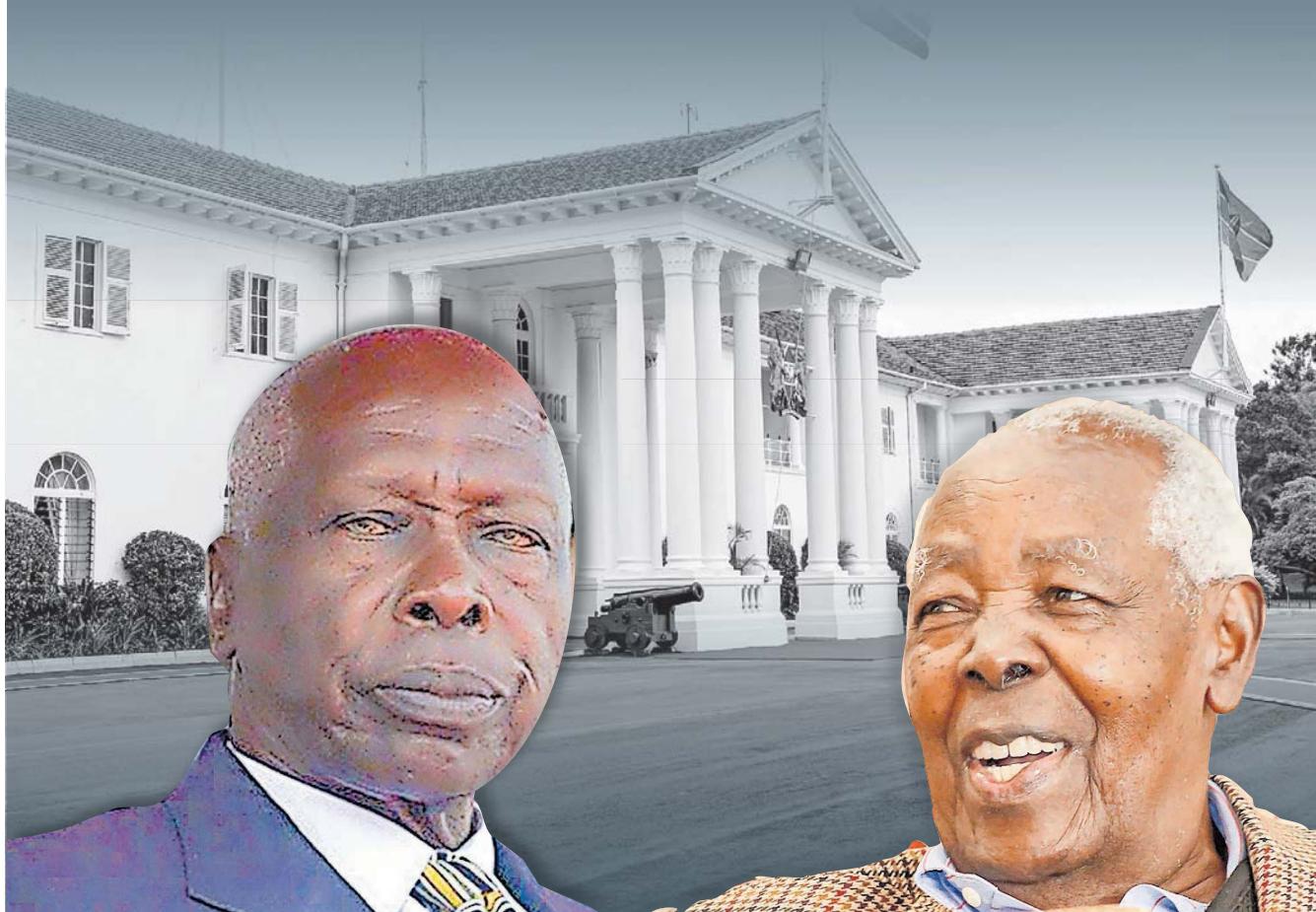


THE Weekly Review

For the Thinking Person

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BETRAYAL AT STATE HOUSE

When Moi pushed his AG out of government in June 1981 after a stormy meeting in his office, only two other people knew about the intrigues that led to the falling-out; Nyachae and Kiereini. We reveal content of an angry letter that James Karugu wrote to the President, which remained a guarded secret for 41 years

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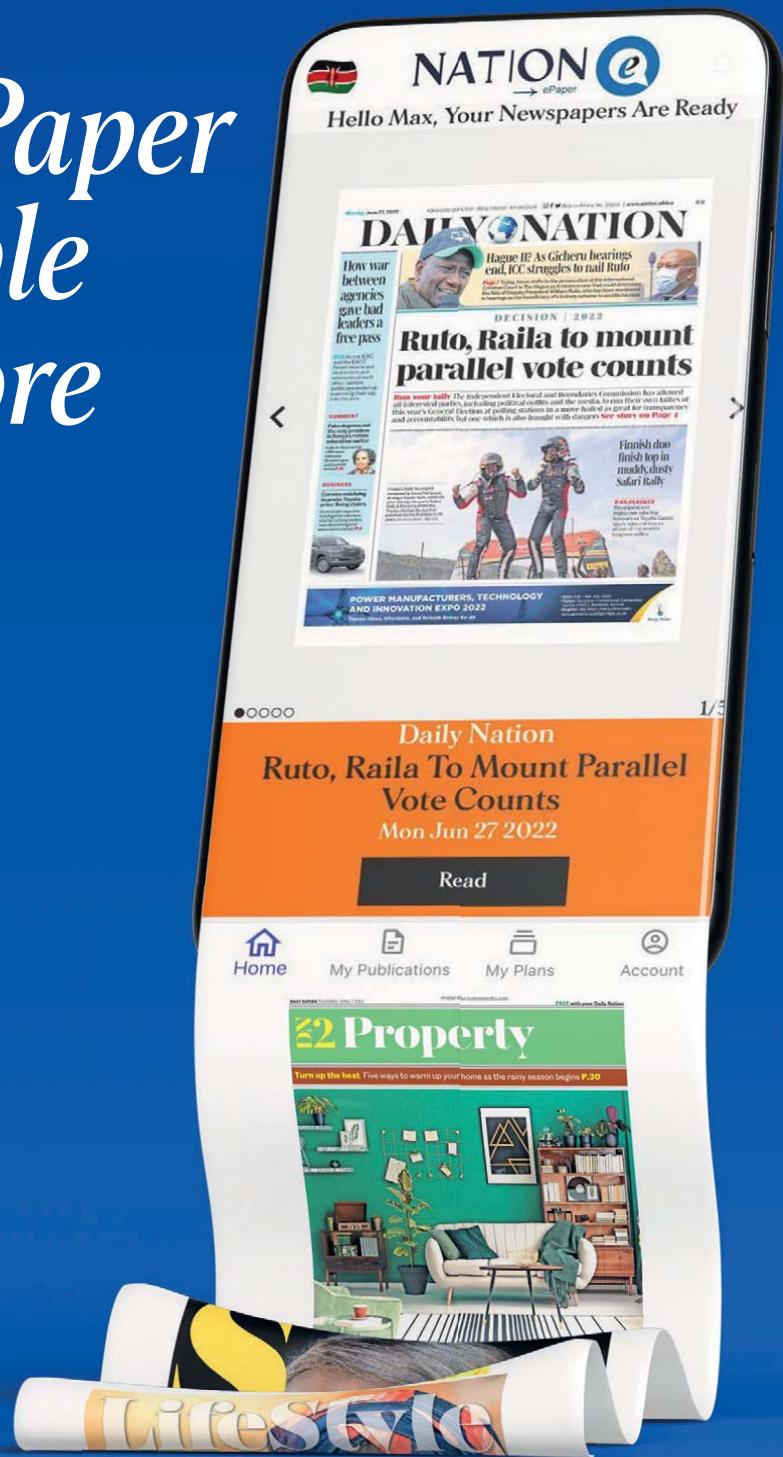


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letter from the editor

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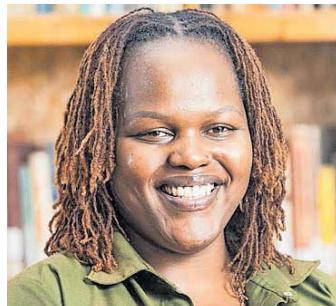
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Why Murkomen cannot wish away the KQ turbulence, or SGR contract

Transport Cabinet Secretary Kipchumba Murkomen has been in the limelight for all the wrong reasons. The bad press has come partly due to reasons of his own making, and partly due to historical happenstance.

Kenya Airways has become a perennial pain in the backside of every Transport CS in the past decade. The national carrier hogs taxpayers' cash with abandon, and comes back for more billions at every turn.

The frequency with which KQ dips into the public cookie jar would make for a classic case study on moral hazard at the University of Nairobi's business school.

Long gone are the glory days when KQ was a prime stock on the Nairobi Securities Exchange, with a seemingly clear strategic focus and a competitive advantage as the biggest carrier in Africa. In its place is an opaque capital structure, an agitated workforce, ridiculously expensive tickets compared to competitors, and a waning market share, not to mention a shabby reputation.

For now, Murkomen has managed to kick the can down the road, until the demons awaken the pampered pilots

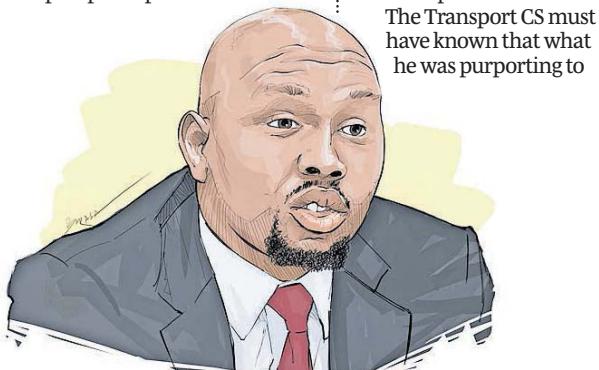


Washington Gikunju

Long gone are the glory days when KQ was a prime stock on the Nairobi Securities Exchange, with a seemingly clear strategic focus and a competitive advantage as the biggest carrier in Africa. In its place is an opaque capital structure, an agitated workforce, ridiculously expensive tickets compared to competitors, and a waning market share, not to mention a shabby reputation.

again. Murkomen's SGR contract kerfuffle is a self-inflicted wound, however, that smells of pure mischief.

