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The African Union's conflict early warning system is no more. What now?

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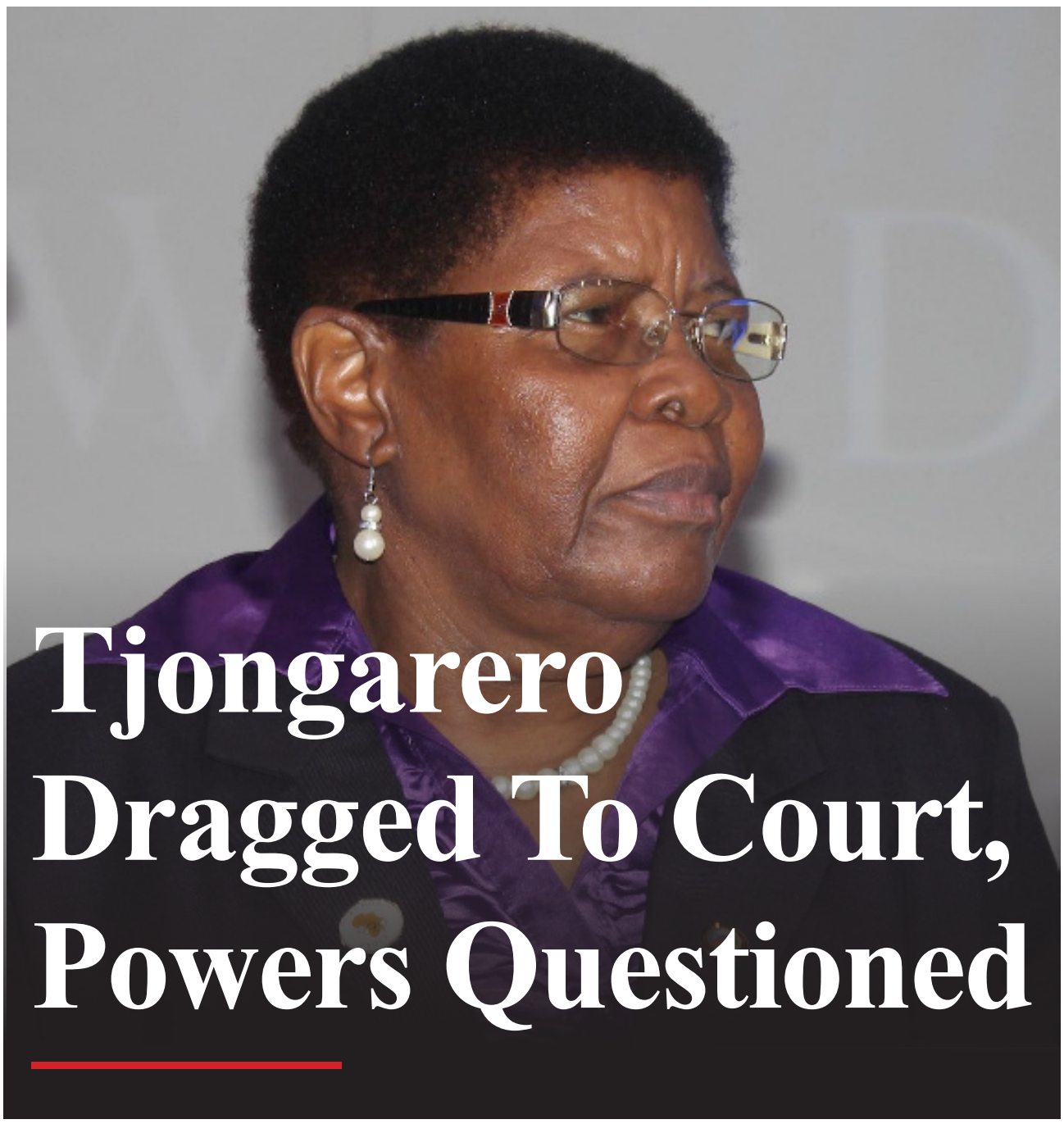
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Tjongarero Dragged To Court, Powers Questioned

■ Kelvin Chiringa

Sport, youth and national service minister Agnes Tjongarero is now set to be dragged before the Windhoek High Court over her decision to disregard a recommendation of the commission to renew the contract of chief administrator Fredy Mwiya.

The minister stands accused of failing to understand where her powers begin and end and where the commission's start.

According to the Sports Act, 23 (1), the minister has the power to appoint a person as chief administrator but is subject to a recommendation by the commission.

The commission, on 26 March 2022, recommended Mwiya's contract renewal for another five years (from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2027) as per the provisions of Section 9 (3) (a) of the Sports Act.

"The NSC board, on its special meeting, held on Saturday, 26 March 2022 (held) online, unanimously resolved to: recommend to the line minister to consider re-appointing the NSC Chief Administrator, Mr Simataa. F. Mwiya for another five-year contract renewal effective 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2027." "The condition of service is to be held in line within the State-Owned Enterprises Directives on remuneration dated 18 April 2018 at 90 percentiles," reads the letter penned by board chairperson Joel Matheus and secretary Bernadine Nengonya.

Available documentary evidence shows that Tjongarero has, in the meantime, disregarded the commission's recommendation and directed that the position must rather be advertised.

She also instructed that Mwiya has the window open for him to apply as well.

But the commission has expressed that the minister's directive is a violation of the Sports Act as it undermines its power.

Based on her interpretation of the Act and refusal to re-appoint Mwiya, a legal challenge is now expected in the Windhoek High Court this Friday at 09:00 am.

> **"The minister stands accused of failing to understand where her powers begin and end and where the commission's start."**

In a letter dated 29 March 2022, the minister said, "your recommendation is well received and acknowledged. However, it is in the best interest of the nation that the above-mentioned position be advertised for all interested Namibians to enjoy a fair chance in applying;

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Ovaherero Genocide Foundation Condemns Germany "Loaning" Back Looted Artefacts



■ Ludorft Iyambo

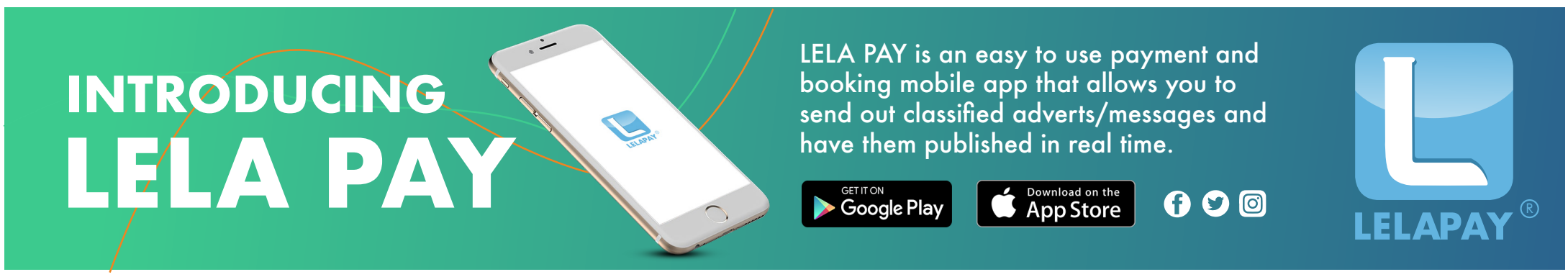
The vice-chairperson of the OvaHerero Genocide Foundation, Joyce Muzengua, said they will issue a letter condemning Germany for "loaning" back 23 traditional Namibian artefacts.

This comes after a Berlin museum in Germany made a statement that it will, on Friday, 27 May 2022, send 23 ancient pieces of jewellery, tools and objects back to Namibia.

Muzengua said Germany is making such a statement so that they are not illegally implicated in the ovaHerero and Nama genocide. German colonial settlers killed tens of thousands of indigenous ovaHerero and Nama people in the 1904-1908 massacres -labelled by historians as the first genocide of the 20th century.

"Genocide is a crime that has illegal implications. You can never conduct whatever it is to restore, rectify or reparate the crime of the genocide without a legal obligation. It does not work like that. Germany is basically trying to do the right thing, but they are cautious with their semantics so that it does not bind them or haunt them in future. That is why they use terms like projects and "indefinite loan". What is an indefinite loan? A loan is something to be paid back. These are just semantics to protect them so that they do not implicate themselves illegally for things that will open a case," said Muzengua. She further said that Europe had colonised the entire world, and if Germany has to start by giving back artefacts, which are part of the reparation package, it would be detrimental to Germany because all the other superpowers are watching Germany. She further disagrees with the statement that the artefacts should be handed over to the National

Continued on P2



Tjongarero

thus, the incumbent is free to apply for the position."
"It is against this background that I write to you to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the incumbent CA for an exceptional job done for the institution's growth and services rendered to the sports sector. Subsequent to the above-mentioned communique, be so kind and provide my office with a copy of the notelet if and when the advertisement is placed in print and electronic media."
However, documents further disclose that the directive created friction on both parties as the commission stood its ground and refused to carry it out.
Instead, in its letter dated 19 April 2022, the commission said it had considered many aspects before recommending Mwiya.
The commission said it considered the evaluation assessment and report conducted by Pink Tech, a consultancy company, a comprehensive evidence file containing the factual elements of Mwiya's achievements and the terms and conditions of his contract of employment.
The board told the minister that it applied its fiduciary duties and jurisdiction in the matter thoroughly before arriving at the resolution to renew his mandate.
It also told Tjongarero that as far as they were concerned, Mwiya had "performed exceptionally well."
"According to the contract of employment of the Chief Administrator, it is clear, and from the reference of the performance policy and the NSC, the determination of his contract of employment is rested on the performance evaluation by the sitting board of directors and their recommendations as they are the direct supervisor of the incumbent," the commission said.
Again, a 21 April 2022 letter copied to finance minister Iipumbu Shiimi and Attorney General Festus Mbandeka shows that the minister was adamant that the position be made vacant.
She further asked for it to be advertised "immediately as the time is not on our side".

Legal Argument Against Tjongarero

Lawyers from Ndaitwah Legal Practitioner (NLP) have told Tjongarero that she has violated section 23(1) of the Sports Act.
The Act reads: The minister must appoint a person as Chief Administrator of the Commission on the recommendation of the commission.
"The decision taken by your office in your letter dated 29 March 2022 was reiterated in your letter dated 21 April 2022, despite the Namibia Sports Commission's letter dated 19 April 2022, wherein it was, inter alia, expressly explained that the terms of Section 23 (1) of the Act, your office "must" act on the recommendation of the commission in appointing the Chief Administrator."
"The word "must" does not afford your office a discretion. Authority of this point is found in the Supreme Court Judgement between William S Torbitt and others versus The International University of Management, where it was found that the use of the term "must" is mandatory and peremptory and not permissive or directory…."
The lawyers added that in light of the Sports Act, the authority and the various communication between Tjongarero and the Namibia Sports Commission, she acted ultra vires.
A review application in the High Court of Namibia will now seek several orders.
(a) An order in terms whereof the minister's decision against Mwiya's recommendation to be reviewed and set aside,
(b) An order in terms of which the minister is directed to act in terms of Section 23(1) of the Sports Act.
Speaking to The Villager Thursday afternoon, Tjongarero said, "Yes, I have been served with papers."

A Ministry In Disarray

The sports ministry is currently in disarray as the minister is reportedly not seeing eye to eye with Mwiya whom she has had heated arguments in meetings.
This has been disclosed by sources close to affairs inside her ministry.
"I didn't know there was a bad relationship. I really didn't know that (I said) that I want somebody else instead of him. And now that we are having court cases and papers, the reason I said let us advertise is because there is an investigation going on. If you were in my position, what could have you done?"
"Will you extend the terms of office for another five years while knowing there are things going on? I said let's just advertise, let everybody apply, including himself. The ministry is stable as usual," she said.
Tjongarero is said to be looking for someone who can play second fiddle to her alleged plans to dismantle the commission and absorb it within the Olympic committee.
"This was created by the husband," the source said.
There is a strong feeling inside the commission that Tjongarero is victimising Mwiya with the sole intention to "advance the legacy of the family-founded organisation".
The committee has been frowned upon as not representative of the black majority, while Mwiya is also said to have gone to the extent of roping in a lawyer to "stop her plans".
The minister has denied the accusations.
"Come on, come on, come on, come on! Really. Come on! Whatever is coming up with this nonsense, that is nonsense at all (sic). How can the commission be absorbed into the Olympic Committee?
However, things came to a head this week when Tjongarero relieved the entire board of the commission of their duties with immediate effect.
She carried this out on account of what she called "deliberate insubordination and ignoring directives from the appointing authority, as well as a directive from the office of the Attorney General".
The board consists of Joel Matheus, Erica Beukes, Alna Similo, Karen Mubonenwa, Thomas Mbeeli, Dr Marius Johannes, Nicklaus Ngumono and Linda Chicalu.
"Afcon will be affected now. Botswana won't trust us as there are fights in sport. She was to look for stadium issues. How can CAF bring Afcon here if stability is not there in (the) country? She does not see that," one of the staffers at the ministry has told this publication, choosing to remain anonymous.

Genocide Foundation

Museum of Namibia and made available to local artists and academics for research.
"The communities against which the crime was perpetrated are still not involved in this thing," she said. She said the artefacts were crafted by the ancestors of the decedents of the Nama and ovaHerero communities, who are still alive.
She claimed that they were not surprised by seeing this because Germany had agreed with Swapo. She moreover said Germany is trying to cover her footprints because she knows that this could open a case for the entire West.
Sima Luipert of the Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA) said that the German government does not want to acknowledge that they stole the artefacts. She said the museum that will receive the artefacts was never discussed with Nama and ovaHerero authorities.
"I don't know how you loan back something you have stolen. The receiver of this stolen good has no rights whatsoever to receive it because it does not belong to them," said Luipert.
Luipert told The Villager that the was no Namibia when the artefacts were looted from the communities; hence, they should be given back to the rightful owners.
"We will challenge the Museum Association of Namibia, and we will challenge the institution in Germany. These things do not belong to them," claimed Luipert.
The artefacts, which Namibian experts chose, include an ancient three-headed drinking vessel, a doll wearing a traditional dress and various spears, hairpieces and other fashion accessories.
Esther Moombolah, director of the National Museum of Namibia, during the announcement of the artefacts' return to Africa, said that Namibians should not have to get on a plane to see their cultural treasures, which are kept in boxes in foreign institutions.
The Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (SPK), which runs the Berlin museum, where the items were previously housed, did not say why the objects were not simply restituted to Namibia rather than put on long-term loan.
Hermann Parzinger, president of the SPK, said that it was "a process of rapprochement, and that's the way that was decided for the objects to go back" to Namibia.
Berlin's Ethnological Museum has been working together with the National Museum of Namibia since 2019 to discuss the future of the hundreds of objects from the southern African country in its collections.
The move is one of a series of recent steps by Germany towards atoning for colonial-era crimes, including the official recognition last year that it committed genocide in Namibia, then known as German South-West Africa.
Although smaller than those of France and Britain, Germany's colonial empire encompassed parts of several African countries, including present-day Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Namibia and Cameroon.
Over the last years, Germany has returned skulls and other human remains to Namibia that it had sent to Berlin during the period for "scientific" experiments.
Germany returned the late Hendrik Witbooi's Bible and whip to Namibia in 2019.
The Ethnological Museum also reached an agreement last year to begin returning its collection of Benin Bronzes, ancient sculptures from the Kingdom of Benin, to Nigeria.
The 16th-18th century metal plaques and sculptures, among the most highly regarded works of African art, are now scattered around European museums after being looted by the British at the end of the 19th century.

