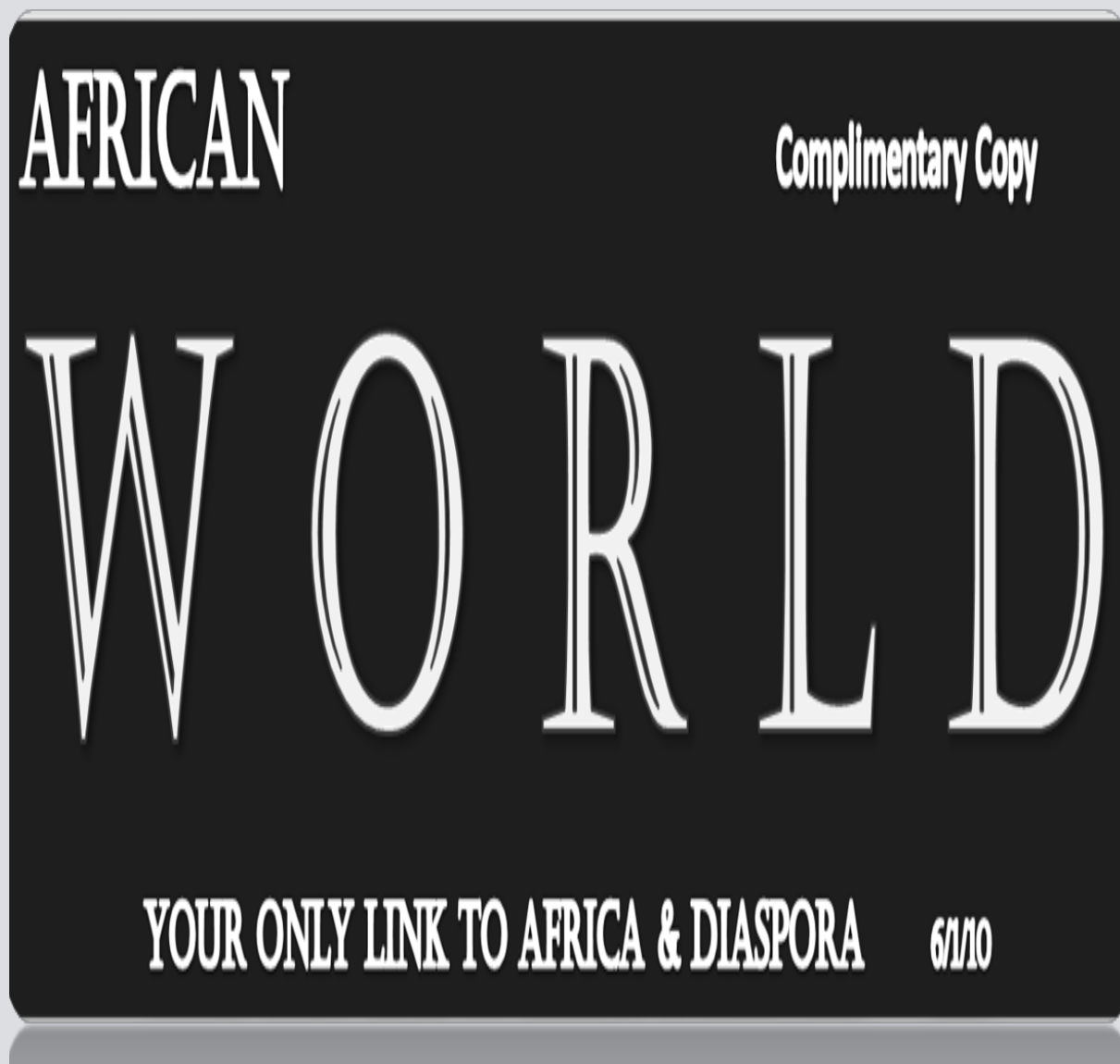
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