The Transport CS must have known that what he was purporting to



release was just a small bit of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) contract, but he went ahead and did it anyway. Kenyans, after all, are shallow on detail and short on memory, he must have reasoned.

The assumption boomeranged on the former Elgeyo Marakwet Senator, leaving sticky egg on his face. Having borrowed the Chinese amounts in the north of half a trillion shillings, which will be repaid by a cross generation of Kenyans, the feeble attempt at covering up the meaty parts of a fetid contract did not wash.

Fears that Mombasa port could become an extension of the Chinese empire if the Treasury defaults on the massive loan is clearly the elephant in the room. The cost of both the concessionary as well as the commercial aspects of the loan is also of great interest to the public.

Who pocketed the \$4 million commission disclosed in the contract, yet this was a government-to-government deal? How could the Attorney-General sign on documents that prohibited disclosure of details of the contract, in clear breach of the constitutional provisions for Kenyans' freedom of access to information? Murkomen's cosmetic disclosure raised more queries than it provided answers, and succeeded in carrying over a monkey that was clearly nestled on the Jubilee government's shoulders.

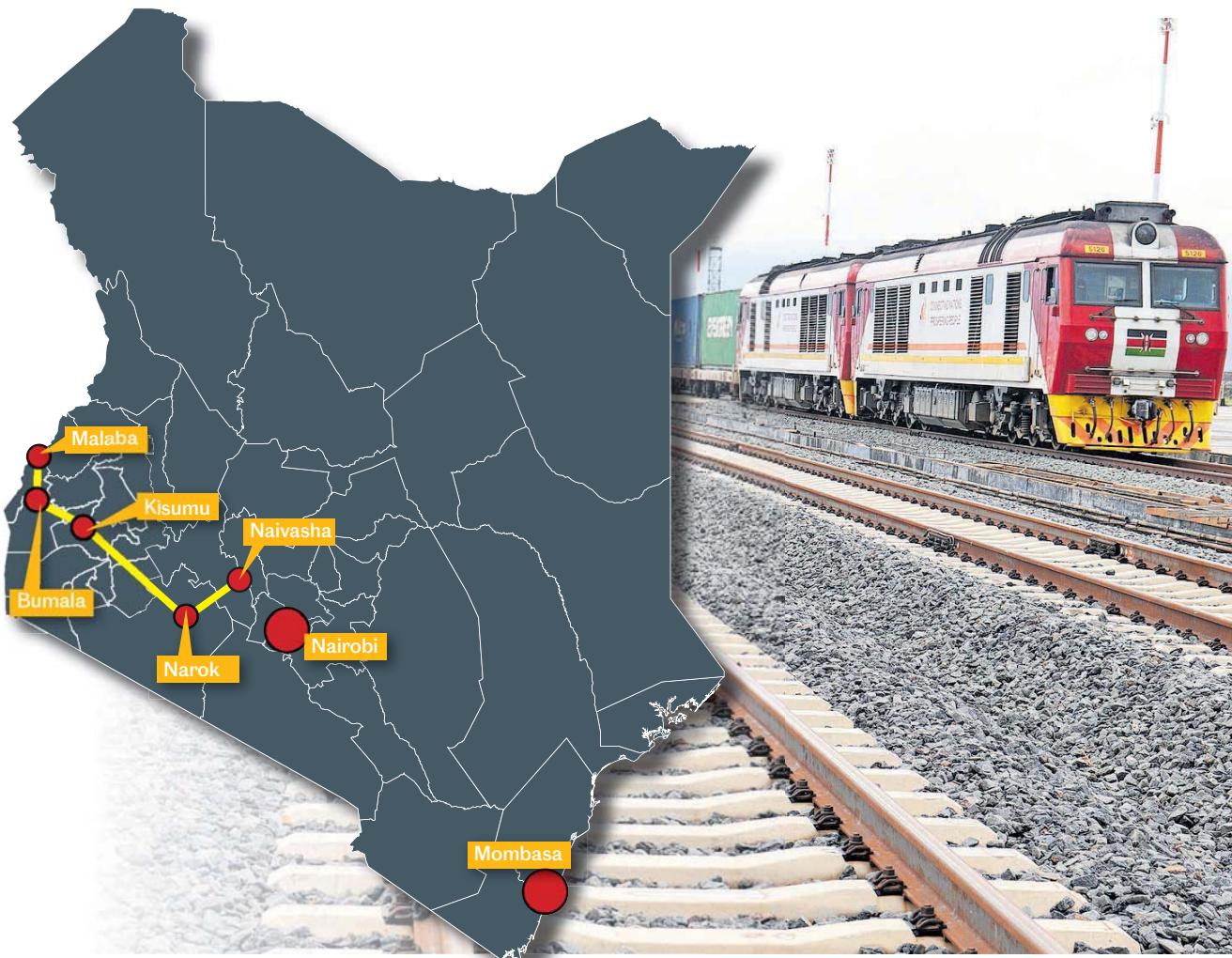
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kenya lens

■ UHURU SOUGHT ANOTHER CHINESE LOAN

FRESH SH500BN SGR DILEMMA

The Kenya Kwanza administration seeks to implement the Kenyatta government's plan of extending the railway line to Malaba via Kisumu



● By JAINDI KISERO

Even as the controversy that has greeted the disclosure by Transport Cabinet Secretary Kipchumba Murkomen of confidential Standard Gauge Railway loan contracts between Kenya and China Exim Bank continues to rage, *The Weekly Review* has seen a Cabinet memo that reveals that former President Uhuru Kenyatta had approved plans to borrow another US\$4.8 billion (about Sh500 billion) from China to finance the extension of the line from Naivasha to Malaba through Kisumu.

Coming against the backdrop of a recent pronouncement by Murkomen that the Ken-

ya Kwanza administration of President William Ruto plans to extend the SGR to Malaba through Kisumu, the revelations have brought to the fore the issue of whether Kenya still has capacity to take on more Chinese debt and what the extension of the line to Malaba would entail for Kenya in terms of aggravating the country's external indebtedness.

Murkomen earlier this month observed that the SGR has to reach the Kenya-Uganda border to serve its purpose. He cautioned, however, that this would depend on the availability of funds. "This project will only make sense when it goes past Naivasha as compared to the current situation where we are forced to transport goods by the lake, instead of through the

Kisumu port," he offered. In just over 10 years, loans from China have grown exponentially and to a level where China now holds 20 per cent of Kenya's external debt stock, the third on the queue after the World Bank and the Eurobond holders, but much bigger than the share held by the African Development Bank, PTA Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As at June 30, 2021, according to the recently published annual debt report, amounts outstanding on loans from China Exim Bank alone came to a whopping Sh759 billion. With an economy that constantly runs a merchandise trade deficit and that relies on the little export earnings from coffee, tea, tourism, flow-

Continued on Page 6

kenya lens

Bid to extend SGR from Naivasha to Malaba

Continued from Page 5

ers and diaspora remittances, Kenya will be hard-pressed were the new administration of President Ruto to insist on proceeding with extension of the line.

According to the Cabinet memo, the massive loan that the Kenyatta administration had approved was for building a length totalling to 216.3 kilometres, including an 8.9km branch line to a greenfield port that was to be built in Kisumu as part of the project.

The details in the Cabinet memo show that the \$4.8 billion figure is a lump sum, inclusive of civil works, 35 locomotives (29 mainline locomotives, four for passenger services and two for shunting), 724 wagons and 64 passenger coaches.

The plan was to electrify this section of the SGR. The memo discloses that the cost of electrification of the line was estimated at 20 per cent of the cost of civil works.

The background of the plan by the previous administration to extend the line to Malaba through Kisumu is narrated in the document as follows.

After Mombasa to Naivasha had been completed, the Kenya Railway Corporation (KRC) signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese EPC contractor, China Communication Construction Company (CCCC), to undertake a feasibility study and preliminary designs for the Naivasha to Malaba section, following which a ministerial committee was set up to review the feasibility study.

As at February 2016, the commercial contract for civil works and rolling stock had been concluded and approved by the KRC board. The understanding was that the commercial contracts would only become effective after successful negotiations with China Exim Bank and when the plans had reached financial closure.

Two additional separate commercial contracts were planned: first, a US\$140 million contract for the Kisumu port, and secondly, US\$233 million to fund expansion and modernisation of the Embakasi Container Terminal that was to be built by China Road and Bridge Corporation.

At a meeting on September 18, 2015, the Cabinet had approved the preferred route for the extended line to Malaba through Kisumu: it would run from Naivasha through Narok, on to Bomet and up to Kisumu, then from Kisumu through Yala to Bumala and Malaba.

The decision by the Cabinet to divert the route away from the Central Rift Valley corridor through Nakuru to Narok was a significant development because talk about town at that time was that politically influential elite had, on learning about the new route, gone on a buying spree of land along the route in anticipation of hefty compensation payments.



According to the Cabinet memo, the budget for acquisition of land along the route of the railway line was set at an estimated figure of a whopping Sh8 billion.

Which is why speculation is rife that the land-grabbing elites are among the forces pushing the government to extend the line.

Meanwhile, the release this week of the confidential SGR loan contracts by Murkomen was greeted with scepticism, with critics insisting that the minister should have disclosed more SGR contracts including those for civil works and the ones for the EPC contractors.

Yet, in reality, Murkomen's disclosures had in many ways struck a blow for transparency around the hitherto secret contracts. Indeed, the real contentious issues around Chinese contracts and loans have all along been three: the secretive nature of the loans, the debates around the China debt trap narrative and whether Chinese loans are more expensive than loans borrowed from the West. Murkomen's disclosures were keenly awaited

because the expectation was that the minister would reveal new facts to forever settle the vexed question around whether or not the port of Mombasa was at risk of being confiscated by the Chinese if Kenya failed to pay up.

It remains to be seen whether the furore that erupted will force the minister to publish two key agreements relevant to the Mombasa Port question, namely, the 'take or pay agreement' between the Kenya Ports Authority and KRC, and the Escrow agreement.

To illustrate just how much Chinese loans come with stringent terms, here are highlights of the terms of one of the three loan agreements disclosed by Murkomen that covered the Nairobi-Naivasha section that was signed in December 2015.