"I don't know how you loan back something you have stolen."

Beloved Sambyu Priest Dies In Car Crash

■ **Annakleta Haikera**

The death of a much-loved priest has devasted Rundu's Catholic community, Charles Chasete Mikaya, from the St. Joseph's Parish at Shambyu in the Kavango East, who died in a car crash on Tuesday, 24 May.
The accident occurred 22 km from Grootfontein towards Rundu. The tyre of the vehicle he was travelling in allegedly suffered a blowout, which led the vehicle to overturn and catch fire. The deceased travelled with Deacon Angel Mulenge Bwalya, who suffered severe injuries.
Bwalya, however, is recovering satisfactorily in the Grootfontein State hospital. Mikaya is from Malawi but has worked as a priest in Namibia for the past five years, based in Rundu.
According to a statement from the Namibia Catholic Bishops' Conference (NCBC), Mikaya was a very committed and hardworking priest.
"Fr Charles Chaseta Mikaya, the Parish priest of St. Joseph's Parish Shambyu, was called to eternal rest this morning, around 11h00, in a car accident. The shocking incident happened around 50 kilometres to Grootfontein as he was driving from Rundu," the statement by Father Linus Ngenomesho OMI, the Apostolic Administrator of the Vicariate of Rundu said.
Barthlomeus Mungonba, one of the Catholic parish members at Shambyu St. Joseph's, described the late priest as having a significant impact on the lives of his parishioners.
"The community members of Shambyu and Andara had lost a priest that has had the greatest impact on many people's lives.
"Father Charles Mikaya had a lot of love for the Catholic Church and its teachings. He was interested in serving people and had the ability to work with others. Father Mikaya was open to different races, ethnic groups and cultures."
Mungonba told The Villager he was very heartbroken to hear of Mikaya's passing.
"I am so hurt. The father and I scheduled a meeting for the coming Friday, but it seems God has already called him to be on his right hand. I am going to pray for him every day, and may his soul rest in eternal peace. I will continue encouraging myself with the many scriptures he left me with and forever be faithful to the church."
Sean Naude of the Namibian Marshall Rangers told The Villager that the grass in the area was aflame after the vehicle caught fire and was spreading to neighbouring farms.
"The accident was a tragic one, which took the life of a well-known priest. The bushes in the area where the accident occurred caught fire after the vehicle burst into flames, but my team managed to contact all the farmers from the surrounding area to look out for a wild spread of fire and to proceed with caution."

"The shocking incident happened around 50 kilometres to Grootfontein as he was driving from Rundu."



World Education Forum To Improve Education Systems



■ Hertha Ekandjo

The higher education minister Itah Kandji-Murangi says she attended the world education forum in the United Kingdom for Namibia to study effective strategies and methods other countries employed during Covid-19.

The World Education Forum started on 22 May and ended on 25 May.

"We are looking forward to, in terms of how we build on what worked for other countries, so that we can make our education system better, stronger and bolder in the midst of whatever challenges we may face while going forward," said Kandji-Murangi.

She said that challenges could be another pandemic, problems that may arise due to climate change such as floods, drought and many more.

According to her, these challenges can also negatively affect the education system. When there is a flood, she said, some learners will not be able to excess education as they usually do.

"The different sessions that we have attended so far is that there have been different ways of dealing with the pandemic," she said.

Kandji-Murangi said that as much as the pandemic was a challenge, it has pushed different countries to the point where they will become innovative. This includes Namibia.

She said that in the phase of a pandemic that took so many lives, universities could still graduate students, showing humanity's resilience.

"As education ministers, we are saying we have what it takes to move our different nationals' states in the face of whatever challenge, whether it is a pandemic, climatic induced challenge," said the higher education minister.

She further said that what they, as education ministers, can do is focus and prioritise their funding and the projects they choose to move with the few resources at their disposal.

According to her, all countries have stood out their respective citizens, as they applied their different modalities and methods that were useful and suitable to them.

She stated that some of the most key things that she came across were the lockdowns. She questioned if the lockdowns and the quick shift to online learning were the only best solution that could be found.

"We really need to double up our socks as ministers of education, as government to see that those who have fallen behind should be brought back on track," she said.

She further said that the Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in Namibia is not fully digitalised.

Kandji-Murangi led a delegation of three, the heads of the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA), Namibia Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and Namibia Training Authority (NTA), to the Education World Forum in London, the UK.

According to her education, World Forum is the world's largest gathering of Education, Skills, Technology and Innovation.

Among many objectives, the Forum this year seeks to create platforms for critical debates on how to provide effective support and promote innovative solutions to countries' education systems post-Covid-19, to improve equity, quality and relevance of curricula, teaching, learning and assessment processes and outcomes.

The 2022's Forum's theme is "Education: Building Forward Together; Stronger, Bolder, Better.

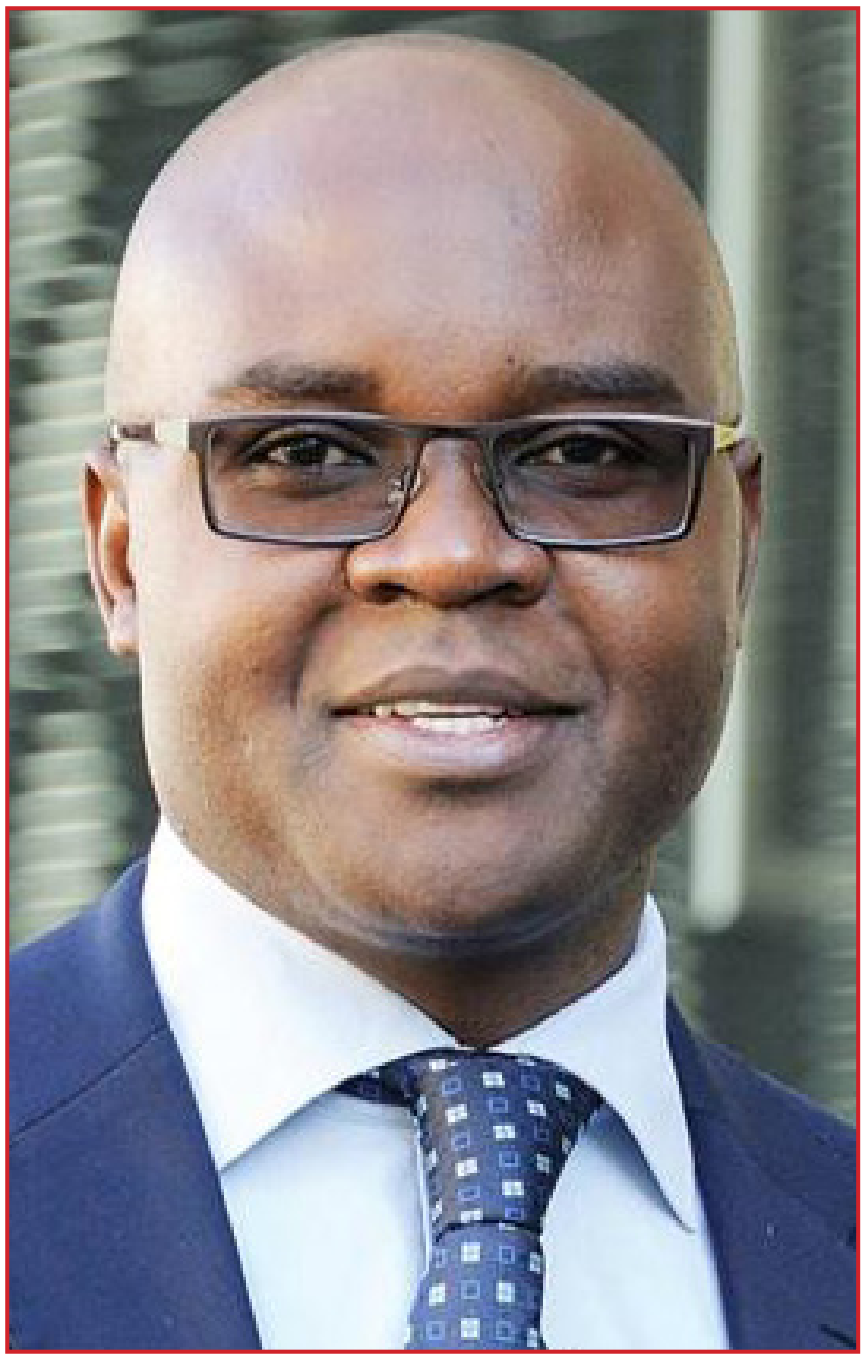
"This theme is carefully identified to guide the EWF 2022's discussions and debates toward solutions for challenges facing the education sector globally due to the pandemic," said Kandji-Murangi.

She added that participating ministers indicated the severity of how different education systems were affected while at the same time bringing to the fore the strategies that proved effective.

She further said this is to help governments learn from one another. The meeting was also organised to help governments think of the best ways the education sector could accelerate governments' recovery from the negative effects of Covid-19.

> **"As education ministers, we are saying we have what it takes to move our different nationals' states in the face of whatever challenge."**

DBN Sign Grant Funding For Housing And Women Entrepreneurs' Research



■ Nghiinomenwa Erastus

The Development Bank of Namibia (DBN) has signed an agreement with the French Development Agency (AFD) for the agency to provide N$5,02 million in grant funding for two DBN research programmes.

The two research programmes will investigate opportunities in the fields of affordable housing and the development of Namibian women entrepreneurs.

The two financiers jointly announced this week in a press release.

The agreement was signed by DBN chief executive officer Martin Inkumbi, Sébastien Minot, French Ambassador to Namibia, and Bruno Deprince, AFD regional director for Southern Africa.

Inkumbi explained that DBN is not just a source of finance but also a knowledge bank and brain trust for the development of economic activity.

He said, although the bank may have financial and administrative capacity, development impact depends on the ability to bring the financial resource to bear knowledgeably and effectively.

In terms of low-cost housing, the bank will seek to understand market impediments to developing low-cost housing schemes, means to incentivize the construction of low-cost housing schemes and appropriate financing products to individuals to purchase such properties.

The bank is investigating dedicated finance and required support programs for women entrepreneurs.

Inkumbi said the research will strengthen DBN's impact by creating market profiles of the women segment, developing tailored products, and understanding barriers to economic inclusiveness.

According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development estimates, the Covid-19 pandemic has set back gender equality by 40 years.

The conference highlighted that extra work is needed to empower women to catch up on this lost progress.

Speaking at the signing ceremony, the French ambassador to Namibia, Sébastien Minot, said although AFD has been active in Namibia since 1998, it is the first time that a project will be conducted in cooperation with DBN.

He hopes to engage in new opportunities to strengthen the ties between the two countries.

Minot insisted on France's commitment to target essential challenges and sustainable development goals through cooperation as SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities and SDG 5 on gender equality.

In 2021, the French Embassy to Namibia initiated the Fem-Tech project to support and develop innovative Namibian female tech entrepreneurs.

AFD counts developing access to affordable housing and women empowerment among its strategic priorities, and the delegation wants to contribute to the DBN project.

Bruno Deprince, Regional Director of AFD for Southern Africa, also insists on the future of this partnership as the results of the financed studies and analysis could help develop new financial products to address the identified needs within the project.

He said the agency is looking forward to implementing the results while being at the side of its new partner. Email: erastus@thevillager.com.na

DRC and Zambia Partner For Electric Car Battery Plant



■ Nghiinomenwa Erastus

The Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia have agreed to collaborate to set up an electric car battery manufacturing plant in the Haut-Katanga and Copperbelt provinces.

The Copperbelt Katanga Mining Newsletter reported early this month after an agreement was signed at the end of April this year.

The arrangement is coming at the time when the two admitted that they supply the world with almost all the required minerals needed for the electric car batteries- however, all they do is ship them out in raw form to Europe and Asia.

The two mineral-rich neighbours decide to harmonise their development policies and strategies vis-à-vis the mining and industrial sector to establish a value in the electric battery and clean energy sector.

To do this, they have set up a framework called the Battery Council of the Republic of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC – Zambia Battery Council).

In addition, this governance body will be equipped with a Technical Committee in charge of monitoring and evaluating the initiative.

Moreover, the Newsletter revealed a harmonised legislative and regulatory framework and a system of incentives common to the two states to create a business environment favourable to the development of the said value chain and a flourishing economic microcosm.

For this purpose, the governments of DRC and Zambia made available for this project sites located respectively in the Haut-Katanga and Copperbelt provinces.

The Newsletter reported that President Hakainde Hichilema said that the signing of cooperation agreements between Zambia and the DRC to start manufacturing electric car batteries is key to poverty alleviation on the continent.

Hichilema, however, said the signing is one thing and emphasised the need to actualise the agreement.

He added Africa has for long been viewed as a source of raw materials, but the narrative is now being changed.

DRC President Felix Tshisekedi motivated the reason for their collaboration, saying that the two countries are home to at least 80 per cent of minerals required to produce electric car batteries.

Tshisekedi said Zambia and the DRC have decided to be masters of their own destiny.

He said the agreement would create a value chain for the production of batteries for electric cars, which will be key to the economies of Zambia and the DRC.

The two Presidents also welcome the commitment of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) as a technical partner and that of the African Export-Import Bank (Afrexim Bank), a financial partner who will support the initiative for fundraising required for its implementation.

They also invited other partners interested in this transformative initiative for the economic development of their respective countries.

The Republic of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo Border States hold about 70 per cent of the world's cobalt reserves.

As the world transitions to a less carbon-emitting mode of transport, the electric car automotive industry has become the feasible alternative. However, the sector faces several risks related to the supply of raw materials.

According to a report by the International Energy Agency (IEA), lithium needs are particularly critical. It is projected that its demand will increase sixfold by 2030, to 500 kilotonnes, requiring the opening of 50 new mines.

These minerals are extracted mainly in countries such as Australia, Chile or the Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, China produces three-quarters of lithium-ion batteries, the dominant technology, and controls more than half of the processing and refining capacity for lithium, cobalt and graphite.

Sales of electric cars exploded worldwide in 2021, but the future availability of raw materials such as lithium is worrying, as underlined on May 23, 2022, by the IEA in its annual report on the electrification of the park.

In 2021, more than 6.6 million units of electric cars were sold, half of them in China.

Sales of electric cars have doubled in one year and now account for 10 per cent of new car sales.

They continued to accelerate at the start of 2022, with two million units sold in the first quarter (+75 per cent over one year), the IEA reported. Email: erastus@thevillager.com.na

IUM
THE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MANAGEMENT

IUM has embarked on constructing a state of the Art Research, Training and Conference Centre in Swakopmund.

Ground Breaking Ceremony is scheduled for Monday, 30th May 2022.

