

## Africa Briefs

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### Russian Helicopters Arrive in Mali, Marking A Strategic Shift

On Oct. 1, Mali received a shipment of 4 helicopters from a Russian supplier, part of a contract signed in Dec. 2020. The aircraft were purchased to be used in the fight against Islamic State terrorists (ISIS, in its many forms, including Boko Haram), which have been plaguing the region for years.

As a bonus, the Russians included a generous supply of weapons and ammunition, to aid in the fight. There are also reports, unverified, that Mali has called on the private Russian security force, the Wagner Group, to provide private military forces to replace the French forces in fighting the terrorists.

This comes amidst a drastic strategic shift taking place in the western Sahel region, where Russia is slowly displacing France—the former colonial ruler—which has been largely discredited in the fight against the ISIS threat, which only continues to grow. In a press reception at the airport, Mali's Interim Defense Minister, Col. Sadio Camara, spoke of Russia as a “friendly country,” according to an Oct. 8 [report](#) in the *African Exponent*.

With that purchase as part of a discussion agenda, AFRICOM head Gen. Stephen Townsend and U.S. Ambassador to Mali Dennis Hankins had flown to Bamako Sept. 23, where the two met with Malian Transition President Assimi Goita and Defense Minister Camara. Mali was at a “critical juncture,” Townsend said, emphasizing the “long-standing partnership [with NATO that has] shed blood together.” On Sept. 27, U.S. Secretary of Defense

Lloyd Austin spoke with French Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly by phone and “applauded French leadership in countering terrorism in the region and assured her of continued U.S. support for this important mission,” according to the U.S. [readout](#).

In a clear response to Mali's action, the European Union has created its own version of the Wagner Group, Reuters [reported](#) Oct. 6. Called the Takuba Task Force, it is described as “a group of elite soldiers from across Europe charged with turning the tide in a decade-long Islamist insurgency that has killed thousands of civilians in the Sahel.”

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### Nigeria: Posterchild for African Pandemic Collapse

The UN Development Program (UNDP) released a 53-page [report](#) Sept. 13 intended to document the “disproportionate” effect the COVID-19 pandemic collapse has had on the economies of developing nations of the world. The title of the report: “The Impact of COVID-19 on Business Enterprises in Nigeria.” Nigeria was chosen, the authors say, because “The pandemic had an outsized socio-economic impact” on it, and because Nigeria “has one of the highest rates of multidimensionally poor individuals in the world.”

Concentrating on business losses, the report concludes that, because of the pandemic lockdowns, “Disruption in operations was evident across enterprises with at least two thirds of businesses currently operating in the country having had to close down during the pandemic.” The pandemic threw Nigeria's economy into “its worst recession in four decades,” while others have speculated that the pandemic set the

continent back ten years in its efforts to raise the standard of living of its people.

No mention is made in the report of how the resulting downturn might have been capitalized on by terrorist organizations currently ravaging Nigeria, or by the ongoing secessionist movements in the country, both of which feed off of the social disorientation and desperation which the lockdowns have caused.

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### Nuclear Power Making Headlines Across the Continent

Recently the nuclear power issue broke through media containment in Africa, as articles pro and con proliferate.

Examples include the training of Egyptian nuclear technicians in Russia—reported in Namibia; what Russia has to offer Africa in the nuclear field overall—covered in Nigeria's *Business Post*; the now ritual attacks in the South African press on South Africa's pro-nuclear Minister of Energy, Gwede Mantashe; and news of the security certification of Burkina Faso by the IAEA, a major step in the energy-starved country's quest for a reliable source of power generation.

In South Africa—currently the only African nation with a functioning nuclear power station—plans for a new build are generating optimism. Energy Minister Mantashe has announced a nuclear build of 2500 MW, now approved by the required government agencies. Build sites have been selected and EIAs completed. On Sept. 5, a lengthy [article](#) titled, “‘Mini’ Nukes Could Make a Comeback in South

Africa,” received a surprisingly wide circulation, including on the technical website MyBroadband.co.za. The article, credited to Netwerk24.com, went into significant detail on small modular reactors (SMRs), but also the South African Pebble Bed Modular Reactor (PBMR). The PMBR technology is being realized today in China, using fuel manufactured in South Africa. (Two of its pioneers, Dr. Eben Mulder and Dr. Martin van Staden, are today leading research for an 80 MWe SMR at a U.S. company, X-energy.)