With a tenure of 20 years, one would assume that this facility was the typical long-term loan with a generous grace period and fairly-priced interest rates.

It has a grace period of five years and attracts

kenya lens**THE NAIVASHA-MALABA SGR DEAL****724** Wagons**64** Passenger coaches**35** Locomotives
(29 mainline locomotives, four for passenger services and two for shunting)

LAND: According to the Cabinet memo, the budget for acquisition of land along the route of the railway line was estimated at a whopping Sh8 billion.

SH8 BILLION

The budget for land acquisition



The massive loan that the Kenyatta administration had approved was for building a length totalling 216.3 kilometres, including an 8.9km branch line to a greenfield port that was to be built in Kisumu as part of the project.

interest rates at a floating rate, with a margin of three per cent above Libor that calculates to about 3.5 per cent, considering the prevailing Libor rate at the time the contract was signed.

But, as the saying goes, the devil is in the detail. Included in the terms is a condition that interest is to be calculated in six-month periods instead of the conventional 12 months. The implication is that over the 20-year period, the effective interest rate on this loan will be much higher.

There are two other significant terms in the loan agreement: a management fee of 0.5 per cent of the facility and a commitment fee on the undisbursed amount of 0.5 per cent, which must be cleared by the end of the grace period.

But what was not disclosed in the contracts Murkomen put out that makes the Chinese loans even more expensive is the cost of insurance.

The agreement states that the government must make an upfront payment of an insurance premium at 6.93 per cent premium payable in two instalments to the China Export Credit and Insurance Corporation (Sinosure).

Calculated, this figure comes to 15 per cent of the total contract amount. Effectively, this means that the Chinese take back 15 per cent of the loan amount upfront.

Kenya's appetite for Chinese loans in the last ten years has been unprecedented. The government has also borrowed heavily for projects of little economic impact — such as procurement of equipment for the National Youth Service and drilling materials — from China.

Going through the external debt register, the Kenya's borrowing from China ranges from loans for buying MRI equipment, procuring of power materials and rehabilitation of technical institutes to modernisation of Kenya Power distribution systems and building of Kenyatta University.

It is a reflection of the power and influence the Chinese companies wield. Indeed, Chinese EPC contractors are adept at putting deals together and getting financing approved by the Treasury.

This is the way the game is played: A Chinese contractor, with his local allies and agents, approaches a CS or parastatal MD to hawk a proj

ject that he has conceived and which has not been budgeted for by Parliament.

The contractor comes with a promise to arrange financing. An MoU is hurriedly signed between the contractor and the CS or parastatal boss. Then follows a commercial contract between the parastatal or its parent ministry and the contractor.

Finally, the National Treasury is invited to sign financing agreements with Exim Bank of China. This way, a new project funded by the Chinese will have entered the budget. This is how the SGR projects came about.

Why do corrupt elite prefer the route of introducing projects through these shady MoUs and commercial contracts to the conventional competitive procurement route?

It makes it easy to conspire with the Chinese to push a project into the government's spending programme even when it has no money for it. Secondly, since the deal can be procured and concluded without subjecting the project to international competitive bidding, the greedy elite are able to pad the budgets of the project with as many backhanders and kickbacks as they choose.

kenya lens**■ HE ESCHEWED CONTROVERSY AND LOVED HIS PEACE**

THE MAN WHO QUESTIONED MOI

On June 2, 1981, Attorney-General Karugu was summoned to State House and ordered to resign immediately, without any explanation. He did, but stunned the President with a rare letter. We reveal its content for the first time

• By JOHN KAMAU

When former Attorney-General James Boro Karugu shared the resignation letter he wrote to then President Daniel arap Moi with this writer, it was not to be leaked during his lifetime. Like a silent man, he eschewed controversy and loved his peace.

When he died on Thursday aged 86, he passed on with some secrets of the meeting that saw him leave the public service at only 45. Silence gave him peace – and it was part of his survival tactic.

The Weekly Review can now reveal the contents of the letter that Karugu wrote to President Moi, known only by a few people and which provide a window to what transpired that day and the workings of the Nyayo regime.

We now know that on the afternoon of June 2, 1981, a day after the Madaraka Day holiday, Karugu was summoned to State House by President Moi, who was hardly three years in office. When he arrived, Karugu found the President in the company of Jeremiah Kieneiri, who was Chief Secretary, and Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President Simeon Nyachae – one of the most powerful people in the Moi government.

It was 3pm, and without the slightest hint, the bombshell was dropped: President Moi wanted Karugu to resign immediately. From the letter's contents, Karugu appears to have tried to salvage his career, but Moi was unwilling to discuss the matter. Either he was not interested, or the atmosphere was poisoned.

Back in his office, Karugu, perhaps shaken by the turn of events, drafted a terse, three-paragraph letter. He said: "In strict compliance with your instructions today at State House Nairobi, at 3pm, in the presence of the Chief Secretary, Mr Kieneiri, and the Permanent Secretary, Mr Nyachae, to resign, I hereby submit my resignation, effective immediately as directed by your Excellency."

"Not unnaturally, I would have been most obliged if specific allegations – if there are any – had been revealed to me and perhaps an opportunity given to me to explain. However, Mr President as you indicated that you did not wish to discuss the matter I must respect that decision and your wisdom in the matter."

"I take this opportunity to thank you, Mr President for giving me the privilege to serve

you, your government, and my country. This, I have done with complete dedication, loyalty and honesty as I have done in the past for the last

nearly 18 years in the public service. My conscience is clear."

At only 45, Karugu had been asked to leave – and he left his Nairobi office and retreated to his Kiamara Coffee



Former Attorney-General James Karugu during an interview with *The Weekly Review's* John Kamau at his Kiambu home on February 16, 2018. DIANA NGILA | NATION

kenya lens

■ OPPOSITION POLITICS

GEARING UP TO FIGHT BACK

Despite cracks in its ranks, Azimio la Umoja-One Kenya says it has elaborate plans to form a shadow Cabinet to keep President Ruto's government in check



From right: ODM supremo Raila Odinga, Narc leader Charity Ngilu, Wiper boss Kalonzo Musyoka and Muungano Party chief Kivutha Kibwana during an Azimio la Umoja-One Kenya rally in Nairobi on June 2. The coalition's Secretary-General, Junet Mohamed, says they are working on an elaborate and powerful opposition. He says the plans will be rolled out in January next year. PHOTO | FILE

BY OSCAR OBONYO

Fafi MP Salah Yakub's recent revelations of plans to remove presidential term limits may well have been a mere teaser, but it nonetheless mirrors the confidence levels President William Ruto's party enjoys over a Raila Odinga-led opposition that is haemorrhaging politically each passing day.

Never mind that the ruling United Democratic Alliance (UDA) party has officially distanced itself from its own legislator's sentiments that have attracted public outrage. Hardly 100 days in office, the fact that Yakub's coded message to extend Ruto's leadership to more than two terms can be entertained by a section of Kenyans and even debated is an indictment of the vibrancy of the opposition.

With scores of poll losers in opposition zones – especially in Nyanza, Western and Rift Valley regions – currently trooping to President Ru-

to's wing, the government is apparently sitting pretty and comfortable with minimal opposition in sight. Former Kisii and Nairobi governors, James Ongwae and Evans Kidero respectively, are among the latest big names to shift camp.

The situation is further compounded by the notion among some of Odinga's diehard supporters that he lost in an election where he was an outright frontrunner and even enjoyed the goodwill of incumbency.

Former Laikipia North MP Mathew Lem-purkel, an ardent ODM supporter, is one such politician who has opted to decamp from Odinga's camp “because he is not serious about his quest for presidency”.

Members of the pastoral community, observes Lem-purkel, believe that if one in their midst loses his herd of animals, cattle rustlers are blamed for the onslaught. If this happens a second time, members of his family start

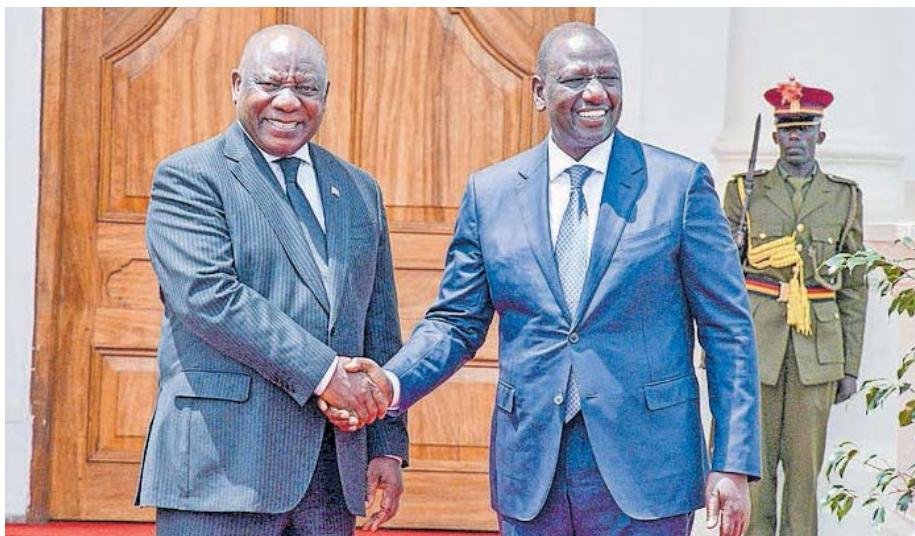
questioning his ability to secure his herd, but if theft happens a third and fourth time, the community totally loses faith in that particular herdsman.

“This thing has now slipped from the hands of my elder brother (Odinga) a record five times and you cannot expect me to hang on in there. Even during the chaotic situation at Bomas (national poll tallying centre), his overzealous supporters were nowhere to be seen, except for one Maasai with a club in hand,” says the ex-MP in apparent reference to Narok Senator Ole Kina Ledama.

