

Weekly ^{THE} Review

For the Thinking Person

ISSUE NO. 17 | December 25, 2022 FREE WITH SUNDAY NATION



PULLING APART

Ruto administration's quest for economic recovery stymied by a sore lack of congruence between monetary and fiscal policy. As National Treasury pushes for budget cuts while yielding to political pressure to spend on pet projects, CBK has been striving for a tight monetary situation while still allowing the proliferation of mobile loans

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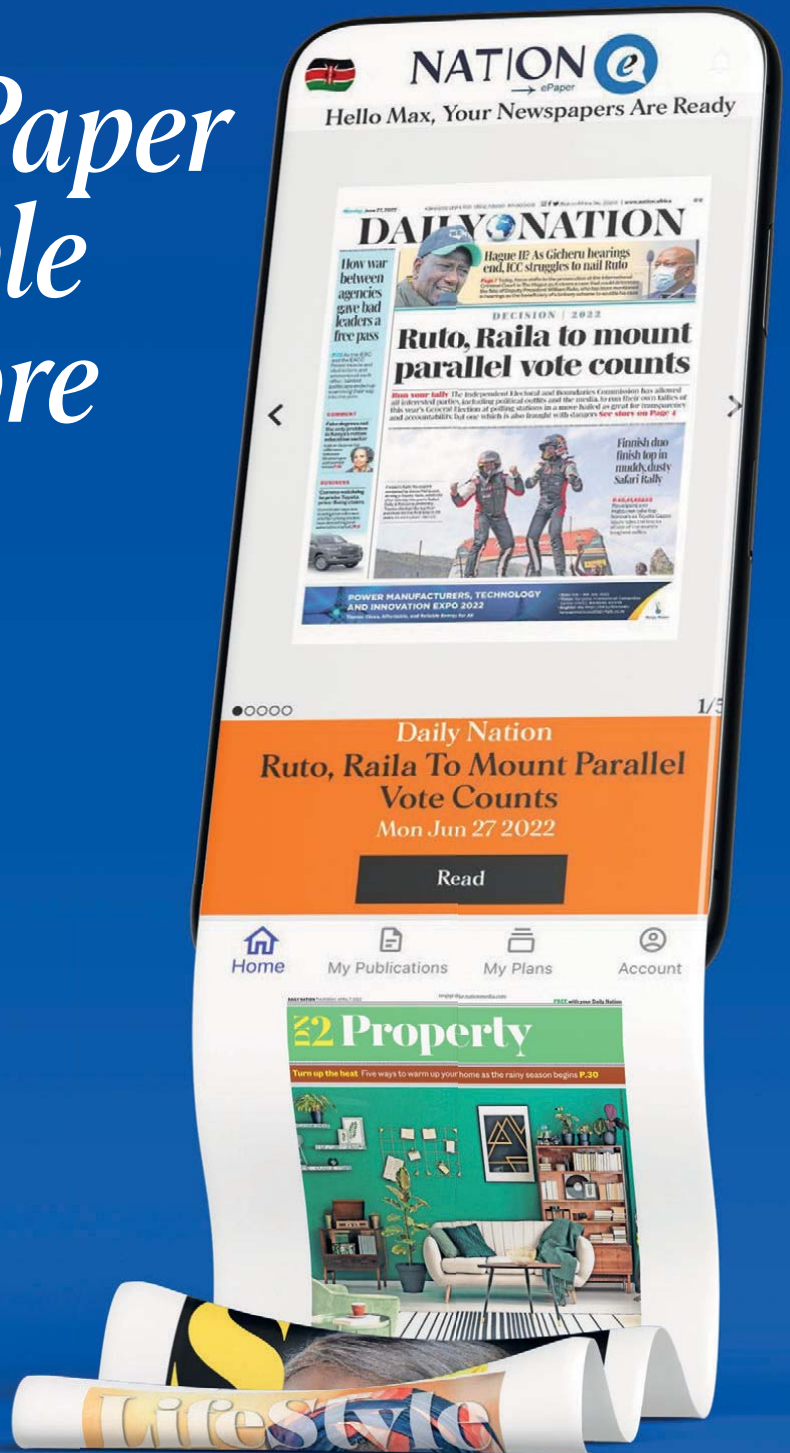
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letter from the editor

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Why it will take more than great slogans to replicate Kibaki's economic miracle

This has been a difficult year for most Kenyans, by many measures.