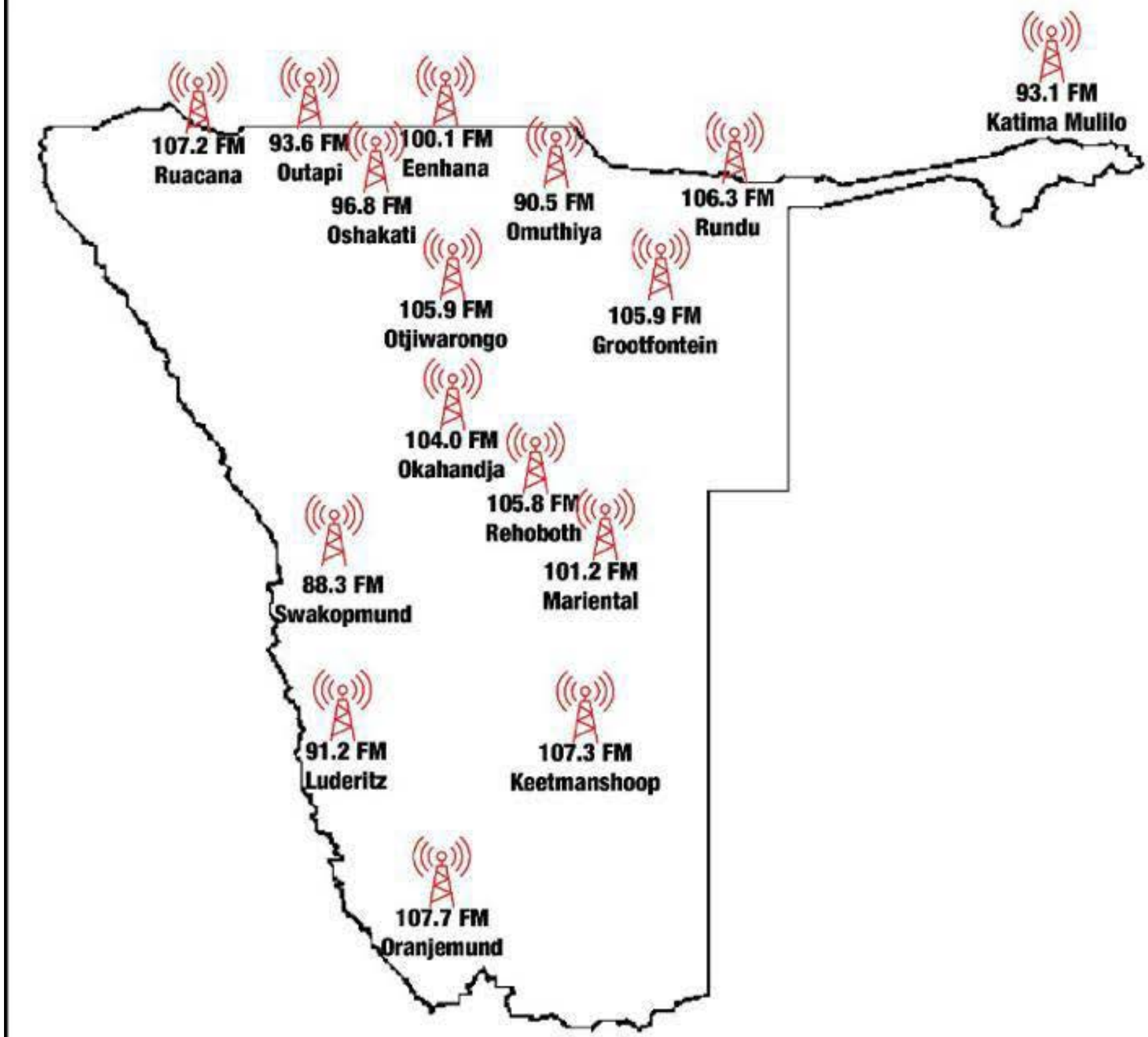




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AFRICAN ROOTS

Elvis biopic: Austin Butler praised, but mixed reviews for film



■ Scottie Andrew

A new biopic of Elvis Presley has attracted generally positive reviews, with many critics praising actor Austin Butler's portrayal of the singer.

The movie, which is directed by Baz Luhrmann, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on Wednesday.

The Wrap said Butler "throws himself into the performance", and Total Film predicted an Oscar nomination.

But Vanity Fair said Butler is "the only thing that works" while IndieWire called the film "deliriously awful".

The Telegraph's Robbie Collin awarded the film four stars, writing: "Yes, it's a bright and splashy jukebox epic with an irresistible central performance from Austin Butler.

"But in that signature Luhrmann way, it veers in and out of fashion on a scene-by-scene basis: it's the most impeccably styled and blaringly gaudy thing you'll see all year, and all the more fun for it."

In another four-star review, Kevin Maher of the Times said Elvis is "easily Luhrmann's best movie since Romeo + Juliet". "The power in the musical numbers is drawn from Butler's turn but also from Luhrmann, who edits with the kind of frenetic rhythms that are almost impossible to resist (feet will tap)," he said.

"They are the spine-tingling highlights that make the entire project a must-see movie."

Butler reportedly beat Harry Styles, Ansel Elgort and Miles Teller when he was cast as Presley in 2019.

The Independent's Clarisse Loughrey praised Butler's performance, writing that the actor "makes a compelling argument for the power of Elvis, at a time when the musician's arguably lost a little of his cultural cachet".

"Butler has the looks, the voice, the stance and the wiggle nailed down, but what's truly impressive is that indescribable, undistillable essence of Elvis-ness - magnetic and gentle and fierce, all at the same time," she said.

The star's portrayal was described as "wildly physical but never cartoonish or disrespectful" by Steve Pond in The Wrap. But, he continued: "It's not really [Butler's] fault that he doesn't look like Elvis, that his singing voice can't really get close to Elvis and that the makeup, hair styling and wardrobe used to get him in the ballpark mostly makes him look like an Elvis impersonator."

Some reviews were far more critical.

IndieWire's David Ehrlich said: "If only this 159-minute eyesore... a sadistically monotonous super-montage in which a weird Flemish guy manipulates some naïve young greaser over and over and over again until they both get sad and die - were gracious enough to be as short in any other respect.

"It's hard to find even ironic enjoyment in something this high on its own supply; something much less interested in how its namesake broke the rules than it is in how its director does, and something tirelessly incapable of finding any meaningful overlap between the two."

There was a lukewarm response from Variety's Owen Gleiberman, who said: "What Elvis never quite shows us, at least not until its superior second half, is what was going on inside Elvis Presley.

"For a while, the film plays like a graphic novel on amphetamines, skittering over the Elvis iconography but remaining playfully detached from his soul.

"Butler does a reasonably good impersonation of Elvis's sultry velvet drawl. Yet his resemblance to Elvis never quite hits you in the solar plexus."

He concluded: "Luhrmann has made a woefully imperfect but at times arresting drama that builds to something moving and true. By the end, the film's melody has been unchained."

The Guardian's Peter Bradshaw agreed, describing Elvis as "another pointless explosion of super-spangly sparkles in celluloid form".

"It's not a movie so much as 159-minute trailer for a film called Elvis - a relentless, frantically flashy montage, epic and yet negligible at the same time, with no variation of pace."

Tom Hanks stars in the film as Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker, who also narrates the story.

Hanks' portrayal is "arguably the least appealing performance of his career", according to the Hollywood Reporter's David Rooney.

"It's a big risk to tell your story through the prism of a morally repugnant egotist, a financial abuser who used his manipulative carnival-barker skills to control and exploit his vulnerable star attraction," he wrote.

"Many will dismiss this film's unrelenting flamboyance as bombastic Baz in ADHD overdrive, a work of shimmering surfaces that refuses to stop long enough to get under its subject's skin. But as a tribute from one champion of outrageous showmanship to another, it dazzles."

Screen Daily's Tim Grierson said: "Butler isn't very successful in suggesting what Presley was like off stage, in part because Elvis' screenplay tends to zip through crucial moments in his life without offering much insight."

But he said the film overall looks "wondrous", praising Catherine Martin's costumes and production design and cinematographer Mandy Walker, who Grierson said "shines during the concert scenes, stripping the shows of musty nostalgia and transforming them into vibrant, urgent experiences".

There was also praise for the supporting cast, with Deadline's Pete Hammond writing: "Olivia De Jonge is superb as Priscilla Presley, especially in moments where she angrily confronts Elvis with his increasing drug addictions."

He also singled out Kelvin Harrison Jr and Alton Mason, who play BB King and Little Richard respectively - who Hammond notes were both "among the Black artists who so clearly influenced Elvis". "Hanks goes for it and nails the enigma of Parker, even if for fans his authentic accent may be a bit disconcerting," he added. "He dives in, subtly showing us a slippery manipulator whose decisions about Presley's career might also be connected in part to hiding his own shady past and gambling addictions."

But the Evening Standard's Charlotte O'Sullivan noted: "Parker's voiceover, as he guides us through Elvis' early years, can be irritating. He's socially conservative, Presley's a loose cannon. We get it. But as the battle between him and his talented young charge hots up, so does the movie.

"The director does undoubtedly simplify the story, whitewashing, for example, Elvis' sleazy sexual tastes," she added. "But the movie isn't simplistic."

Luhrmann's frenetic directing style was highlighted by Justin Chang of the LA Times, who said "his flamboyant stylistic excesses are very much of a piece with Elvis' own".

"The performance sequences crackle with live-wire energy, even when Luhrmann is drawing them out or even slowing them down.... Sometimes Luhrmann will play the concert footage in sizzling black-and-white; sometimes he'll split the screen not into quadrants but octants. It's all a bit much, which means it's just right."

The director's previous film credits include Moulin Rouge, Romeo + Juliet, The Great Gatsby and Strictly Ballroom.

"Perhaps it's by design that the Elvis Presley of the new biopic Elvis is rendered so unknowable," said Vanity Fair's Richard Lawson. "There's lots of him in Baz Luhrmann's film, swaggering and crooning and sweating.

"But little of his inner life, the fire uniquely his, is communicated to the audience. It's a film about a legend that keeps him just that: an idea, thrashing away at a distance."

Jordan Farley of Total Film said: "Some will no doubt take umbrage with the runtime, clocking in as it does at over 150 minutes, but a lack of incident is not the problem - there's enough to Elvis' story to fill 150 hours.

"The issue is that much of interest is skipped over by well-edited montages, or a time jump bridged by a newspaper headline to fill in the gaps. Elvis's initial rise to chart-topping fame is relegated to one such montage, as are most of his Hollywood years.

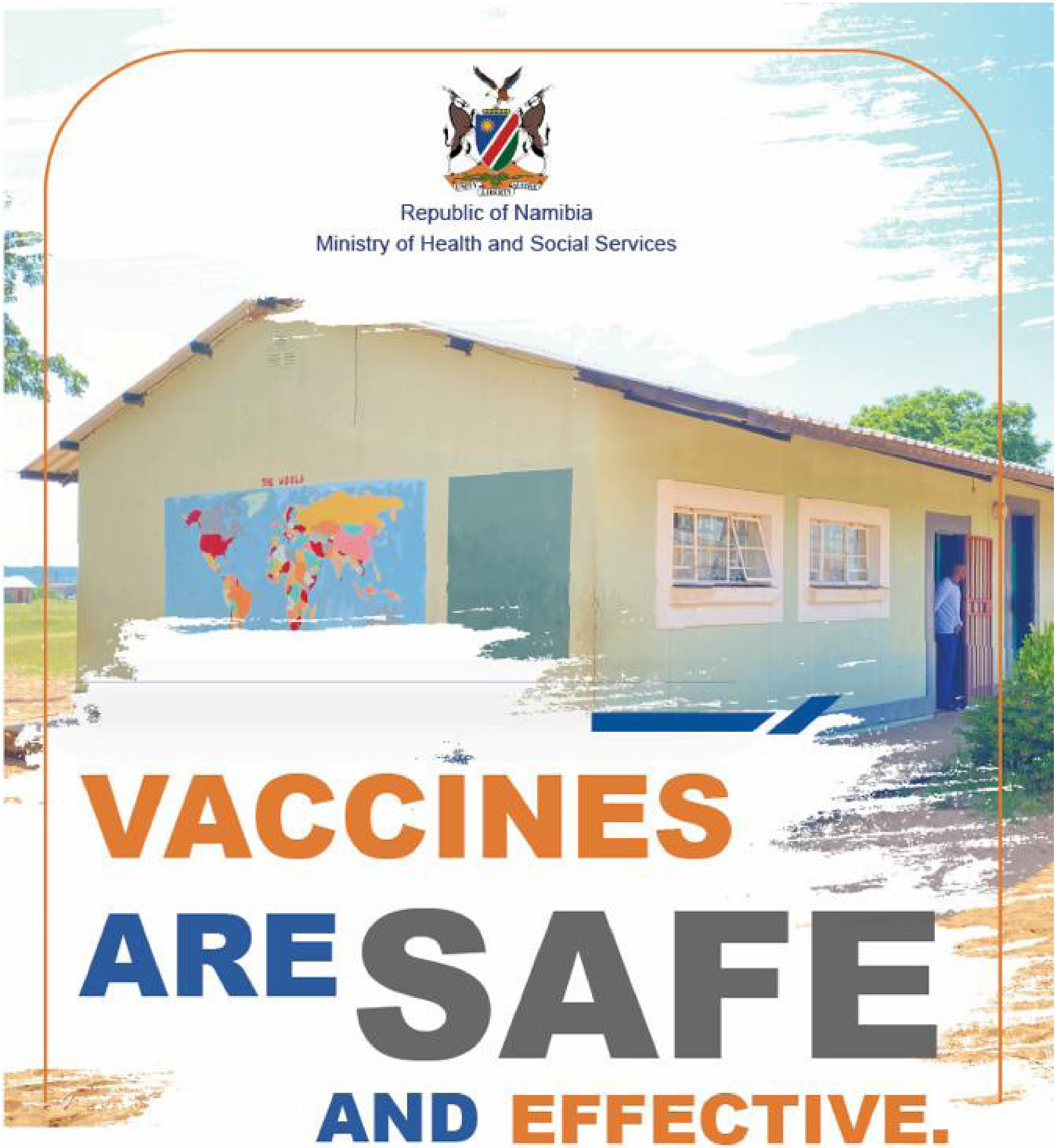
"The ultimate sense is that nothing happens gradually in Elvis' life - this is a life story in fast forward, but such is the energy that Luhrmann cultivates. At least it's never boring."

-BBC



Republic of Namibia

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Big Lips

The Govt Must Not Come in For Genocide Money, But For The Stolen Artefacts Too

When Big Lips says that Africans are not respected, most people do not see anything with everything going on. How does one stomach and digest the disrespect where the Germans are saying they will loan what they stole from the Namas and Hereros to Namibia?

Those who have not heard about what I am talking about, let me give it to you now. This is about the Berlin Ethnological Museum that says it would loan to Namibia 23 ancient pieces of jewellery, tools, and other objects to the National Museum of Namibia.

The German museum wants to loan a three-headed drinking vessel, a doll wearing a traditional dress and various spears, hairpieces and other fashion accessories.

All these were robbed from Namas and Hereros by the Germans who slaughtered the tribespeople between 1904 and 1908 when the Schutztruppe landed on the Namibian shores.