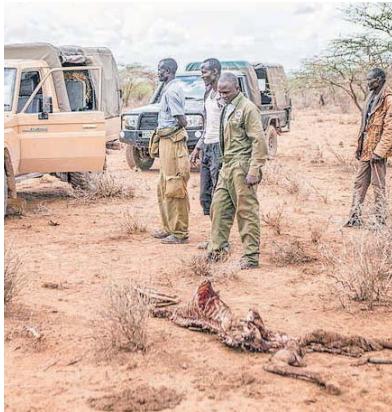
The ODM leader and former President Uhuru Kenyatta have been variously fingered for having underestimated Ruto's political strength, a miscalculation that resulted in a major political shocker for them and their backers.

Noting that the President is a smart and determined schemer, political affairs commentator Dr Henry Wabwire warns that if Ruto man-

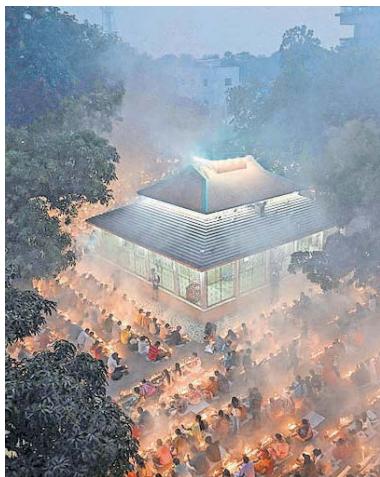
the limelight



President William Ruto (right) with South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa during a press conference at State House, Nairobi, on November 9. FRANCIS INDERITU | NATION



Members of the Grevy's Zebra Trust observe a carcass of a Grevy's Zebra, the world's rarest species that only exists in Kenya and Ethiopia, during hay distribution near Buffalo Springs National Reserve, Isiolo, on November 4. PHOTO | AFP



Hindu devotees offer prayers at the Shri Shri Loka Nath Brahmachari temple during the Hindu religious fasting festival of 'Rakher Upobash' in Narayan-ganj on November 8. PHOTO | AFP



We published this photograph on Page 12 of *The Weekly Review* of October 30, 2022, with a caption which implied that the person in the image had been spreading pesticides over a tea plantation at Kipkebe Estate in Musereita. We have since established that the caption was incorrect. We wish to clarify that the employee was spraying the tea with fertiliser and that Kipkebe Tea Estate does not and has never used pesticides in any of its farms. The error arose from the original caption of the source of the story. PHOTO | AFP



A commercial aircraft flies before the rising full moon above Kuwait City on November 8. PHOTO | AFP

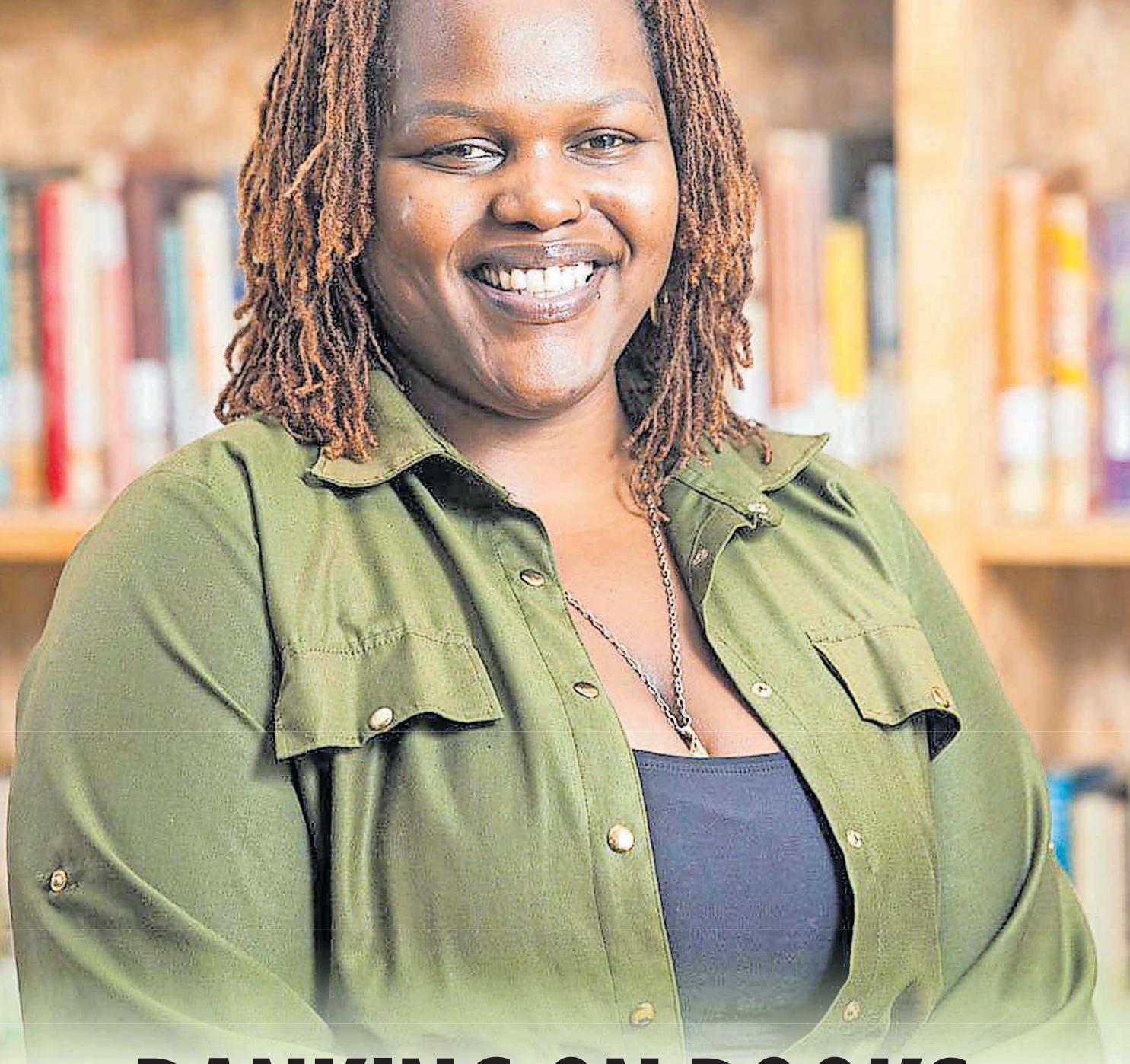


A Ukrainian soldier of an artillery unit fires towards Russian positions outside Bakhmut on November 8. PHOTO | AFP



A mother holds her child while taking part in a breast-feeding class at Danwagaag Mother and Child Health Centre in Baidoa, Somalia, on November 9. PHOTO | AFP

The
Arena



BANKING ON BOOKS

Book Bunk, Wanjiru Koinange's public library restoration project, has won international acclaim and is encouraging a reading culture

PUBLIC READING SPACES

• BY EDDY ASHIOYA

Sunny side up. That's what I kept thinking when having a conversation with Wanjiru Koinange, she of the highly acclaimed *Havoc of Choice* (the novel is based on events that surrounded the 2007 Kenyan general election) and Book Bunk project. There is a lightness in her voice, and she speaks without hemming and hawing, without poeticisms, her words the soundtrack of many a dream in its innocent desires and dawning regrets. She has an enchanting laugh, but even that is blurred by her force of character.

She is a sceptic, not a cynic. She, like her mom, questions things. Questions, questions. The writer's motif. Her moxie? That she just keeps it moving. Scepticism, after all, is a virtue. Cynicism is a vice. When she speaks about the things that make her heart sing, you get the impression of a bubbly lover with her healing water and kooky science, playing with toys she knows everything about. But she has a certain toughness about her, too, more artist than artisan, holding herself to lofty standards, torn between worlds but always showing up to keep it moving and make the tough decisions because life, ultimately, is a havoc of choices.

Choices made her as much as she made her choices. From an early age, she was teetering between being a pilot and a writer. Words won. Words condemned her and she had little choice but to submit to her sentences. Her book is still flying off the shelf – literally and figuratively – and has recently been translated into Arabic.

But it is Book Bunk that has become an article of faith, a reference point, the Rosetta stone, unquestioned and unquestionable. The international press has rolled out the red carpet for it, with features in the *Financial Times*, *CNN* and Publishing Perspectives. She and her parabatai, Angela Wachuka (one of Kenya's leading

ONE FOR THE BOOKS

READING CULTURE: The international press has rolled out the red carpet for Book Bunk, a library restoration project, with features in the *Financial Times*, *CNN* and Publishing Perspectives

publishers of African literature and former Executive Director of Kwani Trust), co-founded Book Bunk in October 2017. In 2020, during the pandemic, they went a step further to cofound a publishing company, Bunk Books, and so far have published two books: Koinange's debut novel and a children's book, *Sulwe*, written by Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o and illustrated by Vashti Harrison.

For all her outlier qualities, Koinange also embodies the zeitgeist of this liminal age. Despite her magic dust, she prefers lurking in the shadows to hogging the limelight. Their biggest achievement, she says, is providing proof of concept for Book Bunk.

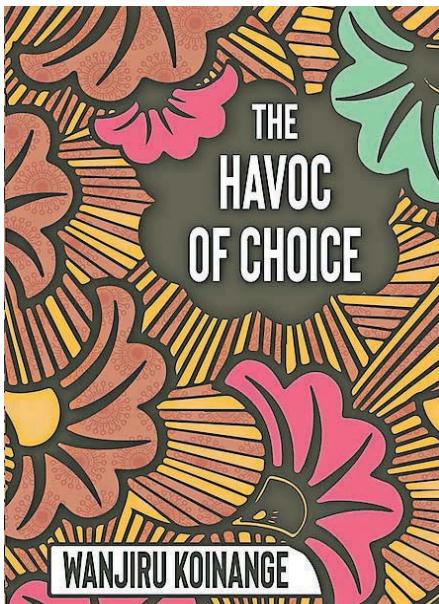
"We didn't know that it was going to work because it hasn't been done before. So we started out with a small library to test it and scale as we grow. Now we have spaces that are centred around the user."

The McMillan Library is Book Bunk's third library restoration project following runaway success with the Eastlands Library in eastern Nairobi and the more central Kaloleni Library. Book Bunk initially spent months on a recce mission, finding out the services that local communities desired most. Wi-Fi, updated bathrooms, extended opening hours, community spaces and fun activities topped the list. Book Bunk did not stop there, adding a feather to their hat by transforming libraries into spaces for events that encourage thought and celebrate writing, including hosting the Nairobi Literature Festival.