A searing drought saw millions nurse hunger pangs, with official government estimates showing that up to four million citizens were in desperate need for food aid.

Fuel prices hit historical highs, transmitting through the economy in the form of sharp increases in the prices of goods and services.

The Russia-Ukraine war disrupted global supply chains, triggering a surge in prices of a wide range of commodities and raw materials that kept the annual inflation rate well above the Central Bank of Kenya's 7.5 percent upper limit for most of the year.

Many African countries, Kenya included, were hard hit as they were forced to take even more expensive debts just to stay afloat and buy relief food for starving citizens.

Just this month, Ghana did what looked unthinkable only a few years ago.

Accra suspended payments on most of its external debts, including Eurobonds, commercial loans and most bilateral loans, effectively defaulting on its obligations.

The country that only a few years ago was cited as a beacon of economic excellence in Africa has been experiencing what has been termed as its worst economic crisis in a generation. More than 1,000 protestors marched through the capital last month, calling for the resignation of the president and denouncing deals with the IMF, which they say have made the cost of living



Washington Gikunju

Many African countries, Kenya included, were hard hit as they were forced to take even more expensive debts just to stay afloat and buy relief food for starving citizens. Just this month, Ghana did what looked unthinkable only a few years ago.

unbearable.

A harbinger for things to come for other equally debt burdened African countries?

Only time will tell.

What is not in doubt, however, is that it will take extra-ordinary efforts for Nairobi and other distressed African economic citadels to reverse the current slide.

As this week's lead story attempts to demonstrate, it will take more than just great slogans to replicate the years of economic boom under former President Mwai Kibaki.

The author of the cover story, reputed economist Mbui Wagacha, warns against policy dissonance that could lead to a situation of a government functioning at cross-purposes.

He argues that the Hustler Fund, for example, a populist campaign promise that to a large extent delivered a win for the Kenya Kwanza government, does not sit well with the Central Bank of Kenya's (CBK's) conservative monetary policy.

While CBK is attempting to tighten the purse strings with an eye on inflation, the Hustler Fund wants to put cash in every hustler's pocket, effectively generating inflationary pressures. The quest for quick economic recovery, he cautions, should not trump age-old economic practices that call for coordinated fiscal and monetary policy stances.

The National Treasury cannot be calling for budget cuts, while still yielding to political pressures to spend on pet projects.

Equally, CBK cannot be advocating for a tight monetary policy outlook and yet allowing for proliferation of mobile loans, whose regulation is now firmly under its ambit.

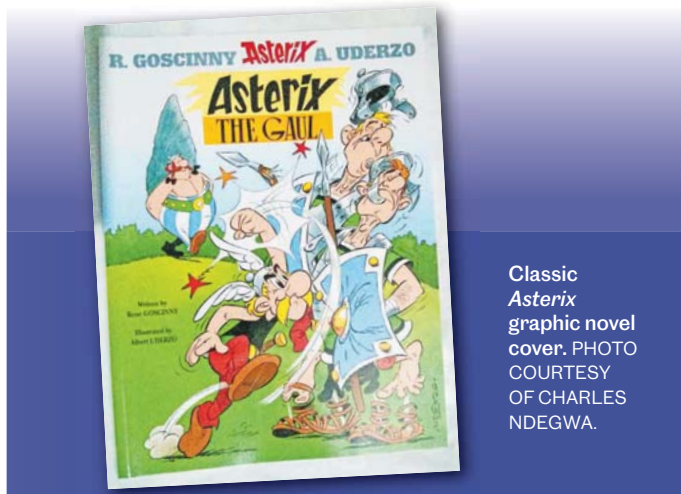
In the end, economic take-off will require a truism to economic principles, and independence from political interference.

The Kenya Kwanza administration must appreciate that it is one thing for politicians to promise a bottom-up economic model, and a whole different ball game to let economists do their thing to achieve it.

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the telescope

■ Title of the forthcoming book remains a secret



Classic *Asterix* graphic novel cover. PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARLES NDEGWA.

‘Asterix’ takes on new writer for 2023

Popular French comic book series *Asterix* will turn a new page for its forthcoming 40th volume, with a new writer chosen to pen next year’s instalment, the publisher said Tuesday.