In addition to stealing Namibia's treasures, German colonizers plundered resources and committed genocide in Africa, killing tens of thousands of natives, particularly in the 1904-1908 massacres.

The available records say that the Schutztruppe killed more than 65 000 Hereros and more than 10 000 Namas, while about six million died during the holocaust.

The 65 000 Hereros killed made up 80 per cent of the total Herero population at the time, and the 10 000 Namas killed were 50 per cent of the Nama population.

It isn't easy to understand why the government is acting too soft on the Germans looking at all these figures. And now the Germans say they can only loan to the owners what the colonial master stole from Namibians!

Why is it that when it comes to artefacts, the fight is left to the tribes affected by the genocide, but the government takes the lead when it comes to discussing money issues?

For example, in 2011, Herero and Nama tribal leaders went to Berlin to collect 20 skulls. The skulls belonged to some of the 300 people who were beheaded between 1904 and 1908. The skulls were taken to German as trophies between 1909 and 1914. Some Namas and Hereros were killed during battles, while others died of starvation, thirst and disease in camps set up in the desert.

The skulls brought back in 2011 had been in archives at the Medical History Museum of the Charite Hospital in Berlin. Some were found at the Freiburg University.

According to German researchers, the skulls collected in 2011 belonged to 11 Namas and nine Hereros. There were four women, 15 men and a boy.

I have in this column spoken about how Israel has never forgotten what the Germans did to the Jews during Second World War. The Jews are hunting down the Germans who were actively involved in the holocaust until this day.

Of course, the numbers of those killed by the German Schutztruppe in Namibia and those killed by Hitler's Nazis differ; the fact is that people were killed.

To worsen the situation, there is a government that has a long and big heart which does not seem to understand the pain the Nama and Herero descendants feel still today.

I feel the government should know something about the 1904-1908 genocide - that is, the restoration of the Namas and Hereros' dignity. No amount of money can buy dignity.

The Namibian situation reminds me of what Menachem Begin, who later became the Prime Minister of Israel, said in 1952 after the then Prime Minister David Ben Gurion was fighting for reparations from Germans.

Begin said: In this generation of ours that we call the last of bondage and first of redemption—in this generation that we have been privileged to gain back our dignity, in which we emerged from slavery to freedom—you are ready, for few millions of contaminated dollars and for impure goods, to deprive us of dignity that we have earned.

How different is this from what some Namibians have been saying after the government agreed with the German government on an amount to be paid for the genocide?

The African Union's conflict early warning system is no more. What now?

Since 2017, the African Union (AU) has undergone institutional reforms to increase its efficiency and effectiveness. The gist of these reforms was proposed by the so-called Kagame Report commissioned by the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government.

An advisory team led by Rwanda president Paul Kagame took on "the chronic failure to see through African Union decisions". This had led to the AU being seen as having limited relevance to African citizens.

The team also addressed financial overdependence on external partners, the underperformance of some organs and institutions, and the ambiguous working relations between the African Union Commission, and regional entities and member states.

One reform proposed was the merging of the Political Affairs and Peace and Security departments in 2021. It's now called the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security.

However, the result was that one of the five pillars of the African Peace and Security Architecture – the Continental Early Warning System – has disappeared. Established in 2002, the early warning system was created to anticipate and prevent conflicts in the continent.

It was recently argued that the warning system's functions would be incorporated across the new portfolio department. However, its major functions can no longer be performed. These include coordination and harmonisation with regional economic communities, and assisting member states in conflict analysis and mitigation.

As a former advisor to the African Union's Peace and Security Department, I am deeply concerned about the effect this will have on the continent's capability to prevent violent conflict. It is impossible to prove which conflicts were avoided because of the early warning system. However, in my view, its outputs ensured less violence than might otherwise have been.

The warning system produced analytical reports that informed the chairperson of the African Union Commission and the Peace and Security Council on impending conflict situations. It also established regular, direct relations with the council and helped regional economic communities develop their own early warning systems.

It further facilitated early warning exchanges across the continent, and helped member states address issues of structural stability and root causes of conflict.

The continental system additionally offered regular analyses in pre-election situations that had in the past escalated to violent conflict.

Establishing the system

The African Union's Continental Early Warning System became operational in 2012, 10 years after its formation. This followed the careful design of its systems, workflow and structure.

Historically, the core of the system was the Conflict Management Centre. This was set up in 1993 for the Organisation of African Unity, the AU's predecessor.

The early warning system functions included information monitoring and collection. Second was conflict and cooperation analyses. Third was the formulation of response options for decision-makers. The first was carried out by the so-called Situation Room while the second and third were carried out by analysts.

The early warning analyses were to be used by the chairperson of the African Union Commission:

to advise the Peace and Security Council on potential conflicts and threats to peace and security in Africa, and recommend the best course of action.

Early warning practices

Numerous early warning reports were developed, such as the automated Africa News Brief or Daily Reports. There were also in-depth, analytical early warning reports that offered concrete policy recommendations.

The early warning system also developed a strong dimension of long-term conflict prevention practices. It resulted in strategies that countries could use to assess their potential for conflict and develop mitigation strategies. In 2017 and 2018, Ghana became the first country to voluntarily go through this process.

Another problem to be overcome was the 'silo mentality' among African Union Commission stakeholders who were acting in isolation to each other. For this purpose, a separate conflict prevention framework was established in 2015. The task force was partly operational, until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the continent.

In engaging decision-makers, the Continental Early Warning System developed a horizon-scanning practice. From 2016, it briefed the Peace and Security Council twice a year. However, this was also discontinued during the pandemic.

The effect of institutional reform

The Continental Early Warning System was unfortunately obliterated under the broad AU reforms in 2021 that created a new department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security.

The Situation Room has been retained, but the early warning system analysts were redeployed to regional desks. There are now three regional desks: West and Central Africa, East and Southern Africa, and North Africa. They are staffed by five analysts each.

Obviously, they are preoccupied with conflict management in the many cases of violent extremism and terrorism, or unconstitutional changes of government. They simply don't have the time and structure to also do early warnings. This means the dedicated place for early warnings is gone.

So, what are the practical implications of these decisions?

First, the question arises: can these rather dramatic changes be made without the African Union Assembly revising the Peace and Security Council Protocol? As stated earlier, the early warning system is one of five statutory pillars of the African Peace and Security Architecture.

Second, it's not clear what role the system's technical staff will play within the union's peace and security apparatus. Or what becomes of the tools that have been developed and customised for data collection and analysis over the past 13 years.

Third, there is no dedicated unit left to prepare the statutory horizon-scanning briefings for the Peace and Security Council.

Fourth, there's no unit in place to continue assisting member states to identify and address structural vulnerabilities at an early stage to build more resilient and prosperous nations. This core function is quite different from the work of the African Peer Review Mechanism and cannot be replaced by it.

Finally, there's no indication which organ will now coordinate and harmonise the early warning relationship between the African Union and regional economic communities.

A possible future

The current structure of the new Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security basically doesn't fulfil the early warning mandate of the Peace and Security Council Protocol.

It also doesn't address the ambitious aims spelled out in the African Peace and Security Architecture Roadmap and the Master Roadmap on Silencing the Guns.

The African Union had years of steady progress in implementing the early warning dimensions of the Peace and Security Council Protocol, and even going beyond it. There is a strong need for its decision-makers to realise that these early warning functions and practices must be re-organised quickly, systematically and substantively.

On the issue of early warning and conflict prevention, the well-intended institutional reform of the African Union has gone a step too far.

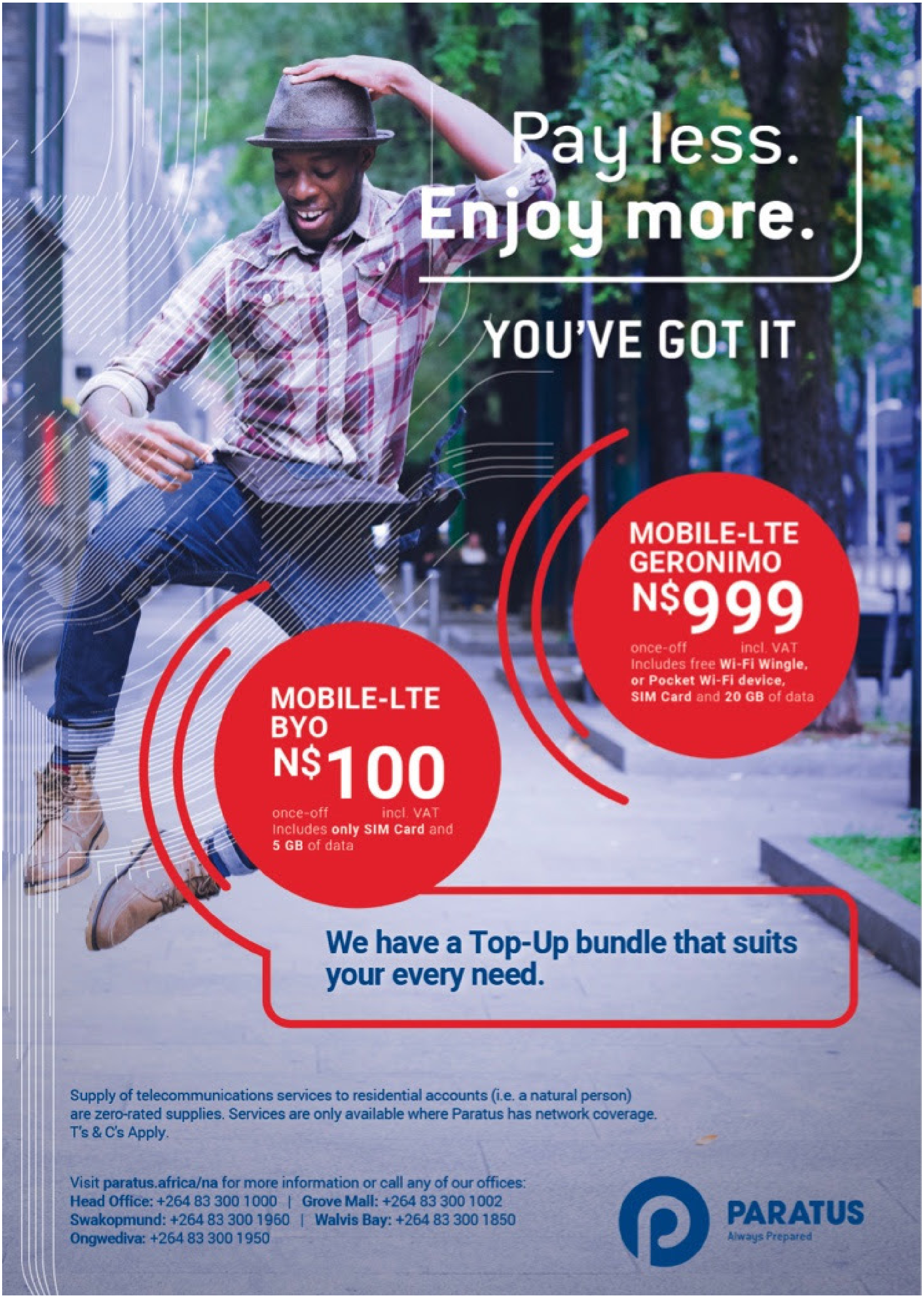
However, this can be easily rectified.

A possible way forward can be borrowed from another structure that was dissolved under the new organogram: the African Union Border Programme.

The border programme had developed an important track record in addressing ill-demarcated borders and border conflict in amicable ways. Its "need for dedicated capacity and required resources" was recently acknowledged during a meeting of the Specialised Technical Committee on Defence, Safety and Security held in Ethiopia on 12 May 2022.

Taking stock of the achievements and current needs of the continental early warning system should follow soon.

Ulf Engel
Professor, Institute of African Studies, University of Leipzig


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Pfizer to offer low-cost drugs to 45 lower-income nations

US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer has said it would sell its patented drugs on a not-for-profit basis to the world's poorest countries, as part of a new initiative announced at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

"The time is now to begin closing this gap" between people with access to the latest treatments and those going without, chief executive Albert Bourla told attendees at the Swiss mountain resort gathering on Wednesday.

"What we discovered through the pandemic was that supply was not enough to resolve the issues that these countries are having," Bourla said.

He noted that billions of doses of the company's COVID-19 vaccine, Comirnaty, have been offered for free to low-income countries, mainly through the US government, but those doses cannot be used right now.

"An Accord for a Healthier World" focuses on five areas: infectious diseases, cancer, inflammation, rare diseases and women's health – where Pfizer currently holds 23 patents, including the likes of Comirnaty and Paxlovid, its COVID vaccine and oral treatment.

"This transformational commitment will increase access to Pfizer-patented medicines and vaccines available in the United States and the European Union to nearly 1.2 billion people," Angela Hwang, group president of the Pfizer Biopharmaceuticals Group, told the AFP news agency.

Five countries: Rwanda, Ghana, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda have committed to joining, with a further 40 countries – 27 low-income and 18 lower-middle-income – eligible to sign bilateral agreements to participate.

"Pfizer's commitment sets a new standard, which we hope to see emulated by others," Rwanda's President Paul Kagame said.

But he added that "additional investments and strengthening of Africa's health systems and pharmaceutical regulators" would also be needed.

Seven years behind

Developing countries experience 70 percent of the world's disease burden but receive only 15 percent of global health spending, leading to devastating outcomes.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, one child in 13 dies before their fifth birthday, compared with one in 199 in high-income countries.

Cancer-related mortality rates are also far higher in low- and middle-income countries – causing more fatalities in Africa every year than malaria.

All this is set against a backdrop of limited access to the latest drugs.

Essential medicines and vaccines typically take four to seven years longer to reach the poorest countries, and supply chain issues and poorly resourced health systems make it difficult for patients to receive them once approved.

"The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the complexities of access to quality healthcare and the resulting inequities," said Hwang.

"We know there are a number of hurdles that countries have to overcome to gain access to our medicines. That is why we have initially selected five pilot countries to identify and come up with operational solutions and then share those learnings with the remaining countries."

'Very good model'

Specifically, the focus will be on overcoming regulatory and procurement challenges in the countries, while ensuring adequate levels of supply from Pfizer's side.

The "not-for-profit" price tag takes into account the cost to manufacture and transport of each product to an agreed-upon port of entry, with Pfizer charging only manufacturing and minimum distribution costs.

If a country already has access to a product at a lower price tier, for example, vaccines supplied by GAVI, a public-private global partnership, that lower price will be maintained.

Hwang acknowledged that even an at-cost approach could be challenging for the most cash-strapped countries, and "this is why we have reached out to financial institutions to brief them on the Accord and ask them to help support country-level financing".

Pfizer will also reach out to other stakeholders – including governments, multilateral organisations, NGOs and even other pharmaceuticals – to ask them to join the Accord.

It is also using funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to advance



work on a vaccine against Group B Streptococcus (GBS), the leading cause of stillbirth and newborn mortality in low-income countries.

"This type of accord is a very good model, it's going to help get medicines out," Gates told the Davos conference, adding that "partnerships with companies like Pfizer have been key to the progress we have made" on efforts like vaccines.

Earlier this month, the head of the World Health Organization called on Pfizer to make its COVID-19 treatment more widely available in poorer countries.