They are now working to digitise books and archival content like periodicals that will make access to his-

tory a click away. This forces me to ask, is it true that people are abandoning print for e-books? "That shift isn't as big as we think it is. During the pandemic, millennials were reading 25 per cent more than their predecessors. Now, people are picking up books as an escape from screen time." She says her print edition has done even better than e-books. People who love to read love books. E-books are here to supplement rather than supplant print books.

Koinange was raised on a farm on the outskirts of Nairobi with her four siblings. She



The book cover of 'The Havoc of Choice' by Wanjiru Koinange.



Wanjiru Koinange, author of 'The Havoc of Choice'.

The new generation is doing it by holding their own fashion shows, setting up e-commerce pages on social media, opening shops and setting up pop-up stores, as was the case with Thrift Social.

Brian Msafiri

“

Nation Media Group

I've been mastering for a couple of years," Njenga, opens up about the NAD brand, known for its cutting-edge, customised outfits, particularly denims. At the studio, the thrifted denim is deconstructed, fashioned by a canvas and hand-painted to give it a unique touch, creating limited editions. The customised pieces are sold at a price range of between Sh2,400 to Sh3,600 and often sell out in days.

Studio 18 also sets up monthly pop-up stores in different spaces in Nairobi, adding to their cultural currency.



Brian Msafiri is a fashion director and stylist. PHOTO | POOL



A model poses with Nairobi Apparel District streetwear. PHOTO | POOL

Thrift Social," says Msafiri.

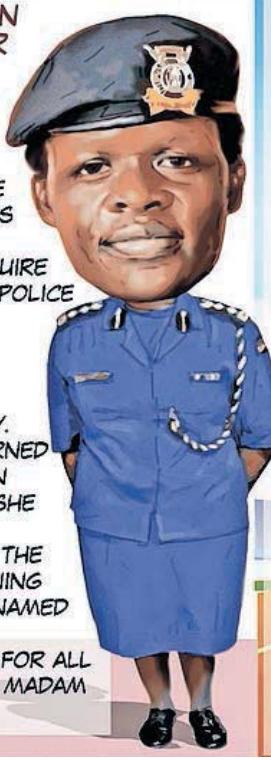
In a country where the urban youth aged 16-24 spend over Sh64 billion annually on clothes, according to a report by marketing research firm Youth Dynamix, Msafiri sees this space as an opportunity that is under-exploited.

smatiko@ke.nationmedia.com



WOMAN POWER

DR RESILA ATIENO ONYANGO IS A WOMAN OF MANY FIRSTS. LATE LAST YEAR, SHE MADE HEADLINES WHEN SHE BECAME THE FIRST FEMALE POLICE OFFICER TO ACQUIRE A DOCTORATE IN THE NATIONAL POLICE SERVICE'S HISTORY. NOW SHE HAS MADE HEADLINES YET AGAIN AFTER BEING NAMED THE FIRST FEMALE POLICE SPOKESPERSON IN THE COUNTRY. THE SENIOR POLICE OFFICER EARNED HER FIRST DEGREE IN EDUCATION FROM MOI UNIVERSITY BEFORE SHE JOINED THE NPS IN 2003. DURING HER GRADUATION FROM THE NATIONAL POLICE SERVICE TRAINING CAMPUS IN KIGANJO, SHE WAS NAMED THE BEST FEMALE RECRUIT. WE TAKE OUR HATS OFF TO YOU FOR ALL THAT YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED, MADAM SPOKESPERSON.



STAR OF THE WEEK

NEWLY CROWNED NEW YORK CITY MARATHON CHAMPION EVANS CHEBET SAYS A POOR PERFORMANCE IN THE SAME EVENT FOUR YEARS AGO IS WHAT SPURRED HIM TO VICTORY THIS TIME ROUND. THE BOSTON MARATHON CHAMPION DID NOT FINISH THE RACE IN 2018 AND WAS ELATED TO HAVE REDEEMED HIMSELF WITH HIS SECOND WORLD MARATHON MAJORS WIN IN A YEAR. "IN 2018, I WAS HERE BUT WAS UNABLE TO FINISH. AT THE 29KM MARK, I GOT TIRED AND QUIT THE RACE. THAT I RETURNED HERE TO NEW YORK AND WON THE RACE IS A BIG IMPROVEMENT AND COMMANDABLE EFFORT THAT CALLS FOR CELEBRATION. I AM SO DELIGHTED," CHEBET SAID. WE TOTALLY AGREE WITH YOU, CHAMP!



opinion



■ **The President will be retained or rejected in 2027 on account of his record**

Kenya doesn't need a life president

Mr Johnston Muthama, the chairman of the United Democratic Alliance, sensationally prophesied last month that President Ruto would be elected unopposed in 2027. He said Ruto would perform beyond the expectations of Kenyans who, in wholesome appreciation, would refuse to subject him to the indignity of vote-seeking.

Last week, Fafi MP Salah Yakub, also a member of UDA, crawled out of the woodworks to argue that the two-term limit on presidential tenure should be removed, via a change to the Constitution, to allow a successful president to run for re-election until he or she is 75.

Put another way, Yakub was saying that the President is only 55 years young and therefore good to lead for the next 20 years. And, Yakub was saying, what is standing in the way of the coming great performance of Ruto is the constitutional two-term limit on presidential tenure. Therefore, get rid of the presidential term limit and the President will do wonders.

Muthama quickly denied Yakub's unprovoked, yet provocative intention to launch an assault on the Constitution, did not have the blessing of UDA. What is the difference between Muthama's prophecy of the President's success, made even before a Cabinet was named, and Yakub's prediction of his successful delivery?

It is that Muthama reckons that, impressed by the President's overwhelming performance, Kenyans would move to protect the goose that



**KWENDO
OPANGA**

lays the golden egg by fiercely guarding the nest, while Yakub, sure the goose will lay the golden egg, proposes that MPs, Kenya's elected representatives, move to give the goose a longer lifespan.

Muthama's and Yakub's utterances are a test balloon floated by UDA on behalf of the President. Strictly speaking, the prophecy that inspires Yakub's powers of thinking should be directed towards the execution and delivery of Kenya Kwanza's 2022 campaign pledges and not the 2032 presidential poll.

Muthama should ensure the UDA platform is being implemented and low-hanging fruits are picked this early and trumpeted as signs that the UDA train is going to check into all the stations on time, with passengers safe and sound and cargo intact until Terminus August 2027. Then the passenger and cargo manifests will tell the story of safety, reliability and believability.

An old English saying advises that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Kenyans have just served themselves, or have been served by Mrs Martha Koome, an electoral pudding.

However, before they can begin to eat it, they are being told it is made of the best ingredients found in Kenya, so they should be careful not to eat the plate as well, sweetened as it is by the pudding.

Please, Muthama, let us eat the cake and then we will advise whether, in fact, it was worth the plate on which it was served. Please, Yakub, first listen to yourself. Don't tell us we should not have let President Kibaki go in 2013 because he was a progressive leader, and at the same time tell us presidents should not be above 75 years of age.

UDA should be addressing the cost of living because it was said a long time ago that a hungry man is an angry man. And somebody needs to remind UDA, Muthama and Yakub that their thinking about 2032 polls when Kenyans and their livestock are dying of hunger and thirst in 2022 is obscene and as tone deaf as it gets.

The President will be retained or rejected in 2027 on account of his record of service and not UDA's plan to create a life presidency.

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opinion

■ Many leading economies have failed to allocate 10pc of national budgets to agriculture

The 'Africa Rising' narrative: Myth or reality?



ALEXANDER
OWINO

At the turn of the Millennium, scare stories were swirling around of computers going to crash from the so-called millennium bug. In the middle of 2000, a quiet narrative was born which, even for those tumultuous times, kicked off a veritable storm.

This was the narrative of Africa as a hopeless continent wallowing in poverty, ignorance and disease – and racked by endless and senseless wars. Within a decade by 2011, this doomsday narrative was dramatically turned on its head.

A chorus of Africa Rising narratives promptly broke out among Africa's "development partners". Respected institutions joined in to chant the new mantra (really!) of a prosperous Africa in our times, bravely proclaiming Africa as the world's next economic powerhouse.

In 2013, the narrative had morphed into the hopeful continent, represented typically by pictures of a smiling *mama mboga*.

Development finance institutions piled in to tout the new mantra with statements like "10 of the 15 fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa" or local variations like "Kenya is among the five or six fastest growing economies in the world".

A leading consultancy weighed in with its variation on the same theme in landmark reports on Africa's "Lions on the Move".

The Africa Rising narrative came in handy in explaining that Africa is, indeed, "catching up" by growing rapidly, and that Africa is "on the right track" and will soon "catch up" with the high per capita income levels of the "Tiger" economies of East Asia and ASEAN.

Kenya's economic trajectory from near-zero around 2000-2003 to fast-paced economic growth that peaked at around eight per cent under the Kibaki administration was a powerful example of the Africa Rising narrative.

Sadly, the Africa Rising narrative remained largely a myth as it had no relationship to the lives and livelihoods of ordinary citizens on the ground. Most of Africa's leading economies have not grown fast or fast enough when measured in absolute per capita income terms or relative to per capita income levels in developed countries.

And neither are per capita incomes converging to advanced country incomes as economic growth in Africa has remained far too low for far too long.

Kenya, for example, has not sustained annual

economic growth rates of 8-12 per cent that it would need to outpace its high population growth rates of 3-4 per cent and "catch-up" to advanced country incomes.

Africa's growth tragedy

Africa and Kenya's failure to grow fast-for-long begins with the failure to execute meaningful structural transformation. A farm-to-factory structural transformation would shift labour currently employed or "locked" in low productivity agriculture and informal sector "hustles" to manufacturing and services.

The share of Africa's labour force employed in subsistence agriculture and rural, extractive activities at 60-80 per cent remains much higher than levels in advanced country levels of two to six per cent. This is now a binding constraint to rising incomes and increasing productivity on the continent.

To illustrate in simple terms a high share of employment in low-productivity agricultural, rural and extractive activities means that, on average, four farmers in Africa are "tied down" in producing barely enough food to feed themselves and one more (non-farming) person. This has resulted in the grim reality of the continent being a net food importer to the tune of US\$35 billion annually.