French novelist and comic book author Fabcaro, who is known for his absurdist humour, will be the fourth scriptwriter to carry on the adventure of the indomitable Gaul, who stood against the Romans.

As is tradition, the next volume will come out in an odd-numbered year, with the latest release planned for October 26, 2023, publisher Albert Rene said.

The title of the forthcoming book remains a secret.

Asterix – defender of the last Gaulish village holding out against the Roman empire – was dreamed up

in 1959 by Rene Goscinny, who died in 1977, and Albert Uderzo, who died in 2020.

The comic books have sold hundreds of millions of copies worldwide.

Before the *Asterix* series, there was no history of comics having a scriptwriter. Fabcaro, 49, said he was excited to be taking on the task.

“I was a huge fan of *Asterix*. This is a great gift to the child that I once was,” he said. “I want to stay faithful to... what makes *Asterix* so appealing. With classic ingredients such as the anachronisms, the puns... And especially remain faithful to the characters.”

As the new writer Fabcaro follows in the footsteps of previous authors Goscinny, Uderzo and Jean-Yves Ferri.

■ Media barred from attending hearings

Suu Kyi’s trial enters final phase

A junta court will hear the final arguments in the 18-month-long trial of Myanmar’s Aung San Suu Kyi next week, a legal source said on Tuesday, before reaching its final verdict against the Nobel laureate.

Suu Kyi has been a prisoner since the military toppled her government in February 2021, ending the Southeast Asian nation’s brief period of democracy.

She has been convicted on

14 charges, ranging from corruption to illegally possessing walkie-talkies and flouting Covid restrictions.

The junta court will hear “final arguments” from both sides related to five remaining charges of corruption on December 26, according to a source with knowledge of the case.

“The verdict will be given after that stage,” the source said, adding a date had not yet been set.

Suu Kyi, 77, appeared in good health, the source said.

Each corruption charge carries a maximum jail term of 15 years.

Journalists have been barred from attending the court hearings and Suu Kyi’s lawyers have been banned from speaking to the media.

In June, she was transferred from house arrest in military-built Naypyidaw to a prison compound, where her trial continues at a special court.

The military alleged widespread voter fraud during the November 2020 election, won resoundingly by Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy party, although international observers said the poll was largely free and fair.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the coup, with over 2,500 killed in the military’s crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group.



Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in this file photo taken on January 17, 2020. PHOTO IAFP

■ Sh600 million raised for Asal residents

Beating hunger this festive season



The National Steering Committee on Drought Response is set to step up humanitarian assistance efforts to more than four million Kenyans in arid and semi-arid lands (Asals) facing acute food shortage.

The committee’s chairperson, Safaricom Chief Executive Officer Peter Ndegwa, says they have raised slightly over Sh600 million to feed Asal residents this festive season. The committee is targeting to raise Sh57.36 billion to fund drought response between January and October 2023.

Kenyans have been called upon to contribute through Pay bill number 880990 or KCB account number 1305486137.

■ Meru Governor will know her fate this week

Senate team to probe Kawira charges



Embattled Meru Governor Kawira Mwangaza will this week know whether her impeachment by Meru MCAs will continue before the Senate or it will be dropped.

On Tuesday last week, senators established a special 11-member

committee to investigate charges levelled against the first-term governor. The committee has 10 days to go through the seven particulars of the allegations against Kawira and determine whether the charges have been substantiated.

The committee will have to report back to the Senate on or before December 30, 2022 with its findings.

Governor Mwangaza will be required to appear to answer to the charges levelled against her during the week.

kenya lens

■ QUEST FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND STABILITY

PULLING IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

For Kenya's economy to recover, the right fiscal-monetary policy mix has to be struck. But the CBK and the National Treasury have been working at cross purposes

• By Dr Mbui Wagacha

Recently, as a panellist at the World Bank Kenya Economic Update (KU) Edition No.26, which was held on December 8, 2022, a discussion arose on the appropriate macroeconomic policy mix (fiscal and monetary sides) needed to strengthen economic recovery, starting with short-run year-to-year changes in production, incomes and demand.