Comirnaty brought in nearly $37bn in sales last year, and analysts expect the company's COVID-19 treatment Paxlovid to add almost $24bn this year, according to the data firm FactSet.

-Al Jazeera



Cambodia's microloan sector under scrutiny as poor drown in debt



■ Phom Bopha

When Sam's hard-up relatives needed money to buy a plot of land and start their own business several years ago, they turned to Sathapana Bank in Siem Reap to borrow about $20,000.

Now the Siem Reap tuk-tuk driver and his wife are struggling to make monthly repayments of about $500.

"We do not have the capacity to pay, so we missed payments," Sam, who asked to use a pseudonym, told Al Jazeera. "We could only pay a small amount of the interest."

Sam and his family are not alone.

Cambodia's microfinancing sector, which purports to alleviate poverty by offering financial services to people excluded from traditional banking, is under scrutiny as the watchdog of the International Finance Corporation investigates complaints that the body's funding of microfinance lenders has caused "grave harm" to local communities.

The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) and Equitable Cambodia (EC), two local advocacy groups, have accused the World Bank's sister organisation of "reckless investments" that "destroyed lives and wrecked communities".

The complaint, which the IFC's Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO) accepted for review earlier this month, claims the financial institution provided $400m to six Cambodian lenders over the last five years without meeting its obligation to "conduct due diligence and supervise projects to ensure compliance with performance standards".

The lack of due diligence, the NGOs say, has fuelled overindebtedness that has resulted in child labour and families being forced to sell their homes and land.

For many borrowers like Sam and his wife, their financial troubles had begun before they visited a lender.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, Sam made from $13-15 per day, and his wife made $2-$5. On an especially good day, the couple could make up to $40 combined.

When tourists stopped arriving during the pandemic, Sam's income dried up and his wife lost her job in a beauty salon.

"During COVID, I made nothing some days, and some days it was $2.5 to $5."

Struggling to pay the bank and feed his family at the same time, Sam, 33, went to Thailand to work illegally in 2020. But within a few months of getting a job at a fruit factory, the work dried up and he was forced to return home.

"The bank only comes to pressure us for money," he said, adding that the bank has suggested he sell some land he owns. "They don't care where the money is."

"They discussed with us, took photos of the land, and advertised to see if anyone is interested, so we could sell and pay back the bank," Sam added.

Many of Sam's neighbours are in a similar situation.

Ta Nou, a village chief in Siem Reap, said that about 90 percent of residences in his community of about 600 people had borrowed money from a microlending institution.

Some borrowers have since gone to work in Thailand, he said, with one family putting their house on sale to cover their debts.

"I feel sorry for and pity them," Nou, who asked to use a pseudonym, told Al Jazeera.

Since 2019 LICADHO, EC and other NGOs have been investigating the problem of excessive indebtedness in Cambodia.

"The serious human rights violations caused by the sector have been ongoing for years, and we hope the detailed information provided in the complaint will serve as a wake-up call to the IFC," said Eang Vuthy, executive director of Equitable Cambodia, said in the statement in May.

In their CAO case, LICADHO and EC have the option of choosing a dispute resolution process or a compliance appraisal, which would lead to further investigation into the allegations.

The IFC told Al Jazeera the microfinance sector in Cambodia has boosted incomes, created jobs and helped people expand their businesses, but acknowledged "legitimate concerns about indebtedness".

"In Cambodia, we have worked with the National Bank of Cambodia to set up a credit bureau to help avoid situations of multiple borrowings and unsustainable debt levels and to provide information that helps stamp out aggressive lending practices," a spokesperson said.

"IFC welcomes a productive dialogue with the CAO and other stakeholders if the complaint proceeds as part of the CAO's process."

'Zero-tolerance policy'

Kaing Tongngy, a spokesman for the Cambodian Microfinance Association (CMA), said that the association has a "zero-tolerance policy for any malpractice by our members" and is looking into the complaint.

"Any breach of the code of conduct may result in termination or even worse," he said. "CMA is working with our members and stakeholders to strengthen mechanisms and monitor their performance to ensure they fully adhere to the codes of conduct and respect the rights of their customers."

Sok Voeun, chief executive officer of LOLC Cambodia, one of the six financial institutions named in the CAO complaint, said the lender has written off more than $4.5m in debt for 4,600 hardship cases.

"LOLC is aware of the complaints submitted to the International Finance Corporation and welcomes the opportunity to support the investigation by their Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO)," he told Al Jazeera.

"We are confident the investigation will conclude that responsible microfinance providers such as LOLC have an important role to play in supporting economic development and promoting financial inclusion in countries like Cambodia where many microentrepreneurs would otherwise be forced to rely on unregulated money lenders."

Another lender named in the complaint, ACLEDA Bank, described the report filed by the two NGOs as "too politicised and baseless".

"It's routinely issued before each election, I noted," In Channy, president and group managing director, told Al Jazeera. "It lacks [professionalism], and the researchers never understand the best practices of banking and finance in accordance with the law on banking and finance in Cambodia."

The other four lenders did not respond to inquiries or could not be reached for comment.

Milford Bateman, a visiting professor of economics at Juraj Dobrila University of Pula in Croatia, said microfinance institutions around the world have lost touch with reality.

"The MFIs have everywhere around the world lost touch with their pro-poor developmental roots as a result of being privatised, commercialised, and especially bought up by foreign investors keen to maximise profits in a short period of time," Bateman told Al Jazeera.

Naly Pilorge, outreach director of LICADHO, said predatory microlenders have created an "over-indebtedness crisis" in Cambodia.

"Because so many of these overinflated microloans are collateralised with borrowers' land titles, they often are pressured to resort to harmful practices such as child labour, migration, and in some cases the sale of land to repay these microloans," Pilorge said.

"What we want from all parties – the MFIs and banks, investors such as the IFC, and the Cambodian government – is for Cambodia's microloan sector to do no harm by respecting the human rights of all borrowers."

For Sam and his wife, any change in the sector will come too late.

Resigned to not being able to repay their bank, the couple has decided to sell their land.

"I've put the land on sale," he said. "If anyone is interested, they can have a look at the land."

-Al Jazeera



New spinning wheel may boost India's hand-woven pashmina business



■ Bilal Kuchay

It was in October that Shaista Bilal, a resident of the old quarters of Srinagar in Kashmir, first heard of a spinning wheel that works by a pedal, to yarn pashmina.

The 37-year-old homemaker had for years, in her adolescence, spun raw pashmina into threads on a traditional wooden spinning wheel, called yinder in Kashmiri. On that, it would take her about two months to yarn enough pashmina for a single shawl.

Once the pashmina was ready, artisans would weave the hand-spun wool into fine-quality shawls or fabric famously known across the world as cashmere, a process that would take another week.

Shaista had given up pashmina spinning almost two decades ago when she joined college and did not resume the work after her marriage. The process of spinning pashmina was too tedious and gave little financial returns to the newlywed.

Now in need of money, Shaista went back to yarn pashmina once again, this time at Me & K, a Srinagar-based luxury international cashmere brand. There she works on the new yinder which has nearly halved the time taken to yarn about 250 grams of pashmina, the amount needed for one shawl, to about 40 days from about two months.

"There is a huge difference between the two," Shaista told Al Jazeera sitting behind a yinder fitted with a pedal, calling it "very beneficial" as it helps her spin more pashmina in less time.

"This is very comfortable because it allows you to remain seated on a bench unlike sitting on the floor. Even the women who have backaches can freely work on this."

That is the bet that Shaista's employer and the state government are making – that the ease of the new yinder, a quicker turnaround and the ability to earn more will help revive the fading art of spinning pashmina by hand.

A dying business

Pashmina shawls are woven from the fleece of domesticated, high altitude Himalayan Capra hircus goats, a special species of goat found in the Himalayan range in Tibet, Ladakh and Nepal.

Spinning pashmina and shahtoosh was once a household affair in Kashmir, primarily the domain of young girls and women, and in the 1990s there were tens of thousands of women involved in the process across Kashmir, said Mahmood Shah, director of the state government's Kashmir Handicraft and Handloom Department. But because of poor wages – one rupee per thread – most women eventually left the business and there are now only a few thousand still spinning pashmina, he said.

"This spinning [of pashmina], you can say 99 percent was done by the women here. Their contribution has been immense in the trade," Shah told Al Jazeera.

Apart from the poor wages, competition from mechanised spinning mills in Kashmir and Punjab state also played a role in decimating the handwoven industry. For instance, while it cost $370 to spin by hand one kilogram of pashmina, the same thing could be done for a miniscule $30 on a mechanised mill, Mujtaba Kadri, founder of Me & K, told Al Jazeera.

The resulting rise of cheap pashmina shawls decimated the handwoven industry and led to the "marginalisation of women artisans," Shah said.

Another blow to the spinners and the weavers came in 2000 when the Indian government banned shahtoosh shawls, the most sought after for their fineness which came at a premium, following reports that Tibetan antelopes were killed for their hair.

"When the ban on shahtoosh happened, it led to some degree of marginalisation," of the spinners, Shah said. But when the mechanical spinning machines came, "the craft reached the verge of collapse," he added. For instance, in the financial year ending March 2021, the state exported shawls worth 1.7 billion rupees ($23.5m), a decline of more than 70 percent from the year ending March 2013 when it exported shawls worth 6.2 billion rupees.

A turnaround?

Now the Kashmir government is trying to change things. Apart from introducing the new yinder in October, it has also increased the rates for the hand-spinning of pashmina to 2.5 rupees a thread, up from one rupee.

"If the women do not earn a decent wage component why should they do it? Unless and until it's lucrative for them, they will not do it," Shah said.

The government is also working on bringing in a minimum support price, a government regulated pricing which would set the starting price for a single piece of pashmina shawl at 12,000 rupees ($160) to ensure better income for the sellers. Both the government and the sellers are betting on the new spinning wheel to help revive the art and the business.

"This new machine is a game changer," said Me & K's Kadri, adding it is bringing more women back to the old traditional hand spinning of pashmina "which is a good thing for this industry."

Kadri, who has been in the shawl trade for more than two decades and exports the hand-made wrap across the world, has trained dozens of women, including Shaista, to handle the new spinning wheels that come fitted with a pedal. So far he has provided for free 40 units to women, he said. One unit costs about $80.

The Kashmir Handicraft and Handloom Department has also set up training centres across Kashmir to train women on the new spinning wheel in order to revive the "good old days" of pashmina work.

Misbranding and GI Tag

Officials at the handicraft department are also trying to restore the premium on pashmina which cannot be spun on a machine or a loom due to its fragility, they say. To save labour costs, some traders reinforced raw pashmina with plastic fibres allowing them to use the looms for faster production.

The shawls are then soaked in a mild acid to dissolve the plastic. "And when that happens, it leads to the shrinkage of the shawl and lint appears within six months," Shah said. "The quality of the shawls has gone down considerably."

The US standard for good quality cashmere is 11-18 microns of thickness. The Kashmiri handspun pashmina's thickness is between 11-15 microns.

Government officials are also trying to restore the premium of the pashmina tag. Amritsari shawls, as the machine-spun imitation shawls are called, have affected the sales of genuine Kashmiri shawls since they are much cheaper. Several traders from Kashmir have also bought into the economics and buy cheap shawls from Amritsar, or make them on their own mechanised mills, which they sell in Kashmir at high prices like pashminas.

To fight the misbranding, the local government brought in a geographical indication (GI) tag – a form of intellectual property or certification given to certain goods or products from a specific region.

Though Kashmir started GI tagging pashmina products in 2013, it is only in the past year that government officials have stepped up their efforts on that front.

Every hand-spun and hand-woven product goes into a laboratory where its thickness, quality and material is checked under a microscope and through various other parameters.

Once a shawl is found to be both hand spun and hand woven, a tag is attached with a unique eight-digit code, which is linked to a database that shows where the shawl is from, and who has made it.

"Anyone, anywhere in the world can check through that code whether the shawl is authentic pashmina or hand made," Mohammad Younis, an official at the Pashmina Testing and Quality Certification Center, told Al Jazeera.

Shah said that people can get machine-made shawls anywhere in the world but Kashmir's specialisation is its skill set which needs to be protected.

"The world knows us for our skill set … We have to protect [it]," he said.

-Al Jazeera





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Tech Eagle with Frans
12h00-13h00
Brand Conversation with Sally
13h00-14h30
On the Radar with Dwight
14h30-16h30
Ookundana Dhingi with Helen
16h30-18h30
The Home Run with Frans/ Fanus
18h30-20h00
Business Segment with Gabriel
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Spain, UK say Russian influence in Africa threatens NATO security

Russia's expanding influence and activity in Africa pose a "worrying" threat to the security of NATO countries along with its invasion of Ukraine and must be addressed by the military alliance, the Spanish and British defence ministers have said.

At a joint news conference on Wednesday in Madrid, Spain's Margarita Robles said the expansion of operations by the Russian state and Russian private security companies such as the Wagner Group in countries like Mali and Libya was "very clear" and accused them of fomenting organised crime and terrorism.

"NATO cannot remain indifferent in this situation," she added.

The United Kingdom's Ben Wallace, in Madrid for a bilateral meeting before Spain hosts a crunch NATO summit in late June, said rising instability coupled with hunger in Africa could significantly affect Europe.

"If [Russia] can use migrant flows as a weapon at one end of Europe, they can certainly use it at the other," he said.

He was referring to allegations by Western governments that in last year's European Union border crisis, Russia supported ally Belarus in encouraging thousands of migrants fleeing war in other parts of the world to cross towards Poland in retaliation for EU sanctions.

Wallace echoed Robles's call for NATO to include defence of its southern flank in its new strategic concept, its basic military doctrine which will be drafted at the Madrid summit.

"NATO's strategic concept has to involve the whole of NATO, all the territory it covers through its partnership," he said.

"Russia's army is already exhausted, broken, we see it bringing equipment out of retirement. The Russian navy will be more of a threat, Vladimir Putin will use his navy as a way of intimidating his enemies and that means he will be in other parts including the southern flank," he added.

'Do the right thing'

Wallace also called on Russia to let Ukraine export its grain to help countries where grain scarcity could trigger hunger.

Russia must "do the right thing", Wallace said, and open a grain corridor from Ukraine's Black Sea ports.

On Thursday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko said the country was ready to provide a humanitarian corridor for vessels carrying food to leave Ukraine, in return for the lifting of some sanctions, the Interfax news agency reported.

Wallace rejected the idea of lifting sanctions, and welcomed the suggestion of Black Sea nations, such as Turkey, escorting the Ukraine grain shipments after Moscow ruled out the involvement of Western forces.

"That grain is for everyone, Libya, Yemen, people around the world are relying on that grain to feed themselves," Wallace said. "I call on Russia to do the right thing in the spirit of humanity and let the grain of Ukraine out, stop stealing the grain for its own means. Let's not talk about sanctions, let's do the right thing."

Ukraine's Black Sea ports have been blocked since Russia sent thousands of troops into Ukraine on February 24 and more than 20 million tonnes of grain are stuck in silos in the country.

Before the invasion, Ukraine was seen as the world's breadbasket, exporting 4.5 million tonnes of agricultural produce per month through its ports – 12 percent of the planet's wheat, 15 percent of its corn and half of its sunflower oil.