Africa's leading economies, including Kenya, have consistently failed to allocate 10 per cent of national budgets to agriculture under the Maputo and Malabo Commitments they signed up to. The result is decades of under-investment in agriculture and stagnant or declining agricultural productivity for Africa's key grain crops (per acre and per unit of labour employed).

That failure in turn hinders structural transformation – shifting of resources to higher value-adding manufacturing and services to raise productivity and incomes. Structural transformation requires significant domestic investments, especially in agriculture, that can only be sustainably funded by high levels of domestic savings. Most African countries, includ-

ing Kenya, lack the high levels of domestic savings that the East Asian "miracle" economies mobilised to fund high levels of domestic investments.

A low-productivity informal sector comprising of street hawkers, *mama mbogas* and *boda-boda* riders is common in virtually all African economies. These informal sector workers are forced by circumstances to eke out a living on the periphery of urban areas and in unplanned settlements (slums).

Worryingly, the low-productivity informal sector increasingly includes young, educated and tech-savvy Africans who, through no fault of their own, cannot get formal sector jobs commensurate with their skills and education, as there are simply none.

This is Africa's ticking demographic time bomb, which is aggravated by high income and wealth inequalities and inequities that rank amongst the highest in the world.

Africa cannot rise while de-industrialising. Most African countries, including Kenya, profess the intent to industrialise and aim to increase the share of manufacturing in GDP to 15 per cent as a critical pillar of rising incomes and productivity.

A few go a step further and seek to raise the share of manufactured (and high-tech) exports in relation to total exports. By comparison, the rapidly industrialising Tiger economies of East Asia, in their high growth phase, raised the share of manufacturing in GDP to as high as 30 per cent to 40 per cent. Africa's leading economies are not industrialising but are moving in the opposite direction of rapidly de-industrialisation. The share of manufacturing in GDP in Kenya has declined steadily to 7.5 per cent from 12.5 per cent a decade ago.

The Africa Rising narrative needs to be buried in the "Alternate African Reality" (Metaverse, maybe?) that it purports to describe. Meanwhile, a new narrative tied to Africa's abundant mineral resources that are critical to the global energy transition has been born – a new scramble for Africa. It all sounds eerily familiar.

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Kenya's economic trajectory from near zero economic growth around 2000-2003 to fast-paced economic growth that peaked at around eight per cent under the Kibaki Administration was a powerful example of the Africa Rising narrative.

kenya lens**■ REGIONAL POLITICS**

BY JOSEPH MBOYA

Three major events that took place last week—the naming of principal secretary nominees to run the Kenya Kwanza administration, the call by a section of politicians led by former Nairobi Governor Evans Kidero for ODM leader Raila Odinga to quit active politics, and the launch of a maize flour brand by the Homa Bay county government—had a major bearing on and sparked a fierce debate about the political future of Luo Nyanza.

First, the naming of the PS nominees was the talk of town. A good number of commentators in conversations and social media had different views on the appointments. There were those who felt that the Luo Nation had been handed the short end of the stick by President William Ruto's administration by getting only two slots.

The slots were for the Interior and Coordination of National Government, which went to Raymond Opollo, while Alfred K'Ombudo who was named PS for Trade. It is interesting that people from the region felt short-changed by Ruto yet they overwhelmingly voted for Odinga in the August 9 polls.

What these people fail to realise is the fact that ours being winner-take-all politics, Ruto had no obligation whatsoever to appoint to his government anyone from areas that did not give him substantial votes.

It was perhaps to create a government that mirrored the face of Kenya, or just personal considerations, that the two were allowed into government.

According to those in the know, Omollo, who had been serving as the boss at the Lake Basin Development Authority, stood firm against the wave that saw senior government officials back the Azimio la Umoja bandwagon in the period leading up to the elections.

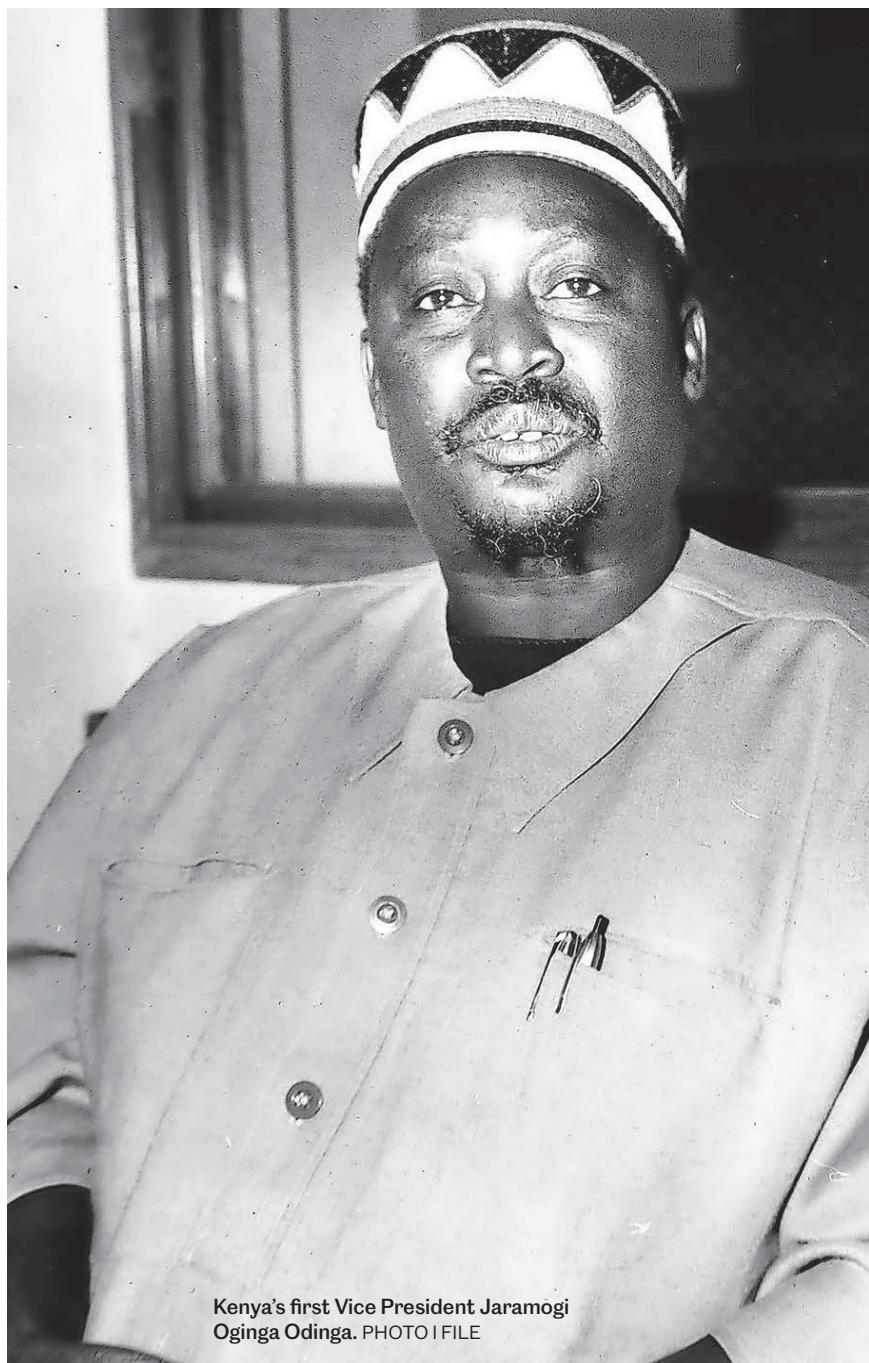
He is said to have been a key supporter of the UDA leader in very hostile territory and for his troubles, he bagged the powerful docket. In their excitement, some of Omollo's admirers have hacked back to the days when another Luo, the late Hezekiah Oyugi, wielded great power sitting on the same seat.

Known as "kalam maduong (Powerful Pen)" by his admirers, Oyugi was a power unto himself, giving jobs to fawning fans at whim and using his office to make serious policy decisions to favour his native South Nyanza district (now split into Homa Bay and Migori counties).

But his supporters must realise that Omollo will be operating in an environment where the President is more in charge. Not forgetting the fact that, unlike Oyugi, who 'reigned' at a time when Kenya was a single party state and the word of the President and those close to him was the law, Omollo will be discharging his duties to a politically literate population who will run to court at the slightest hint of a breach of the law. On the other hand, K'Ombu-

RESTLESS WATERS

Recent events spark fierce debate about the political and economic future of Luo Nyanza



Kenya's first Vice President Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. PHOTO | FILE

kenya lens

2027

It is a call borne by the argument that, at 77, Odinga is at an age where he should call it quits from active politics. The argument gathers more weight when looked at against the milieu that, when the next polls are held in 2027, Odinga will be 82.

do, who boasts a spectacular CV, is said to have been a key member of Ruto's economic advisory team, which created the bottoms-up economic model that the President sold at all the campaign rallies he addressed when canvassing for the highest office in the land.

The son of long-serving Nyakach MP Ojwang' K'Obundo has had an interesting career that saw him work at the International Trade Centre. His bio on LinkedIn mentions that he "is a multi-award winning advisor of African governments offering solutions to the most complex development challenges they face, and has experience in over 14 African countries.

Through senior assignments at the World Bank, International Finance Corporation, UNDP, East Africa Trade and Investment Hub and International Trade Centre, Alfred has designed and implemented ground-breaking economic development, trade and in-



There is a narrative being driven that the group calling for Raila Odinga to quit politics is pushing for a South Nyanza-North Nyanza divide in Luo politics, a throwback to the 1960s, when Tom Mboya, who hailed from the present-day Homa Bay County, was a counterweight to Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, who was from present-day Siaya County.



Homa Bay Governor Gladys Wanga



Former Nairobi Governor Evans Kidero

According to those in the know, Omollo, who had been serving as the boss at the Lake Basin Development Authority, stood firm against the wave that saw senior government officials back the Azimio la Umoja bandwagon in the period, leading up to the elections. He is said to have been a key supporter of the UDA leader in very hostile territory and for his troubles, he bagged the powerful docket. In their excitement, some of Omollo's admirers have hacked back to the days when another Luo, the late Hezekiah Oyugi, wielded great power sitting on the same seat.

vestment projects."