The economy is still impeded principally by a weak fiscal position and lack of policy pronouncements and coordination underpinning how the policy mix is to be implemented for a rebound. The key ambiguity means that the two sides are not working together to shield the economy from recent contractions, job cuts and financial volatilities.

For two decades after the Moi regime, Kenya's leadership has attempted to achieve the mix and revive the economy through short-run, medium-term and long-term measures with varying degrees of success and failure.

Purposeful leaders go to great lengths to beat economic collapse, applying headline policy mix and persevering heated public debates to take unconventional steps, if necessary. The results can rescue the economy, as in the case of US Fed's Bernanke in the 2008-09 financial crisis.

A bail-out of banks with taxpayer dollars was frowned upon, but

it proved to be the bold step the US needed for the far greater good to rescue the economy; repayments with interest were made after recovery. In contrast, the Euro zones struggled with the mix problem.

In Kenya, the topmost victim of the policy ambiguities of the outgoing Jubilee government and shocks from Covid-19 plus the Russia/Ukraine conflict is agriculture, where most Kenyans subsist, with a share of about 20 per cent of GDP.

Its contraction year on year by 1.5 per cent for the first half of 2022 contributed 0.3 per cent to GDP contraction. The results are increased poverty and inequality, massive unemployment, and low incomes that can be revamped with higher productivity, agro-processing and irrigation.

Data shows worsening incomes overall. The majority of the 2.9 million individuals employed in Kenya's formal sector dangle in the lower wage brackets, with only 358,833 (15 per cent) earning more than Sh100,000 per month. Some 1.18 million workers (40 per

cent) earn below Sh50,000 per month and at least 51,770 earn below the national average of Sh20,123. In contrast, 3,362 Kenyans were dollar millionaires at the end of 2021, and are projected to reach 4,274 by 2026.

The National Treasury's high-level team at the World Bank meeting owned up to the Bank's prognosis that responses to recent shocks must involve agriculture as a priority, and in policy mix, smart spending cuts could improve fiscal space, while credit must be switched to the private sector to unleash levelled growth and reverse the trends mentioned above.

The mix can normally be achieved through forceful coordination of more affordable lending in the financial system and cuts in government spending. Unfortunately, the CBK currently tightens interest rates citing global trends, not in coordination with the fiscal side. The latter then blows hot and cold, randomly fueling spending or announcing spending cuts, sometimes contradicting, or even re-

versing, its own pronouncements.

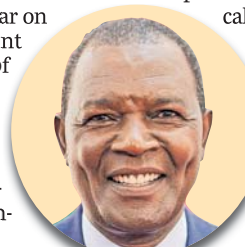
The President is not properly advised on both sides. The CBK, for example, drags its feet on regulation to tame widespread predatory encroachment of the monetary policy space by digital lenders from the rich north riding on mobile capabilities to turn segments of our society into predatory labs.

Never mind the stark mistakes of the Jubilee regime that bequeathed Kenya a blighted economic outlook. The Kenya Kwanza regime will benefit from studying the merits and demerits of two decades of attempts at economic recovery and stability. One singles out the Moi/Kibaki transition, which the giants of macro-policy mix, Mundell, Tinbergen, Tobin, and Okun, would applaud.

Fig. 1 depicts the growth performance of that era that resurrected GDP growth from the collapse inherited from Moi, to 8.4 per cent by 2010 from a paltry 0.5 per cent in 2002. The trough to a GDP growth rate of only 0.2 per cent in 2008 demonstrates how Kibaki wielded macro-policy mix to regain momentum after the financial crisis of 2008-09 that followed Kenya's tribal clashes. Growth recovered to reach 8.4 per cent by 2010. How was this achieved?

