

Dateline Africa

Fleeing danger to possible disaster ... and death

### **1 June 2023 – 31 August 2023**

*The last three months have again been marked by repeated drownings of migrants leaving the shores of Africa for Europe. Boats small and large from Egypt, Senegal, Libya and Tunisia have foundered and capsized leading to the known loss of respectively 78, 60, 41 and 14 lives – and many, many more uncounted. Gangs of traffickers control the routes, promising but rarely providing safe routes to safety and a new life. Nevertheless, some migrants try again and again to cross to Europe, despite the hardships and extreme danger. The Tunisian coast guard recovered 901 bodies of drowned migrants off its coast from January to 20 July this year, according to the country's interior minister.*

### **AUGUST**

**31 August:** 74 people died when a fire broke out in a building in downtown Johannesburg that had been 'hijacked' – with space rented out illegally to squatters who set up shacks in the building. It is believed was started by a candle in one of the shacks. Many of the dead were migrants, including foreign nationals. The building is one of [over 50 sites](#) in the inner-city, most of them owned by the City Council, that have been abandoned to the control of crime syndicates.

**30 August:** Soldiers in Gabon seized power days after a fraudulent presidential election returned the incumbent, Ali Bongo, to office. The Bongo family have ruled since 1967, with the support of France, the former colonial power. The leader of the coup was said to be a cousin of the ousted president and crowds in Libreville, Gabon's capital, peacefully demonstrated their support for the new regime. There have been eight military coups in the region since 2020 – all condemned by the African Union.

**22-24 August:** South Africa hosted the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (Brics) summit on "Brics and Africa: Partnership for Mutually Accelerated Growth, Sustainable Development, and Inclusive Multilateralism". Sixty-seven leaders from the Global South were invited and Chinese President Xi Jinping attended, as part of a state visit to South Africa from August 21 to 24. The biggest takeaway from the 15th annual Brics summit was the announcement that six new member countries will be added to the bloc in 2024.

**23 August:** For the first time ever, election observers from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) refused to endorse the results of the Zimbabwe election – many press reports detailed pre-election violence and cited intimidation, coercion and irregularities during the voting process. Otherwise, the news was as predictable as ever; the long-running ruling party's Emmerson Mnangagwa was declared the winner and the opposition rejected the outcome, alleging "blatant and gigantic fraud".

**8 August:** According to UN agencies, more than half of the population of Sudan – at least 24 million people, including around 14 million children – require humanitarian aid. The majority face severe hunger and six million people are on the brink of famine. Three million under-fives are malnourished, with 700,000 at risk of severe acute malnutrition and mortality. Some 1.7 million children could miss out on critical vaccinations, raising the risk of disease outbreaks. The war in that country has forced nearly four million people to flee their homes, some heading across the borders into Chad, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia and Egypt.

**13 August:** Chinese contractors won nearly a third of all construction projects in Africa in 2022, four times more than Western firms, according to a report by the Hinrich Foundation, an Asia-based philanthropic organisation. Despite reductions in new Chinese 'Belt and Road' funding, "China is currently winning the Great Power competition to establish political and economic relations in African countries".

**11 August:** Jacob Zuma, South Africa's former president, returned to jail (albeit very briefly) apparently to serve out the remainder of a 15-month sentence for contempt of court. However, he immediately benefitted from a presidential decree that released all prisoners with less than two years prison time remaining, ostensibly to reduce prison overcrowding.

**10 August:** Interpol seized or froze 2.15 million euros, blocked 208 bank accounts and arrested 103 people in an operation targeting West African mafia groups and gangs specialising in internet fraud and scams across the globe. The operation, codenamed Operation Jackal, mobilised police forces, financial crime units and cybercrime agencies across 21 countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, South Africa, France and the US. Among those targeted was Nigerian-based Black Axe, a violent gang renowned for cyber-enabled financial fraud and scams in online business, email compromise schemes, romance and inheritance scams, credit card fraud, tax fraud, advance payment scams and money laundering.

**10 August:** The military junta in Guinea signed a significant agreement with the Australian mining giant, Rio Tinto, and Chinese investors to build a 600km, US\$15 billion railway that will carry iron ore from the remote Simandou mine, the biggest known unmined iron ore resource in the world, to Morébaya Port on the Atlantic coast. The railway is environmentally controversial and the project has been repeatedly threatened by political instability.

**3-11 August:** Five people died in violence caused by a taxi-strike in Cape Town, after the City Council imposed a new procedure to impound taxis involved in breaking city by-laws.

## **JULY**

**28 July:** Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed a delegation from seven African countries, led by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, to the second Russia-Africa summit in St Petersburg, Russia. However, he did not agree to any policy concessions. Despite pleas from Ramaphosa and the African Union, Russia declined to re-instate the Black Sea grain deal, thereby putting Africa's food security at further risk.

**26 July:** In another reminder of Europe's waning influence across the Sahel region, soldiers from Niger's presidential guard seized power in a coup and detained the democratically-elected President Mohamed Bazoum. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) set repeated but shifting deadlines for the military to withdraw and threatened intervention by force to return Bazoum to power. Meanwhile, crowds who demonstrated in support of the coup waved Russian national flags, which happened to be to hand. French disengagement from Mali, Guinea, Burkino Faso and Niger has made space for Russian mercenaries across the Sahel.

**13 July:** International NGO Save the Rhino reported that 16 Southern white rhinos were relocated to the Garamba national park in the Democratic Republic of Congo from the Phinda Private Game reserve in KwaZulu-Natal. The local sub-species of Northern white rhino became extinct more than a decade before after Garamba was beset by massive poaching for rhino horn and became the victim of conflicts within the DRC. The Canadian mining company, Barrick Gold, which operates the Kabila gold mine in north-eastern DRC, funded the rhino relocation.

**6 July:** The esteemed annual Caine Prize for African Writing, which celebrates the richness and diversity of African literature and recognizes outstanding achievements in African storytelling, announced its 2023 shortlist of five stories selected from a pool of 297 entries from 28 African countries.

**2 July:** The University of Strasbourg in north-east France began the task of verifying the origins of its collections of human skulls, bones and other remains collected in the aftermath of the genocide in Namibia and atrocities in Tanzania under German colonialist rule. In March, Namibia's [Ovaherero Genocide Foundation](#) requested the return of human remains obtained after the massacre of Ovaherero and Nama people by German troops in Namibia between 1904 and 1907. This followed a request by Tanzania in January 2020 seeking the restitution of remains belonging to the Wachagga people from around Mount Kilimanjaro whose leaders were killed after resisting colonial rule.

## **JUNE**

**27 June:** An authoritative report, "Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group's Blueprint for State Capture in the Central African Republic", published details on how the Russian mercenary Wagner Group has co-opted the President of the Central African Republic, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, amassed military power and created a complex network of operations to plunder natural resources. Describing this as "a truly new kind of ultraviolent colonialism", the report stated: "Soldiers and militiamen report Wagner training in ultraviolent techniques, including how to cut fingers and legs, remove nails, strangle, throw fuel and burn people alive." Over 500 footnotes and many on-the-ground interviews backed up this report, which was published by The Sentry, an investigative and policy organisation that investigates multinational groups that benefit from violent conflict and repression.

**16-17 June:** Representatives from seven African countries, led by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, visited Kyiv to meet with Ukrainian President Zelensky and then Moscow and Russian President Putin to try to broker an end to the Ukraine-Russia conflict. A 10-step peace plan stressed the importance of territorial sovereignty, de-escalation and security guarantees for all parties.