On to Kidero and his associates with their call for Odinga to leave and create space for others: Ever since he lost to Ruto in the August 9 presidential poll, Odinga has heard this chorus almost on a daily basis. And it is a sticking point among his supporters, the majority of whom are from Luo Nyanza.

It is a call borne by the argument that, at 77, Odinga is at an age where he should call it quits from active politics.

The argument gathers more weight when looked at against the milieu that, when the next polls are held in 2027, Odinga will be 82.

There is a narrative being driven that the group calling for Odinga to quit politics is pushing for a South Nyanza-North Nyanza divide in Luo politics, a throwback to the 1960s, when Tom Mboya, who hailed from the present-day Homa Bay County, was a counterweight to Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, who was from present-day Siaya County. Those in this camp accuse Kidero, who is also Mboya's son-in-law, of being behind the scheme.

The reality is that, come 2027, if he chooses to run, Raila will have a Herculean task in trying to turn the tables on Ruto.

With the support of the system of the day, he lost to Ruto in this year's polls. With Ruto having the benefit of incumbency in the next elections, it will be a miracle if Odinga gets past him to bag the prize that has eluded him five times in the past — the presidency.

Finally, Homa Bay Governor Gladys Wanga recently launched a maize flour brand known as 'Mokwa' (our flour), creating a buzz with the presence of Odinga at the launch.

Many believe that the counties of Luo Nyanza should explore ways of exploiting local resources to build industries that will not only provide employment but also contribute to the general economic empowerment of the region.

It is a sad fact that more than 10 years into devolution, not a single county in the resource-rich region has put up an industry that can stand out for its contribution to the well-being of the residents.

This initiative by Wanga should inspire some healthy sibling rivalry among the governors of Siaya, Kisumu and Migori, the other counties making up Luo Nyanza.

africa lens

■ CLIMATE CHANGE SUMMIT RAISES PRESIDENT'S PROFILE

THE SISI COMMAND



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi

Since taking power in 2013, the general has faced accusations of presiding over what some international human rights organisations have described as the ‘worst clampdown on human rights in the country’s modern history’

● BY LEVIN OPIYO

The COP 27 summit in Egypt has provided a platform for President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to bolster his international image amid concerns about his government's human rights record.

The summit, whose top agenda is to help four billion people adapt to climate change by 2030, is being attended by world leaders, most of whom have embraced el-Sisi despite his heavy handedness.

Even though British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and US President Joe Biden had earlier expressed their intentions of raising hu-

man rights issues with Sisi, nothing more than lip service could be expected from them. In fact, their concerns were mainly about the citizens of their countries detained in Egypt on trumped-up charges.

This is even as UN human rights expert and advocates of free speech continue to raise concerns about draconian measures introduced prior to the summit by the Egyptian government to prevent demonstrators and protesters coming anywhere close to the resort city of Sharm el-Sheikh, where the leaders and delegates are meeting.

Since taking power in 2013, el-Sisi, a military general-turned-politician, has faced accusations of presiding over what some inter-

national human rights organisations have described as the “worst clampdown on human rights in the country’s modern history”.

According to Humans Rights Watch in its Middle East-North Africa report, el-Sisi’s government has imprisoned tens of thousands of government critics, including journalists, peaceful activists and human rights defenders on abusive “terrorism charges”.

However, the Egyptian government has often defended itself against these accusations by emphasising that extraordinary measures were needed in order to defeat terrorism. The truth is that while el-Sisi deserves a pat on

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africa lens

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the back for eliminating most terrorist groups that were thriving in Egypt, he has also been using the fight against terrorism as a cover to crack down on dissidents and critics.

The cover of fighting terrorism does not only offer his administration a defence line against human rights accusations levelled against it, but also endears it to the US and European countries, whose pursuit of strategic interests in the Middle East supersede the demand for human rights.

Early this year, in the run-up to the European Union-African Union summit in Brussels, Amnesty International warned Europe leaders that they risked legitimising el-Sisi's crackdown on human rights if they only concerned themselves with their countries' interests.

"EU leaders must not offer him an opportunity to whitewash Egypt's deeply repressive policies," said Eve Geddie, Director of Amnesty International's EU office. "By continuing to pursue business-as-usual relations with Egypt, the EU risks undermining its own credibility."

US leaders, in particular, have been the coziest with el-Sisi. At the tail end of his presidency, Donald Trump, while hosting el-Sisi at the White House, described the Egyptian leader as a "great president, doing a great job" also pointing out that "we've never had a better relationship than we do right now". This was happening at a time when 12 Americans were languishing in Egyptian jails on what US law makers described as "dubious charges".

A couple of months later, while waiting to meet Sisi at Hotel du Palais during the G7 summit in France, Trump left everyone dumb-

Cop27 gives Egyptian president political capital

founded when he shouted: "Where is my favourite dictator?" Although the remarks were made in jest, they highlighted Trump's apparent ease with the Egyptian leader.

Joe Biden, who by then was campaigning to become US president on a Democratic Party ticket, was so irked by the Trump-el-Sisi "strategic bromance" that when Mohamed Amashah, an American citizen of Egyptian ancestry, was released from an Egyptian prison, he wrote a tweet chiding the friendship and el-Sisi's brutality. "No more blank checks for Trump's favourite dictator. Arresting, torturing, and exiling activists or threatening their families is unacceptable," he tweeted.

Even though el-Sisi was the first Arab leader to congratulate Biden when he won the election, his government was in great panic over the ramification of a Biden presidency on Egypt-US relations, especially in view of his stand on human rights.

"Egyptian officials have always rejected discussions about human rights," said Egyptian



A man tries to get a selfie with French President Emmanuel Macron at the COP27 climate conference at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt on November 7.

journalist Khalid al-Balshi. "They therefore view anyone who raises these issues as an enemy of the Egyptian government."

El-Sisi's government was so anxious that it hired a top US lobby firm to help improve the relations and build its image before Biden's administration. But as Biden settled in the White House, his firm stand on el-Sisi's administration melted as he began getting cozy with the Egyptian强man.

This drew condemnation from critics who accused him of being about-faced. "The Biden administration frequently proclaims it is placing human rights and democracy at the centre of US foreign policy, yet it has disgracefully chosen to cosy up to vicious dictator Abdel Fattah," said Washington-based think tank Project on Middle East Democracy (POME).

The prioritisation of strategic interests over human rights by the Biden administration is further underscored by the enormous military aid it has been giving to the Egyptian government. Last year alone it gave Egypt military aid worth \$1.1 billion, but tried to save face by withholding a meagre \$225 million for what it described as human rights concerns.

According to Mohamad Elmasry, an associate professor of media studies at Doha Institute of Graduate Studies, this aid serves as a green light for el-Sisi to continue with his crackdown on human rights activists.

So why do world powers, especially the US, appear measured in their dealings with Egypt?

The answer lies in remarks made by Dalia Youssef, an Egyptian parliamentary and a staunch supporter of el-Sisi, who stated: "It is difficult for any American president to overlook Egypt. The US cannot protect its interests in the region in the absence of a strong ally like Egypt."

Some of the main reasons that make Egypt of great strategic importance is that it controls the Suez Canal, one of the world's most important waterways, and also it is one of two stable and friendly countries that share a border with Israel. As a result, US greatly relies on it for the stability of the Middle East and the security of Israel.

For instance, Egypt has always given US military vessels preferential passage through the Suez, and war planes access to its airspace. This is part of a military collaboration that has existed for close to 30 years now and whose aim is to contribute to the stability of the middle east.

Cairo has also been instrumental in helping Israel reinforce its 15-year-long blockade of the Gaza Strip, which is supported by the US.

Buoyed by this strategic importance, el-Sisi will continue with his crackdown on critics and political rivals in a bid to tighten his grip on Egypt. If anything, he is one man who has perfected the art of manipulation to salvage his dented image, depending on the situation. For instance, when he realised Biden was winning the election, he released hundreds of prisoners, and in the period leading to COP27, he released 1,500 others.

global lens

■ BURIED PHONES, BRIBES AND PARANOIA



A child looks through a fence as war-displaced Ukrainians arrive at a humanitarian relief centre in the central Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhia on November 7 from the Russian-held town of Berdyansk, amid the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Psychiatrists at the humanitarian relief centre prepare to receive those displaced by war, offering them immediate counselling and further guidance.

LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION

Russia has imposed martial law and curtailed communications across four Ukrainian regions it proclaimed as its own in September

• KYIV

One couple buried their phones in the garden to keep them from being seized by the Russian invaders. Others gave away their cars or paid bribes to get Russian troops to let them flee to Ukrainian-held land.

And many more lost their businesses and homes to the new rulers of Kherson and its neighbouring region of Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine's war-shattered south.

The accounts of life under occupation by

those who managed to escape tell a tale of near-total paranoia and subjugation to the whims of soldiers and Kremlin appointees.

Russia has imposed martial law and curtailed communications across four Ukrainian regions it proclaimed as its own in September.

None are under full Kremlin control and all are enduring heavy fighting in the third month of Ukraine's pushback into captured lands.

Lack of independent media access to Russia-held regions makes these stories nearly im-

possible to independently verify.

But the pattern they paint does not easily fit with the version Kremlin media portray for their domestic audience. "It was incredibly scary," said former Zaporizhzhia nuclear power station engineer Anton Ovcharov.

The Russian-held plant — Europe's largest — is near the scene of constant shelling and only has enough power to keep its six shut reactors from melting down. "Our entire city is

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global lens

The misery and terror of life under Russia

Continued from Page 27

full of strangers with guns," the 44-year-old Energodar native said.

Lyudmyla and Oleksandr Shevchuk said Russian troops in their Kherson region village of Kachkarivka would barge into people's homes and seize mobile phones.

The 56-year-old husband and wife said the Russians probably feared that locals would give their positions away to Ukrainian forces near the front. "They would walk from house to house with their weapons. Then they would throw all the phones in a bucket and walk away," Lyudmyla said.

"We would bury our phones. Everyone would do that. The ones that didn't bury theirs in time — all of them lost theirs."

Mother-of-two Iryna Mykhaylena said soldiers once stopped her and her daughter in the middle of the street in the Zaporizhzhia region city of Berdyansk.