After 2002, an announced position to decrease borrowing from

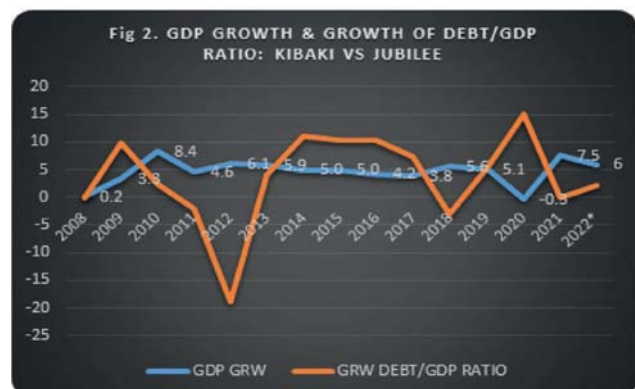
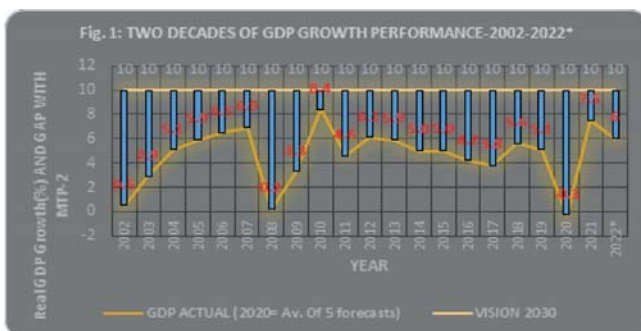
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kenya lens

At cross-purposes

Continued from Page 5

CBK lowered credit to government, switching it to the private sector for year-on-year increases in output, demand, and incomes. Growth reached 6.9 per cent by 2007. The debt/GDP ratio of 60 per cent was trimmed to 40 per cent by 2008 through investment, pick-up in jobs, growth in KRA revenues and repayment of debt.

Fig 1 also shows how the outgoing Jubilee regime underperformed by Kibaki standards from 2013. The performances of 2021-2022 (first half) are outliers reflecting the revival from below zero GDP growth in 2020. The bars also indicate that only Kibaki stepped nearest to the Vision 2030 target GDP growth of 10 per cent compared with both the Moi and Jubilee regimes, who handed over disembowelled economies.

Furthermore, Fig 2 shows the Kibaki regime expended economic management to rebuilding a smooth debt-growth position trending downwards and engendering business confidence, while the Jubilee regime after 2013 crushed Kenya with debt, underperformance and explosive increases.

Growth of debt/GDP ratio was sharply reined in from 2009 to 2012 while escalating after handover to Jubilee government and roaring to a historic level by 2020.

What can be improved in the Kenya Kwanza approach? The lessons of policy mix propose that recovery (investment, output, jobs) can be triggered with a loose monetary policy (switching credit to private sector through commercial banks with the efficiencies of mobile services) and a tight fiscal side (reducing public expenditures); or it can be achieved with a loose fiscal side (increased spending) and a tight monetary policy (higher interest rates). Questions dog Kenya Kwanza on lack of credibility where the monetary and fiscal sides pull in different directions, even within each segment. The fiscal side still countenances laxity and tax muddles, irrational tax exemptions, neglect of IMF-identified tax concessions to investors that fail to benefit the economy with increased growth in investments, employment opportunities and affordable consumer prices.

Early commitments to cut spending by Sh300 billion and stark borrowing constraints now conflict with political pressures to spend, especially by regime honchos, on pet projects. The inconsistencies are blinding top leadership to the dangers ahead, while we dance like at the famed Devil's Pool at the edge of Victoria Falls. A slip-up in the macro-policy mix could plunge Kenya into the dark depths and would be catastrophic. On the other hand, a weak monetary side attempts tightening by trending global central banks, while encumbered at the door with digital players (including the Hustler Fund) that weaken even that policy.

The fact that private sector credit has risen in double digits since March 2022, to 12.5 per cent, means the tightening has little credibility. The policy rate against inflation leaves a negative real policy rate. The tightening looks like reining in private credit without conviction. Other baffling positions that would be resolved if central banking regulation were strengthened and coordinated with the National Treasury include tightening to control inflation while the current account is worsening and flooding in imported inflation.

As it is, the National Treasury itself has issued intriguing positions without foundational consultations. It addresses debt pressures with impracticable balance sheet remedies. We have so far heard about accessing new concessional loans (are they even available?) and switching them to repayment of domestic debt; and stoking a scuffle with Fitch, the global rating agency, for downgrading Kenya from B to B+ last week. The first remedy underrates key factors, inflation, and exchange rate movements, which could boost even post-switching concessional and other debt. A fight with Fitch could give someone in Kenya a bloodied nose from the financial markets. The only sure-fire route to recovery is to grow the sectors of the economy out of the woods under a policy mix.