-Al Jazeera



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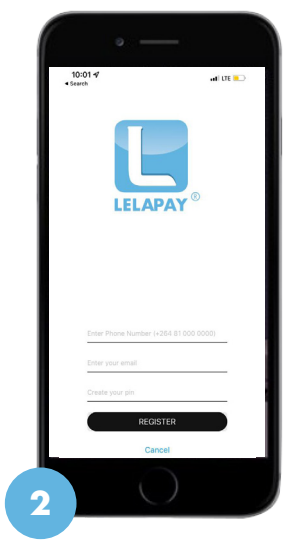
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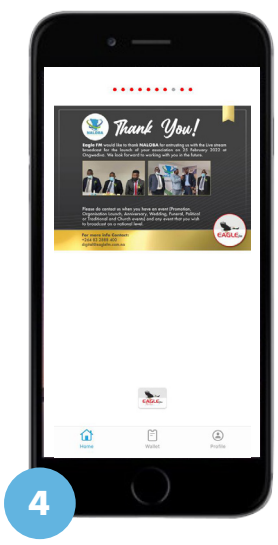
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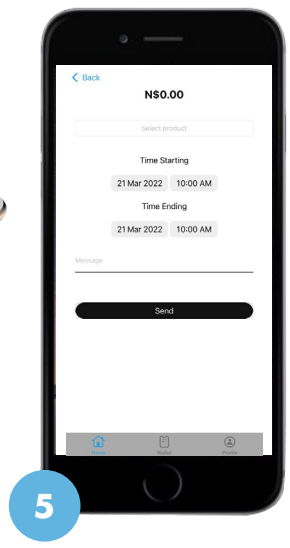
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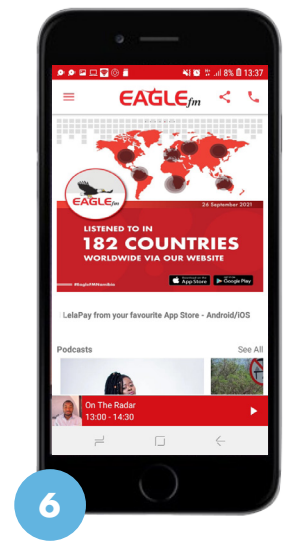
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Gambian government says it will prosecute exiled ex-ruler Jammeh

The Gambian government has said it will prosecute former President Yahya Jammeh for murder, rape, torture and other alleged crimes committed during his more than 20-year rule.
The Ministry of Justice said on Wednesday that it accepted all but two of the 265 recommendations made by a commission that probed alleged crimes committed by the state under the despotic former leader from July 1994 to January 2017.

The commission's report – presented to President Adama Barrow and made public in December – was based on years of witness testimonies.
Jammeh is currently living in exile in Equatorial Guinea, which has no extradition treaty with The Gambia.
The government said it would prosecute all 70 alleged perpetrators named in the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission's twice-delayed report, including former Vice President Isatou Njie-Saidy and members of the so-called "Junglers" hit squad.
"For 22 years, Yahya Jammeh ruled The Gambia with an iron fist," the government wrote in a white paper.

"During his regime, extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, enforced disappearances, and numerous grievous human rights violations became part and parcel of his military Junta."
Al Jazeera's Ahmed Idris, reporting from the capital, Banjul, said "victims, survivors, victims' families, activists, diplomats – everybody came here this morning with expectations that they will be disappointed at the end of the day".
Many said they want to see these recommendations put into action by the government of The Gambia, Idris added.
Emmanuel Daniel Joof, head of Gambia's national human rights commission, said: "We believe seriously that the government will own up, and these recommendations will be implemented."
"We also understand that not everything will be implemented," he told Al Jazeera.
'World is watching'
Meanwhile, Abdoulie Fatty, a former local legal consultant for the commission, called the government's decision "unprecedented".
"This level of acceptance of recommendations by the government is extraordinary," Fatty said.
"The fact that there is a strong emphasis for the prosecution of Jammeh and those who bear the greatest responsibility sends a strong message that government is serious about pursuing him and ensuring that he's held accountable for his crimes," he added.
The government said it was developing a "prosecution strategy" and would set up a special court located within The Gambia, with "the option of holding sittings in other countries".
The truth commission had recommended prosecuting Jammeh and his accomplices in an internationalised tribunal in another West African country.
"Impunity is a kind of incentive that we are not prepared to serve perpetrators," Justice Minister Dawda Jallow said in a speech Wednesday.
"Their resolve to commit these atrocities cannot be stronger than our collective will as a society to hold them to account."
Human rights groups say arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and summary executions became the regime's hallmark.
Testimonies by alleged perpetrators before the truth commission confirmed that some killings were done under Jammeh's direction.

The former president has also been accused of administering phony HIV "treatment" programmes and of the massacre of some 50 migrants in 2005.
The commission recommended prosecuting the former president and 69 other alleged perpetrators. The government had until Wednesday to respond.
Jammeh was forced into exile in early 2017 after his shock electoral defeat to Barrow and a six-week crisis that led to military intervention by other West African states.
Barrow, who was re-elected in December, last year formed a political alliance with Jammeh's former party and nominated two known Jammeh supporters as speaker and deputy speaker of parliament.
"Barrow and his government know that the world is watching, [so] they did not have much choice but to accept the TRRC recommendations," said Nana-Jo N'dow, the founder of an NGO that campaigns against enforced disappearances and summary executions, whose own father disappeared in 2013.
"The question now is whether Barrow follows through on these recommendations, and swiftly."
-Al Jazeera



Nigeria's kidnapping crisis: Should ransom payments be banned?

Having paid a ransom three times to secure the freedom of his loved ones, Nigerian businessman Lawal Ado is not impressed by moves to outlaw payments to kidnappers.
A controversial bill to criminalise ransom payments is the latest attempt to curb the country's spiralling and lucrative kidnapping industry.
It proposes a jail sentence of up to 15 years for anyone who pays a ransom.
Mr Ado said his two daughters were travelling in a police convoy along the Buruku road in Kaduna state, a notorious flashpoint for the criminal gangs, when they were abducted in December.
They were held for 15 weeks, and only freed after he paid a ransom of 10m naira ($24,000, £19,000) in cash, he told the BBC.
A few years ago, his wife was kidnapped from their home in Kaduna city and she was released after he paid 700,000 naira.
His mother - seized while travelling to her home village, also in Kaduna state - was freed after he paid 300,000 naira.
Mr Ado said that when confronted by the reality of armed men threatening the lives of those closest to you, you have no choice but to come up with the cash.
Lawmakers were opposed to ransom payments only because "they have not had a family member kidnapped", he added.
But the lawmakers argue that such payments fuel the kidnapping industry, where criminal gangs randomly seize people and demand anything from $50 to $1m.
Since 2011, kidnappers have collected at least $18m, with more than half of it between 2016 and 2020, says SBM Intelligence, a think-tank based in Lagos.
Detective superintendent Eguaoje Funmilayo of the Federal Criminal Investigations Department (FCID) said families were normally hesitant to involve police, and instead pay ransoms - something that police discourage them from doing.
In a rare success, police earlier this month announced the arrest of two alleged masterminds of the abduction of a group of university students whose parents reportedly paid 200m naira for their release.
Senator Ezenwa Onyewuchi - who proposed the bill, which has been approved by the upper chamber and will now go to the lower house - said kidnapping had become "the most virulent form of banditry in Nigeria and the most pervasive and intractable violent crime in the country".
No place is out of reach for kidnapping gangs, but they are especially prevalent in northern Nigeria. Airports, railways, military barracks and religious places have all been targeted over the years.
Families of kidnap victims often sell their property, take loans from banks and crowdfund to raise the ransom.
Those who do not pay are sometimes killed, and there have been reported cases of kidnappers removing human organs from their victims to sell.
Usman Mbaekwe, who spent five days in a forest in southern Nigeria after a bus he was travelling in was attacked, said the security forces made no attempt to rescue him. He was freed after his wife raised 1m naira (£2,000, $2,400).
In something that could be taken straight from the script of one of Nigeria's famous Nollywood movies, the people delivering the cash were taken on a winding route from Lagos to Sapele, hundreds of kilometres away in the Niger Delta, where they were ordered to drop the money along the road, he said.
Globally, countries like the US and UK rule out ransom payments to kidnappers, arguing that the best way to stop abductions is to remove the incentive.
But countries like France, Germany, Spain and Italy have reportedly paid millions of dollars to free their citizens held hostage by armed gangs in Africa, and elsewhere.
Even the Nigerian federal government is said to have paid huge sums to kidnappers in the past - including to Boko Haram militants to secure the release of some of the Chibok schoolgirls who were kidnapped in 2014, while the Katsina state government reportedly paid for the release of schoolboys seized by armed men in 2020.
More recently, a brazen attack took place on a passenger train travelling between Abuja and Kaduna, in March. At least eight people were killed, and more than 60 are thought to be still held by the gunmen.
The abductors have not asked for a ransom but are making other demands of the government, supporting the argument that outlawing payments will not solve the kidnap crisis.
"Payments of ransom is not the problem here, kidnapping is," said Imran Rufai, whose brother is being held by the train attackers.
Zara Aliyu, whose brother was also abducted from the train, agrees.
"You can only pass such bills where there is adequate security," Ms Aliyu said.
Although it is unclear whether President Muhammadu Buhari supports the bill, he expressed opposition to ransom payments last year.
He said state governments should review their policy of "rewarding bandits with money and vehicles", and called for patience in tackling the crisis.
"We have the capacity to deploy massive force against the bandits in the villages where they operate, but our limitation is the fear of heavy casualties of innocent villagers and hostages," Mr Buhari said.
-BBC



TECHNOLOGY

Big Tech is pouring millions into the wrong climate solution at Davos



■ **Justine Calma**

Alphabet, Microsoft, and Salesforce today pledged $500 million to new climate tech that's supposed to pull carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere to keep it from heating up the planet. It's the latest move by Big Tech to propel the emerging technology forward while painting themselves as global leaders when it comes to taking action on climate change.

Regardless, these companies have a lot of work left to do to deal with their own emissions. Carbon dioxide removal (CDR) isn't the solution for Big Tech's own pollution.

To be sure, the climate crisis has gotten so bad that the United Nations' leading climate experts acknowledge that reducing greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels won't be enough anymore. We'll also have to find ways to draw down tons of CO2 that industry has already pumped into the atmosphere, says a major United Nations climate report published in April.

The UN report, which pulls together the consensus of hundreds of experts across the globe, emphasizes pretty specific, limited uses for CDR. It's primarily intended to address the legacy of pollution that has piled up since the Industrial Revolution and address a small portion of current emissions that are still really difficult to get rid of using clean energy sources.

Specifically, the UN report says, "CDR to counterbalance hard-to-abate residual emissions is unavoidable" in scenarios that limit global warming to a more manageable level of 1.5 degrees Celsius. In climate policy jargon, "hard-to-abate residual emissions" typically come from just a handful of sectors. That includes heavy industry that manufactures things like cement, steel, aluminum, and chemicals. It also extends to heavy-duty transportation like shipping and aviation.

There's just as much pressure on those industries to decarbonize as there is on Big Tech. But there are special considerations for heavy industry because it's still much more difficult to fire up a kiln or fuel a plane with renewable energy. Batteries aren't advanced enough to power large, electrified ships and planes for long distances without weighing them down. Cement is responsible for a significant chunk of global carbon dioxide emissions, but some of that CO2 comes from a chemical reaction in the manufacturing process — not from burning energy. That's why those types of industries, compared to other sectors, might rely more on technologies that remove CO2 after it's already been emitted.

The World Economic Forum launched an initiative last year called the First Movers Coalition — which Microsoft, Salesforce, and Alphabet are members of — that aims to tackle those hard-to-abate emissions.

But for every other polluter outside of those hard-to-abate sectors, including Big Tech, the expectation is that they should prevent the vast majority of — if not eliminate — their emissions. Tech companies might have some residual emissions, perhaps from heavy industry in their supply chains, that they might like to draw down after it's already in the atmosphere. But for tech companies with much of their business and related emissions in data centers, there's little excuse for them not to prevent much of their pollution in the first place.

Tech giants that are hyping up carbon removal say that they're setting up the fledgling CDR market to make it easier for other companies to jump aboard. Getting more backers at this early stage is supposed to make carbon removal more affordable so that it can scale up dramatically.

Back in April, Stripe, Alphabet, Meta, Shopify, and other companies made a $925 million joint commitment to purchase captured carbon this decade. In 2020, Microsoft promised to remove more carbon dioxide than it emits by 2030. Microsoft will "serve as an expert partner by sharing lessons from its carbon removal auctions," the World Economic Forum says of the new $500 million commitment Big Tech made in Davos.

Yet, despite the cascade of new climate pledges from Big Tech, the emissions of many companies continue to grow. Microsoft's emissions, for example, rose from about 11.6 million metric tons of CO2 in the 2020 fiscal year to about 14 million metric tons in its 2021 fiscal year. As its business grew, so too did pollution from the use of Microsoft's devices and cloud services. Salesforces' planet-heating pollution has similarly grown along with its business in its 2022 fiscal year to the equivalent of over 1 million metric tons of CO2.

Largely through carbon offsets, both companies pay to cancel out enough of their emissions so that they can say they're carbon neutral. But offset projects, like forest conservation and tree planting, don't have a good track record of actually permanently removing CO2 from the atmosphere.

Plans to build up the carbon removal market include efforts to try to make it more reliable than traditional offsets. But, for now, the only guaranteed way to stave off the climate crisis is by preventing pollution in the first place. And Big Tech is still responsible for creating a lot of pollution; much of which could be avoided by moving more quickly to clean energy. That deserves as much attention, if not more, as it's giving to CDR.

"We're proud of the strides we've made but we also rely on a global system that needs to change," Max Scher, senior director of sustainability at Salesforce, said in an email to The Verge. "We're focused on what science tells us we must do to limit warming to 1.5C," Scher said, pointing to renewable energy, nature-based solutions, and "carbon removal that we'll need in future decades." Salesforce committed to purchasing $100 million in carbon removal credits as part of the larger pledge today.

Microsoft did not immediately provide comment to The Verge. Neither did Google, whose greenhouse gas emissions have fallen slightly since 2018.