"They rifled through her bag, looking for her phone. That same day, my friend's 12-year-old was walking down the street alone and was also stopped. They also searched her bag," the 43-year-old realtor said.

"You have to delete all your correspondence — God forbid you say something somewhere against Russia. No one feels safe."

Russia has been rushing families into areas under its firmer control as Ukraine slowly fights its way deeper into Kherson.

But those who escaped in the opposite direction said soldiers were ready to drive people up to Ukrainian positions — for a price.

"You used to be able to pay them off with vodka but now you have to really pay," said a Kherson-region woman who agreed to be identified only as Olga for fear of retribution.

"The Russians would take you out and then come back and take your belongings," the 57-year-old resident of partially-recaptured Dudchanы said.

Oleksandr Shevchuk said his friends handed over their car keys to the Russians to be let through. "We later saw the soldiers driving around in that car," he said.

The husband and wife said the soldiers also put "psychological pressure" on Kherson residents to move to the Kremlin-annexed peninsula of Crimea instead.

"They were happy to drive you in that direction," the husband said. The phones that the Kachkarivka villagers buried all had to use Russian SIM cards and could only access sites approved by Moscow censors.

The transition is part of a Russification drive that has forced local officials to either switch sides or face arrest.

Kherson region native Nina Bezguba said she fled her village of Nizhni Serohozy when soldiers from Chechnya — a region under command of feared strongman Ramzan Kadyrov



A woman holds her child as they arrive from the Russian-held town of Berdyansk, at a humanitarian relief centre in the central Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhia on November 7, amid the Russian military invasion on Ukraine.



Ukrainian men talk to AFP after they managed to flee from the Russian-occupied territory of Kherson in Zaporizhzhia on November 5.

—flooded in two weeks ago.

"The Chechens are taking over our homes," the unemployed 44-year-old said.

"I would say 60 per cent of the population is now Chechen."

Many described locals across the occupied territories staying home as much as possible to avoid contact with the Russians.

The realtor, Mykhaylena, said the occupation authorities were using their new powers to confiscate profitable businesses such as resorts and hotels in her Sea of Azov city.

"They come with the commandant, point their finger, say they want this, and that's it," the Berdyansk native said.

But not everyone was giving up without a fight. Olaksandr Gorbonosov said he and his friends would pour sugar into Russian military fuel tanks to make the machines — if only briefly — inoperable.

"But then we understood it was no use. They would just go up to farmers and threaten to burn down their equipment unless they gave them more fuel," the Energodar native said.

"I fled when the Russians figured out where we lived. There are so many informants."

global lens

■ RACKETEERING

CAMBODIA: THE ‘LIVING HELL’

Thousands of hopeless people in Asia being forced to operate online scams to line their Chinese captors' pockets

• SIHANOUKVILLE

Trafficked, beaten and locked up far from his family in China, Lu was one of thousands of people in Cambodia forced to operate online scams to line their captors' pockets.

Covid shutdowns had left the builder out of work, so when he heard he could earn \$2,000 a month on a construction project in Cambodia, he jumped at the chance.

But he soon realised he had been lured by a scamming gang to a compound in the seaside resort of Sihanoukville, along with hundreds of others. There he was forced to work 12- to 16-hour shifts, trawling social media and dating apps on the hunt for victims to scam out of huge sums. “Once I arrived it was too late to escape,” Lu said. “But as long as I was alive, I would keep trying.” People from countries around Asia — including Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Bangladesh and India — have been sucked into similar operations.

Some, like 34-year-old Lu, have made it out, though thousands of others are feared still trapped. In August, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia, Vitit Muntarbhorm, said the trafficking victims “were experiencing a living hell, often resulting in torture and even death”.

Sihanoukville was once a sleepy resort town, but it was transformed by a vast influx of Chinese investment. Dozens of casinos sprang up in recent years, making it a hub for Chinese gamblers and drawing in international crime groups. As travel restrictions bit during the pandemic, these groups shifted their focus. Jeremy Douglas of the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said “criminal groups moved casino businesses online, and some then did a pivot and added online and phone scams”.

One gang member told AFP on condition of anonymity that the first people to fall prey to operations like his were Chinese nationals already in Cambodia. Then gangs started trafficking people into the country.

Douglas said “thousands, and some have estimated possibly tens of thousands” of people have been ensnared. To stop victims from escaping, compounds were installed with metal window bars and barbed wire. “Once they arrived in the compound, they could not leave,” the gang member said. “People were beaten



A Cambodian worker carrying equipment as he clears a building of Chinatown district in Sihanoukville in Preah Sihanouk province on September 25. Dozens of casinos sprang up in recent years in Sihanoukville following Chinese investment, making the City a hub for gamblers and drawing in international crime groups. As travel restrictions bit during the pandemic, these groups shifted their focus from gambling to scams. INSET: A victim of a Chinese scamming gang shows a scar on his leg after he was tortured.

or tortured and sold if they refused to scam others.” Within Cambodia, some were sold on to other gangs, the source said. Those with good IT or English-language skills could be sold for up to \$50,000. AFP interviewed four trafficking victims who said they, too, received lucrative job offers during the pandemic.

A 38-year-old Malaysian Chinese man called Roy described flying to Phnom Penh and being met by a woman in smart office wear who whisked him through immigration and into a car for the five-hour drive to Sihanoukville.

There, he was taken to a complex of apartment blocks a dozen or so storeys tall, housing a mix of accommodation and office rooms. “It just looked like a normal office, with three rows of tables with monitors and keyboards, just like a cybercafe,” said.

But, he said, “once you get in you know you’re not doing customer service”. Roy and others like him had their passports taken away and were instructed to set up fake profiles on apps and dating sites including TikTok, Face-



book, Instagram and WhatsApp. Under the constant threat of violence, they would groom targets to pour money into cryptocurrency or other investment platforms. Others were forced to build online “love” relationships with their targets and to scam them under the guise of needing help to pay debts off.

There are no reliable figures on how much money the gangs have netted from the scams, though the UN’s Douglas said the numbers are “staggering”.

It is not clear where the money ends up, he added, though criminal proceeds are often bundled together with online betting profits, with many of the scam compounds located near legal gambling businesses.

The gang member in Sihanoukville told AFP he did not know who he was ultimately working for. “We don’t know who is who,” he said. “They are the real mafia.”

Forced scammers who resisted paid a high price. Construction worker Lu said he was “beaten quite often” because he was caught trying to escape.

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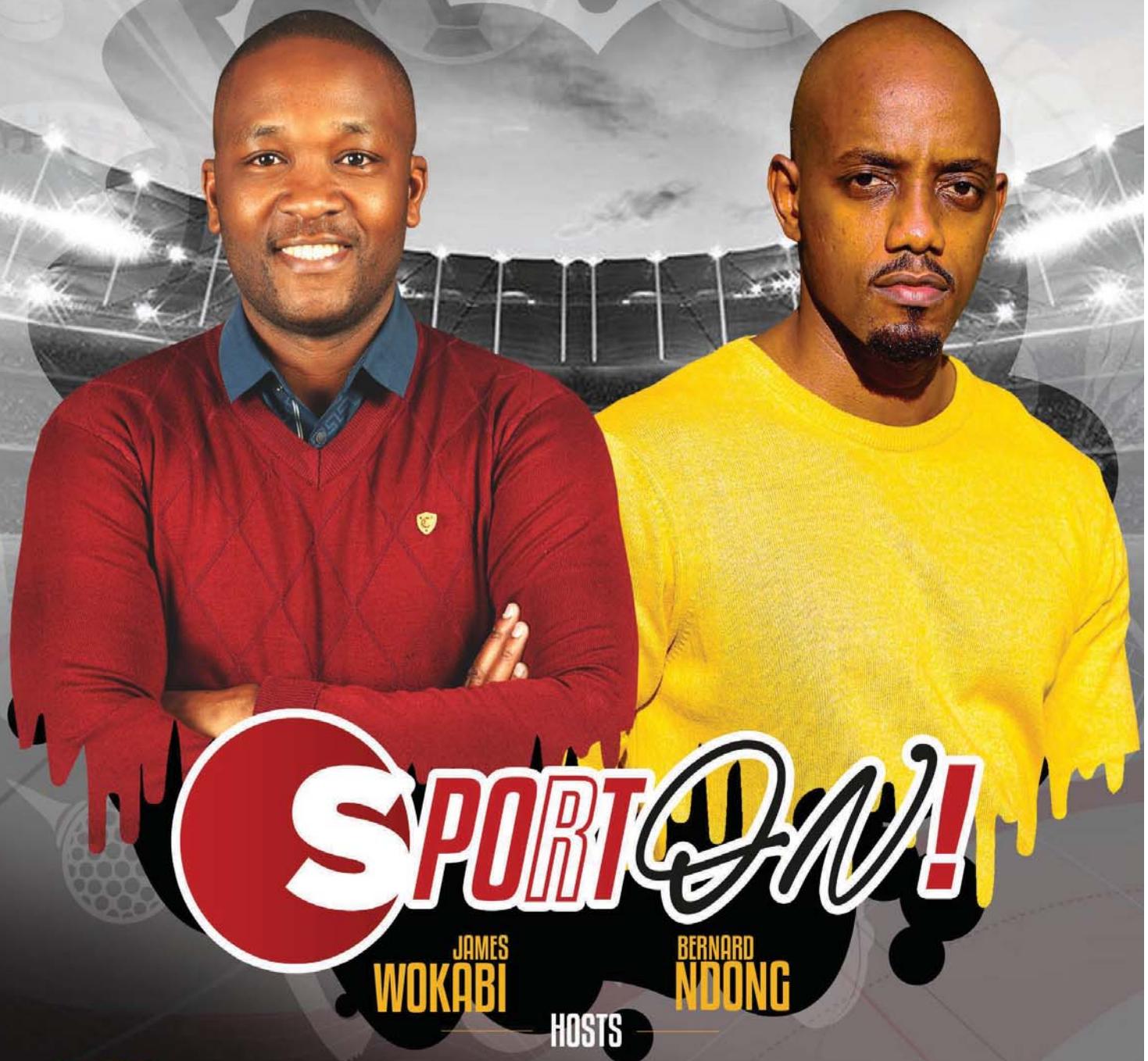
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