The excitement has sparked a backlash of sorts, in the form of an article (also getting wide circulation) in South Africa’s *MoneyWeb*, Sept. 6, attempting to rally the anti-nuke troops to stop the snowballing of enthusiasm. The ultimate question raised by this cleverly crafted article, “Walking the Nuclear Dog,” is: “What was [South African] Deputy President David Mabuza really up to during his extended five-week leave in Russia in July?”

Officially, Mabuza was in Moscow for medical treatment, but the mere possibility that he might have been discussing nuclear options with this leading global nuclear power has the anti-nuclear and anti-Russia establishment fearing the worst.

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## Is Redlined Africa To Get a New Vaccine Manufacturing Facility?

A new report from *Statista* shows that, continent-wide, only 11% of Africans have been fully vaccinated (two doses), and another from the World Health Organization shows that 42 of Africa’s 54 countries have yet to vaccinate 10% of their most vulnerable (including elderly and first responders).

Aside from the sparsely-populated island (tourist) havens of Seychelles, Mauritius and Cape Verde, Africa is still struggling to both acquire and distribute Covid vaccines. The two most

densely-populated countries—Nigeria and Ethiopia—have just over 3% of their populations covered.

According to a [news release](#) issued Oct. 7, the U.S.-based Moderna, a biotechnology company, will invest up to \$500 million to “build a state-of-the-art messenger RNA (mRNA) facility in Africa,” capable of an annual production of 500 million doses of mRNA vaccines every year at the 50 mcg level. The facility is expected to include direct manufacturing as well as the final bottling and packaging steps. Although no country has yet been named, Moderna says it “expects to begin a process for country and site selection soon.”

“We view Moderna’s work as only just beginning. We expect to manufacture our COVID-19 vaccine as well as additional products within our mRNA vaccine portfolio at this facility,” Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel said in the release.

John Nkengasong, director of the African Union’s Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told Reuters that he had not seen the Moderna release and the company had not consulted with him. He welcomed any efforts to address the medium- and long-term needs of the continent, but stressed the urgent need for immediate action on providing vaccine doses in the short-term.

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## Tony Blair Behind Drive To Renegotiate Mining Contracts in DR Congo

On a visit in May to Kolwezi, in the mining region of Katanga, DR Congo President Felix Tshisekedi announced that the state will be examining all existing contracts with extraction companies, to uncover potential illegalities and negotiate better terms for the Congolese people. The time had come, he said, to “readjust contracts with the miners to seal win-win

partnerships,” according to an *AfricaNews* [report](#). The vast majority of these contracts—negotiated under the reign of his predecessor, Joseph Kabila (President 2001-2019), are with Chinese companies, as the mineral supply line for the most productive economy on the planet.

The geopolitical undertones have become more visible with the American J. Peter Pham—a former U.S. special envoy to the Great Lakes and Sahel regions, now a fellow at the imperial Atlantic Council—becoming the loudest voice in the room. After Pham gave a resounding endorsement to President Tshisekedi’s decision, Zhu Jing, China’s Ambassador to the DR Congo, warned that the country “must not become the battleground for great powers,” and that “no one has the right to use the country, a sovereign and independent state, to satisfy its own interests,” according to a Sept. 15 [report](#) in the *South China Morning Post*.

Nonetheless, when DRC officials suspended the operations of six Chinese companies over illegal mining and destruction of the environment, the Chinese government ordered the companies to close down and leave the country, demanding that all Chinese companies follow the host country’s laws.

Behind this on-stage uproar is another imperial actor, the British. Reliable reports have put operatives of former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Institute for Global Change in the middle of Congo’s administration during the past year. A report on the mining contracts has now been prepared by the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which is due to be released within the next few weeks. While the report deals with the mining sector in DR Congo alone, the claim is being spread to other nations that *all* Chinese contracts harbor unfavorable clauses for host countries. Currently headquartered in Norway, the EITI was started by Blair in 2002, at a summit in Johannesburg.