-The Verge





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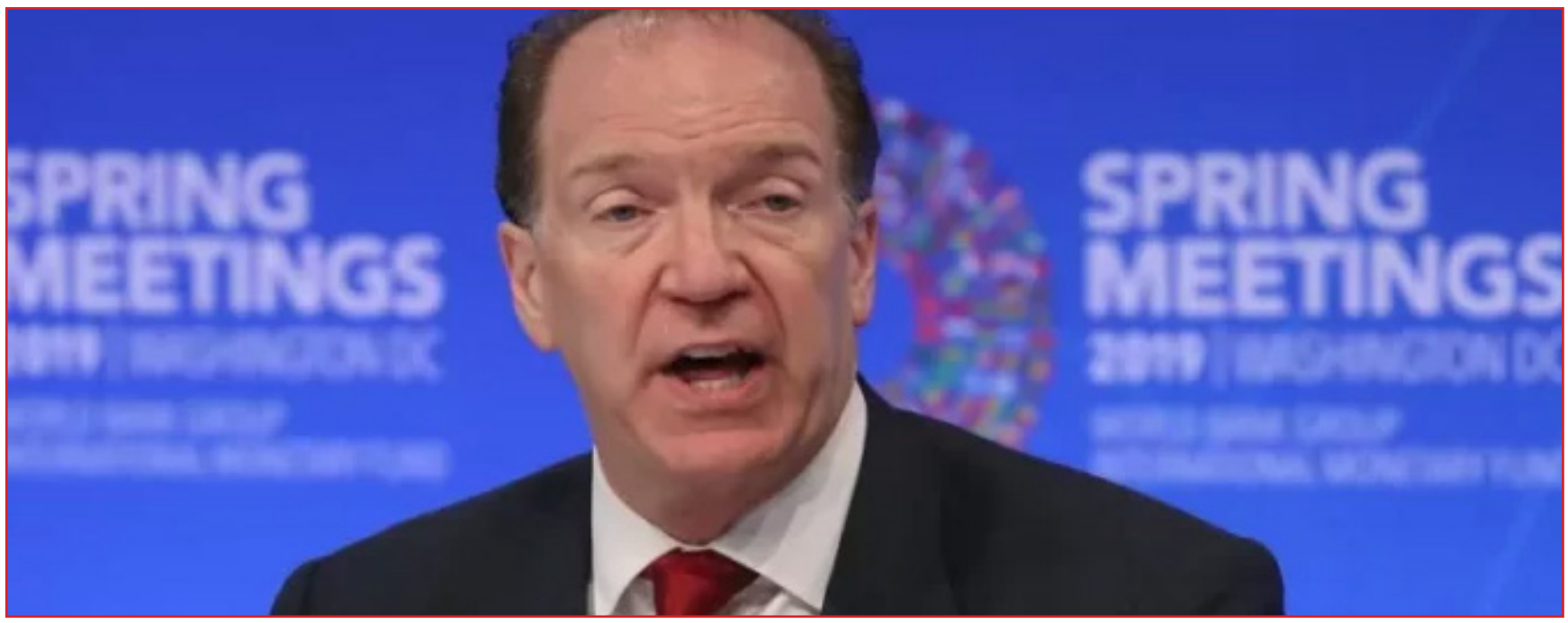
The activists who battled mining with drones

Two indigenous activists from Ecuador who successfully fought against mining on their ancestral lands have won an international environmental prize.
Alex Lucitante and Alexandra Narváez were awarded the Goldman Prize, which recognises grassroots activism.
They used drones and camera traps to document mining on their land.
Their evidence was crucial in securing a legal victory which resulted in 79,000 acres of rainforest being protected from gold mining.
Alex Lucitante, 29, and Alexandra Narváez, 32, are part of the Cofán community, a 1,200-strong indigenous group which has lived in the tropical forest of north-eastern Ecuador for centuries.
Alexandra is a founding member and the first woman to join "La Guardia", a group of 25 volunteers which patrols the area.
It was members of La Guardia who in 2017 first came across heavy machinery on their land along the banks of the Aguarico River, Alex Lucitante told the BBC.
"When we started investigating, we found out that the Ecuadorean state had issued 20 mining licences to several companies and 32 further were waiting to be approved."
Mr Lucitante, a rights defender who wants to become a lawyer, says that when the complaints the Cofán raised with the authorities went unanswered, the community decided to take legal action.
Mr Lucitante says that the aerial images the community took with the help of drones and the detailed record they kept through photo traps of incursions into their territory were key to their fight.
After a legal battle which lasted almost a year, the community achieved a remarkable victory.
A court in their home province of Sucumbíos ruled that the Ecuadorean authorities had failed to seek the free, prior and informed consent of the Cofán needed to legally grant the mining licences.
The court nullified both the existing and pending licences and ordered that the mining activities be stopped.
An appeal by the Ecuadorean government resulted in another victory for the Cofán when the court ruled that they were the ancestral owners of the land and their right to a healthy environment and clean water had been violated.
Alexandra Narváez told the BBC that the ruling was absolutely key to the Cofán "because our territory is our life".
"We know this territory, we have walked through it, we know the sacred sites, the places to go hunting, where animals come to eat. It's full of life and it's everything to us," she explains.
"A Cofán without territory is not Cofán," she says of the importance of their ancestral land to her people.
Ms Narváez says that even before taking on the legal battle against the state, she had to prove herself inside her own community.
"It's been very difficult to be the first woman to join La Guardia, I received a lot of criticism at first from both men and women," she says.
"Traditionally in our community it's been said that women should stay at home looking after the children and the home. So when I said I wanted to be a member of La Guardia, that caused a big stir.
"But I told them, I have to do this not just for myself but for my two daughters and all the women in the community."
Ms Narváez says that eventually she managed to convince the doubters in her community that knowledge traditionally held by women could prove valuable to La Guardia.
"We are the ones who fetch water, who collect medicinal plants and seeds to make our necklaces, and therefore we have a deep connection to our territory.
"The world needs to hear our voice and that voice is saying 'we're going to defend our land with our lives!'"
Ms Narváez is proud that since she opened up the indigenous patrol to women, five more women have joined.
And she says that in moments when she had come close to quitting because she felt she did not spend enough time with her two daughters, it was them who encouraged her to carry on.
"They tell me 'Mum, go on patrol, we're fine and we want to be like you. Once we finish school, we want to wear the Guardia uniform and follow in your footsteps.' That's what gives me strength."
-BBC



World Bank boss warns over global recession

The head of the World Bank has warned that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could cause a global recession as the price of food, energy and fertiliser jump.
David Malpass told a US business event on Wednesday that it is difficult to "see how we avoid a recession".
He also said that a series of coronavirus lockdowns in China is adding to concerns about a slowdown.
His comments are the latest warning over the rising risk that the world economy may be set to contract.
"As we look at the global GDP... it's hard right now to see how we avoid a recession," Mr Malpass said, without giving a specific forecast.
"The idea of energy prices doubling is enough to trigger a recession by itself," he added.
Last month, the World Bank cut its global economic growth forecast for this year by almost a full percentage point, to 3.2%.
GDP, or Gross Domestic Product, is a measure of economic growth. It is one of the most important ways of measuring how well, or badly, an economy is performing and is closely watched by economists and central banks.
It helps businesses to judge when to expand and recruit more workers or invest less and cut their workforces.
Governments also use it to guide decisions on everything from tax to spending. It is a key gauge, along with inflation, for central banks when considering whether or not to raise or lower interest rates.
Mr Malpass also said that many European countries were still too dependent on Russia for oil and gas.
That's even as Western nations push ahead with plans to reduce their dependence on Russian energy.
He also told a virtual event organised by the US Chamber of Commerce that moves by Russia to cut gas supplies could cause a "substantial slowdown" in the region.
He said higher energy prices were already weighing on Germany, which is the biggest economy in Europe and the fourth largest in the world.
Developing countries are also being affected by shortages of fertiliser, food and energy, Mr Malpass said.
Mr Malpass also raised concerns about lockdowns in some of China's major cities - including the financial, manufacturing and shipping hub of Shanghai - which he said are "still having ramifications or slowdown impacts on the world".
"China was already going through some contraction of real estate, so the forecast of China's growth before Russia's invasion had already softened substantially for 2022," he said.
"Then the waves of Covid caused lockdowns which further reduced growth expectations for China," he added.
Also on Wednesday, China's premier Li Keqiang said the world's second largest economy had been hit harder by the latest round of lockdowns than it had been at the start of the pandemic in 2020.
He also called for more action by officials to restart factories after lockdowns.
"Progress is not satisfactory," Mr Li said. "Some provinces are reporting that only 30% of businesses have reopened… the ratio must be raised to 80% within a short period of time."
Full or partial lockdowns were imposed in dozens of Chinese cities in March and April, including a long shutdown of Shanghai.
The measures have led to a sharp slowdown in economic activity across the country.
In recent weeks, official figures have shown that large parts of economy have been impacted, from manufacturers to retailers.
-BBC



New Zealand's Ardern urges US to return to regional trade pact

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has urged the United States to rejoin a sweeping trade deal it quit in 2017, in the latest signal by an Asia-Pacific leader that Washington's efforts to engage the region are falling short.

Speaking on a visit to Washington, DC, on Thursday, Ardern said the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) was the "gold standard" for fostering deeper economic ties.

"If the United States is looking to engage in our region economically, then that is the place to do it," she said.

Ardern made her remarks two days after US President Joe Biden wrapped up his first official trip to Asia, during which he unveiled a new economic framework aimed at shoring up US engagement and countering rising Chinese influence in the region.

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), comprising 12 other countries including New Zealand, Australia, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam, aims to develop common standards in areas including trade, supply chains, clean energy and tax policy.

While many countries in the region have welcomed Biden's outreach amid shared concerns about Beijing's growing assertiveness, the initiative has faced criticism for not expanding trade opportunities, including access to US markets.

Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob earlier this month called on Washington to "adopt a more active trade and investment agenda" with Southeast Asian countries, which are wary of Beijing's ambitions but also depend on Chinese trade.

The Biden administration has been reluctant to join the CPTPP, which has been signed by 11 Asia-Pacific countries that account for 13 percent of the global economy, due to concerns that more American jobs would be shipped overseas.

"New Zealand sees IPEF as a promising start, but it's not enough to show that the US is really going to be at the heart of where regional economic integration goes in the future," Robert Ayson, professor of strategic studies at Victoria University of Wellington, told Al Jazeera, adding that New Zealand's "central message" is that the IPEF is not a substitute for US participation in the CPTPP.

"And power in Asia starts with economic factors – just think of how China has shown that to be the case. Ardern realises that given domestic sentiment in the US, the likelihood of the US joining the CPTPP is highly unlikely, and she knows that Biden is in a bind here. I am sure Biden wants the US inside CPTPP too, but Congress won't deliver that, and that's one reason he goes for IPEF."

In Washington, Ardern, who is on a trade mission to the US, said the IPEF would be a "starting point" for discussions on cooperation on issues including climate change and the digital economy.

"So that is an opportunity and opening for us," she said. "We will take that, but we will keep advocating for market access too." Ardern said New Zealand joined the initiative as it is "better to be at the table shaping those discussions than not, but we will keep pushing at every step for market access". The New Zealand leader's US trip is aimed at boosting exports and tourists as the country prepares to fully reopen its borders after more than two years of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ardern's trip, which features stops in New York, Washington, DC, Boston, San Francisco and Seattle, will include meetings with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and executives from Twitter, Microsoft and Amazon. Ardern, who is recovering from a recent case of COVID-19, has yet to announce plans to visit Biden at the White House, which is subject to strict pandemic protocols.

Asha Sundaram, a senior economics lecturer at the University of Auckland, said countries in the region are unsure how or whether the IPEF will further economic integration.

"Trade agreements like the CPTPP and RCEP go a long way towards reducing trade barriers between member countries, facilitating trade and bringing gains from specialisation," Sundaram told Al Jazeera, referring to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which includes China but not the US.

"Such gains are important for the region, particularly for emerging East Asian economies. US participation in an agreement like the CPTPP would be welcome because it would afford better market access to the US, something the current US outreach does not appear to do."

-Al Jazeera



Israeli court upholds non-Muslim prayer ban at Al-Aqsa

An Israeli appeals court has overturned a lower court ruling questioning the legal basis of a longstanding ban on non-Muslim prayer at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem.

"The special sensitivity of the Temple Mount cannot be overstated," Judge Einat Avman-Moller said in her ruling on Wednesday, using the Hebrew name for the compound.

The judge said Jewish worship there "should be superseded by other interests, among them the safeguarding of public order".

Earlier this week, a magistrate court ruled in favour of three Jewish appellants who had been banned from the Old City by police for 15 days for praying at the site, stirring Palestinian fears of attempts to change the sensitive status quo at the site.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque compound is located inside the landmark Old City. The vast majority of the international community does not recognise Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem and considers it illegally occupied territory.

The compound is one of the holiest sites in Islam and is referred to as al-Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary. According to an agreement in place since 1967, non-Muslims are allowed onto the site during visiting hours, but they are barred from praying there.

Jews believe the 35-acre compound is where the biblical Jewish temples once stood. Based on traditional Jewish religious law restricting entry into the site, and the agreed-upon status quo of the compound, Israel allows Jews to visit on condition they refrain from praying there.

Removing the ban on Sunday, magistrate court Judge Zion Saharai said that while he had no intention of interfering in law enforcement at the site, the conduct of the three appellants "does not raise worry of harm befalling national security, public safety or individual security".

Magistrate's courts can be overturned by district courts, with Israel's Supreme Court a final course of appeal.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas issued a statement calling Sunday's ruling "a grave assault against the historic status quo … and a flagrant challenge to international law".

Israeli police repeatedly raided the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan this year, which coincided with the Jewish Passover festival, in order to provide protection for settler visits. Hundreds of Palestinians were wounded and arrested.

At least 16,000 Israelis are expected to participate in an annual "flag march" in and around the Old City, marking its occupation by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The march will encompass the Muslim quarter and include the Damascus Gate, where Palestinians tend to gather, stoking fears of further tensions.

Palestinians view the march as provocative as Jewish settlers flaunt their "sovereignty" over the occupied territory. Previous marches have included Israeli chants of "Death to Arabs" and attacks on Palestinian homes and shops in the Old City.

Palestinian armed groups in the besieged Gaza Strip, including Hamas, have warned that such events are "adding fuel to the fire". Last year, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) underwent an 11-day war with Israel over attempts to forcibly displace Palestinians in Jerusalem and raids on the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

-Al Jazeera

> **"Magistrate's courts can be overturned by district courts, with Israel's Supreme Court a final course of appeal."**





2022 Hertz Ford Shelby Mustang GT500-H First Drive Review: A 900+HP Rental?!

■ Scott Evans

Yes, you heard right. Hertz is going to rent a 900-plus-horsepower Mustang GT500 to just about anyone who can swing the rental fee. We took the first 2022 Hertz Ford Shelby Mustang GT500-H for a quick drive to find out whether that's really a good idea.

Why Does It Exist?

There's at least precedent for this. Hertz and Shelby first teamed up in 1966 with the GT350-H, which was tuned up to 306 hp instead of 271 hp, a 12 percent increase. When you think about it that way, the 16 percent increase in power between a stock 2022 GT500 and a Hertz Shelby GT500-H seems fairly reasonable … until you remember we're talking about more than 900 horsepower.

If we're honest, the GT500 didn't need more power, but that's kinda Shelby's thing. A massive 3.8-liter twin-screw Whipple supercharger with a commensurately upsized intercooler and heat exchanger bring the beef, though even Shelby doesn't know exactly how much power the car makes as of this writing. They're still working with Whipple to finalize the tune before the cars hit select rental lots this summer. That's also why there's no torque number, but we imagine it'll increase from the stock 625 lb-ft.

Contributing to the tune is a cat-back exhaust system developed by Shelby and Borla, and hardened axle halfshafts prevent the extra power from breaking things. Shelby says it consulted with transmission manufacturer Tremec to make sure the dual-clutch gearbox could take the extra abuse.

You may be wondering what Shelby did to corral all the extra ponies, and the answer is: not much. The GT500-H gets a carbon-fiber hood with extra vents to compensate for the extra heat generated. Shelby says it consulted with Ford engineers on where to add vents, though the car hasn't been wind-tunnel-tested, just track-tested. The car also gets 20-inch forged aluminum wheels wrapped in standard GT500 Michelin Pilot Sport 4S tires. Why not the optional Cup 2 tires with more grip? Because they're no good in the rain, and they wear out too fast, Shelby says. Considering several of the locations planned for the GT500-H are in Florida, the rain concern is legit.

As is the concern about tire life. Shelby has made no attempt to lock out the traction and stability control defeat switch, so if you want to roast 'em, you can. Why on earth would they let just anybody turn off the computer in a 900-plus-horsepower, limited-edition car? Ask Shelby, and it's because they tried it back in 2006 with the first revival of this partnership, and people immediately posted instructional videos on the internet showing how to bypass the physical lockout. Ask Hertz, and it's because "if we thought about what-ifs all day, we'd never lean in and do anything cool," according to executive vice president of global sales, marketing, and customer experience Laura Smith. Apparently, Cars and Coffee videos aren't enough to sway Hertz.

It's worth noting, though, the company has data to back up its position. This is far from the first high-powered sports car the company has rented over the years. Besides the Shelby Mustangs, there have been Corvettes, Porsches, and more. Rather than abuse them like a base Nissan Sentra, the company has found customers are generally quite gentle on the fast and expensive cars, likely not wanting to pay to fix them.

Similarly, the company isn't concerned about people stealing performance parts off the car like they did back in '66. For one, it's a lot harder to do these days. Really, though, Hertz says it's just too few bad eggs to worry about, and they won't jeopardize the experience of renting a car like this for all the other customers over it.

Then again, Hertz isn't going to rent these cars to just anyone. Only 25 will be made, and they'll come with stipulations: no one-way rentals, absolutely no taking it to a racetrack or dragstrip, and there's a 70-mile-per-day limit with a fee of $0.75 for every additional mile. Hertz is also looking at raising the minimum age from the standard 25 years old, and while the rental starts at $399 per day, it can go up. And as always, traffic tickets are your problem.

Pros: What We Like

The Ford Shelby GT500 is already a great car, and although it didn't need more horsepower, adding that much more hasn't hurt it. Without driving a GT500 and a GT500-H back to back, you'd be hard-pressed to notice the difference. The stock GT500 already accelerates so hard it's almost scary, so the Shelby would have to be absolutely insane to really make its mark, and it's not. Given the stock GT500 is already traction-limited, we don't expect the Shelby to be any quicker to 60 mph, though its quarter-mile time might drop a bit once the tires hook.

Point is, anyone who's never done a freeway pull in a GT500 before is going to have their mind blown regardless. Those who have will appreciate that their hair feels 16 percent more on fire now.

For everywhere else, we're happy to report Ford's traction and stability control programs work as well with more than 900 hp as they do with 760 hp. Try whipping it around on city streets, and the software will pull enough power to stop wheelspin and prevent oversteer, but no more than that. That means you can be as brutal with the throttle as you want, and the computer will do everything it can to turn that into acceleration.

Our short test-drive route didn't involve any corners aside from freeway ramps, but as Shelby doesn't touch the suspension on the GT500-H, it should handle as well as a stock GT500, which handles fantastically. Just roll into the throttle a little easier at corner exit, and you should be good to go. Shelby didn't mess with the brakes, either, so when in doubt, stand on 'em. They're excellent.

Cons: What We Don't Like

Aside from the whole concept of renting anyone who can come up with 400 bucks a 900-hp, rear-wheel-drive car with the lesser (but still great) tire option and functional traction and stability control defeats, our main issue with the GT500-H was how many squeaks and rattles it had for a brand-new car. We were literally the third people outside Shelby to drive it, and there were less than a thousand miles on the clock. We love the black and gold livery, and the rest of the cosmetic mods are subtle enough, but the build quality left something to be desired.

The Bottom Line

If you're lucky enough to rent one of these within the six-month window of availability from one of the few Hertz locations offering them, LEAVE THE TRACTION AND STABILITY CONTROL ON. Your wallet will thank us.

-Motor Trend







Will Real Madrid's Rodrygo haunt Liverpool?

■ Marcus Alves

Elano was working as Santos assistant coach in early 2017 when he heard how much Liverpool were willing to pay for the club's new wonderkid Rodrygo. He was not impressed at all.

"I went to the board and said, 'No, no, we can't let him leave for this,'" the former Manchester City midfielder tells BBC Sport.

"It was a 3m euro offer only and the talks were already at an advanced stage. It was pretty much a done deal. They had a verbal agreement but I insisted, 'We can't do this'.

"He was just 16 years old back then and, although the team had high hopes for him, it was not clear yet when he would be playing for the senior side. So I went to Rodrygo and told him, 'We will promote you soon. You have my word.'

"A little while after, I ended up taking charge as a caretaker manager and so, much sooner than expected, I could do what I had promised him. I brought him to train with us and gave him his first minutes as a professional footballer."

Ultimately, Rodrygo agreed to sign a new contract and stayed with the Brazilian giants for another season.

In mid-2018, however, he finally left Santos, but not for Liverpool.

Instead, he signed for Real Madrid after the Spaniards came knocking with a 45m euro bid.

Now, when both teams meet in Paris for the Champions League final on Saturday, the forward will be on the opposing side of long-time admirer Jurgen Klopp.

Rodrygo has proved crucial on Real's epic journey to the Stade de France, scoring five goals, including two goals in just over a minute in stoppage time in the 3-1 comeback win over Manchester City in arguably the greatest semi-final in history.

Such is the hype around the 21-year-old this season that he has been dubbed 'Mr Champions'.

It remains to be seen whether he will return to haunt Liverpool.

Recognition at a younger age than Neymar

The softly spoken and down-to-earth Rodrygo is no stranger to the limelight despite his tender years.

At 11, he became the youngest Brazilian player to sign with Nike, beating the previous record of 13 that belonged to Neymar, another Vila Belmiro product.

That same year, Rodrygo gave his first interview and was invited to join Pele and other legends when Santos celebrated their centenary anniversary. He has never let fame get to his head, though, with much of the credit going to his parents.

A second-tier right-back for most of his life, his father Eric Goes dreamed about sharing the pitch with Rodrygo, but could not fulfil it, so retired in 2016 to focus on his son's career.

"Rodrygo never worried about being like Neymar or any other player from Santos," says Elano, who has made a promising start as a manager back home.

"He wanted to write his own story and we all knew the potential for that was there. Perhaps people who don't know him can't tell that, but he has a strong character. That's key for any athlete's success.

"He was made for the big stages. He doesn't feel the pressure. He was still going to school when he scored his first goal in the Copa Libertadores. It's not every day that you see something like that happening."

Real Madrid deal was sealed in Liverpool

Rodrygo is enjoying his best season for Real and, after winning La Liga and the Spanish Super Cup, wants to finish it with the Champions League trophy.

Playing against Liverpool will be extra special not only because he almost signed for them, but because the whole operation that led him to the Bernabeu took place in the English city too.

In 2018, Santos' then president Jose Carlos Peres was in Liverpool with the Brazil team and, on the eve of a World Cup warm-up match against Croatia, Real sporting director Juni Calafat got in touch asking him if they could meet in a Starbucks cafe next to their hotel. Once Peres arrived, Calafat pulled his tablet out and made a video call to president Florentino Perez. The whole conversation did not last more than half an hour. It was clear money would not be an issue to sign Rodrygo this time.

The following day, they watched the Brazil game together in a box at Anfield and finalised the paperwork for a deal that would be officially announced a week later.

Despite interest from Paris St-Germain, Bayern Munich and Barcelona, Rodrygo was never in doubt about his decision. He had watched Real beat Liverpool 3-1 in the Champions League final that year and had made his mind up.

They have not won it since. It is now up to 'Mr Champions' and company to change that in Paris.

-BBC



'A serial winner who has brought Roma to life'

Jose Mourinho has enjoyed greater achievements in his glittering managerial career, but Roma's Europa Conference League triumph reduced him to tears after the 'Special One' delivered the Italian club their first major European trophy.

Europe's third-tier club competition has been derided in some quarters, but for Mourinho the win over Feyenoord was every bit as important as his two Champions League triumphs with Porto in 2004 and Inter Milan in 2010.

Mourinho becomes the first manager to win all three major European competitions after making it five wins in five European finals.

"Football is about winning and Mourinho wins," said former Manchester United midfielder Owen Hargreaves on BT Sport.

"He's a serial winner and he has brought this Roma team to life."

Box office Mourinho delivers again

This was the 26th trophy of Mourinho's managerial career - 19 years after he masterminded Porto's Uefa Cup win in 2003.

He was announced as Roma boss last May and was tasked with building the club up after a disappointing seventh-place finish in Serie A in 2020-21.

"Mourinho said it wasn't part of the plan [to win the trophy]. The plan was to build this team, it was the start of the project," Joe Cole, who played under Mourinho at Chelsea, told BT Sport.

Roma's run to the final was not all smooth, with the Portuguese coming under fire after an embarrassing 6-1 defeat by Bodo/Glimt in the group stage in October.

"The great thing about my career is that, aside from the Europa League with Manchester United, doing it with Porto, Inter and Roma is very, very, very special," Mourinho said.

"It is one thing to win when everyone expects it, when you made the investments to win, but it's quite another to win when something feels immortal, that feels truly special.

"This remains in the history of Roma, but also mine. I was told only I, Sir Alex [Ferguson] and Giovanni Trapattoni won trophies in three different decades. It makes me feel a little old, but it's nice for my career."

Mourinho has instilled a spirit and togetherness that has seen Roma bounce back and secure a first trophy for 14 years. The hard work, according to Cole, has only just started.

"Roma have gone through a few managers, lost a direction and an identity. Jose's loved in the city but there is a way to go," he added.

"These scenes now, especially for the lads who've come through the ranks at Roma - you cannot go to that city and not feel the club.

"Football is a religion there and they will feel like heroes and be remembered, but this is the start of the journey. Jose will be back in the office, planning whether they can have a go at the Europa League and get closer to titles."

'He's the best'

This was Mourinho's first trophy since winning the Europa League with Manchester United in 2017.

Chris Smalling was part of the United side that defeated Ajax in Stockholm five years ago and the 32-year-old defender produced a man-of-the-match performance to help secure Roma a first trophy since 2008.

"Even when I first came to Roma three years ago, it was a long time since they had won a trophy," said Smalling.

"So we knew how much it was going to mean for everyone at Roma to win something."

Smalling's post-match interview on the pitch with BT Sport was gatecrashed by team-mate and England forward Tammy Abraham.

"He's the best," said a jubilant Abraham before planting a kiss on his Smalling's cheek.

Such has been Abraham's impact since joining Roma from Chelsea for £34m last August that he finishes his first season in Italy with 27 goals, a European trophy and a place in Gareth Southgate's England squad.

"One thing I said when I came was I was going to help my team get to the final and win a trophy in my first season. Credit to my team-mates for excellent performances," said Abraham.

-BBC



Security concerns over Nations League game in Munich



■ **Mantej Mann & Alex Howell**

The Football Association is working with police and security services to limit the prospect of disorder during the Nations League game between England and Germany in Munich on 7 June.

The FA is conscious it is on a 'yellow card' with European governing body Uefa after a number of incidents at the Euro 2020 final between England and Italy at Wembley last July.

There are concerns further trouble could impact the joint UK and Ireland bid to host Euro 2028.

Following a spate of pitch invasions domestically, the spotlight will be on fans travelling to the game next month.

England supporters have been allocated 3,466 tickets in the away end, but many travelling fans have bought seats in the home section of Bayern Munich's Allianz Arena. The FA also expects some to travel without tickets.

However 880 England fans subject to football banning orders will have to hand in their passports before the game.

With their game in Budapest against Hungary on 4 June to be played behind closed doors after trouble at Puskas Arena during the European Championships, the trip to Germany three days later will be the first time England are accompanied by significant away support since the initial coronavirus lockdown in March 2020.

Precautionary measures are being taken that will see police travelling from the UK, including spotters and intelligence officers. Additionally, no alcohol will be sold to any fans at the stadium.

England's Nations League game at Molineux against Italy on 11 June will be played without spectators after the FA was ordered to play one match behind closed doors as a punishment for the unrest at Wembley Stadium during the Euro 2020 final.

The FA was fined £84,560 for "the lack of order and discipline" and threatened with playing a second game behind closed doors if there is a repeat of similar behaviour by England fans over the next two years.

Speaking after announcing his latest squad on Tuesday, England boss Gareth Southgate said everyone travelling abroad should be "good ambassadors for our country" and "leave a good impression".

But asked if there would be any specific plea for good behaviour before the match, Southgate added: "I doubt they would listen to it really.

"If people are going to cause trouble, it is not going to make a jot of difference what I say."

The entire allocation for away fans will be designated to registered members of the England Supporters Travel Club (ESTC), whose details are on record, while home tickets can be bought by anyone who is unattached and can provide a German address. Some England fans have been submitting their hotel addresses as their own.

CJ Joiner, an ESTC member of nine years, says the authorities could find it difficult to prevent English fans from sitting in the German section.

"I think it's just a case of going on to the German FA's website and buying a ticket," Joiner told BBC Sport. "You might have to put a German address down but the tickets are downloadable so they are not sent to that address.

"I don't know if there is any way of an English person being stopped from buying a ticket. I would just hope that everybody that does get in the home end behaves respectably and there is no trouble."

'Both sets of supporters were exemplary'

England's game in Munich comes a day after the 78th anniversary of the D-Day landings in World War Two, but Joiner says the rivalry between the two sets of fans is "not as bad" as some think.

"There is a bit of banter and there is some animosity, but there always is going to be when two sets of supporters get together," he added.

"Generally speaking, fans will be able to stand there side by side in the pub or in the ground and you won't see any problems."

England ended a 55-year wait for a knockout win over Germany in their last-16 tie at Euro 2020 but Joiner - one of the 42,000 fans in attendance at Wembley - says the behaviour of both sets of fans was "exemplary".

Asked if he experienced any disorder in or around the stadium, he said: "Absolutely nothing.

"We had the issues in the final [against Italy] and similar scenes at the start of the semi-final [against Denmark], but in that game both sets of supporters were very well behaved.

"They were drinking together outside and there were plenty of German fans outside of their [seated] section. They sang their national anthem and there were no problems whatsoever. I was proud to be a football fan and to be English on that day."

Germany out for revenge in fans' match

While the spotlight may be on some fans for the wrong reasons, there will also be lots of good-natured activity in Germany.

England Fans FC will be facing their German counterparts in a friendly, as they did when the two sides met in the Euros.

Around 200 spectators watched England win on penalties that day and centre-back Paul Robinson from Swindon says the players do not shirk a tackle but enjoy sharing a drink together after the game.

"It was competitive and both teams wanted to win," Robinson told BBC Sport. "It was a really good game and it is always good to win, especially in a penalty shootout, with the history between England and Germany.

"It can get a bit heated and you may get the odd bad tackle, as in any game, but you get on and all mix together afterwards. We have a photo together and share a drink so it is a really good day."

-BBC