Dr Mbui Wagacha, an economist, is a former Central Bank of Kenya chairman and advisor of the presidency

■ PORTRAIT OF AN EMERGING POPULIST

Riggy G has been busy establishing himself as the new Mt Kenya kingpin

MAN IN A HURRY



● By JOHN KAMAU

In politics, Geoffrey Rigathi Gachagua, 57, is anything but timid. For the last 100 days, the Nyeri-born politician has been busy entrenching himself and working on strategies that would solidify his leadership of the populous Mt Kenya region, which brings together the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu tribes into a single voting bloc.

Mr Gachagua could be a heartbeat away from the presidency – but that depends on how he plays

his national and Mt Kenya politics. Compared to the past 11 deputy presidents (previously known as vice-presidents), Gachagua is emerging as a populist and forceful politician with the kind of energy exhibited by Jaramogi Oginga Odinga in the 1960s and Dr Josephat Njuguna Karanja in the 1980s, before they were brought down. He also matches and shares the exuberance of Dr William Ruto, perhaps due to their background as Kanu activists in their university years.

In national politics, Gachagua

kenya lens

is a political rookie – but does not compare to Karanja when President Moi picked him as V-P on March 24, 1988, to replace the out-of-favour Mwai Kibaki. While Gachagua has served one term as Mathira MP, Dr Karanja had only served for 14 months as Mathare MP before he became V-P. Like Gachagua today, Karanja looked like a man in a hurry to entrench himself – much to the chagrin of Moi's inner circle. By trying to create a new centre of power around himself, Karanja was brought down after only 403 days in office, when Moi set two Central Kenya politicians, Kuria Kanyingi and David Mwenje, on him.

Karanja was first derided as a 'kneel-before-me politician' and then accused of 'acting' as President when Moi was abroad. Finally, Parliament passed a vote of no confidence in him.

Because of his new powerbase, it may be hard to ignore Gachagua in Kenya's political geography. While the Mt Kenya region went to the last election with no kingpin or point man, the emerging scenario is that Gachagua has assumed that mantle by dint of his position.

With the exit of former President Uhuru Kenyatta from local politics, the Mt Kenya political space was left without clear leadership. The defeat of Kenyatta's candidate, Raila Odinga, signalled the region's yearning for another person. More so, President Kenyatta did not pick a successor within the Mt Kenya region, hoping he would still retain relevance as king-maker. But, again, President Ruto's removal of his predecessor from local politics means the latter has less time to shepherd Mt Kenya politicians. For the last 100 days, former President Kenyatta has been engaged in the international scene, leading efforts to stabilise the Democratic Republic of Congo and handling the Ethiopian crisis. Moreover, with his hands full – and with a clear statesman mandate – President Kenyatta has opted to leave the chairmanship of the Azimio la Kenya-One Alliance, which effectively removes him from micro-managing politics in the Mt Kenya region.

With Uhuru's exit of Uhuru Kenyatta from local to international politics, Gacha-

gua would then remain the man to watch as the next powerful politico.

Thanks to the Constitution of 2010, Gachagua's position is guaranteed and he cannot be dropped the way Kibaki was after lengthy isolation, or in the style of Karanja. Thus, even if he exhibits ambitions to overshadow Ruto, it will be hard to impeach him under Article 150 – given the number of United Democratic Alliance (UDA) MPs from the Mt Kenya region and since the president needs him to win a second term.

At the moment, Gachagua knows he was not the popular pick within the UDA party, Kenya's version of a populist right-wing party that promotes a welfare state for the deserving and neoliberal policies for the undeserving. And that explains why for the last 100 days, he has spent his time building bridges – and putting roadblocks – to maintain his hold on the region. His critics argue that his inexperience in running government can be seen by his public policy pronouncement and roadside declarations that were the hallmark of the Kanu regime.

If he manages to eclipse other interests – and gets the backing of Mt Kenya politicians and business gurus who supported Raila in the last election – Gachagua will be the man to watch. Indeed, he will

not be a pushover in local politics. But that is only if he congeals the Mt Kenya region around his personality rather than the UDA party. Even among some UDA faithful, talk within the Mt Kenya region is that it requires its political party.

During the campaigns, President William Ruto had told various rallies that he was the new "Mt Kenya Kingpin," much to the chagrin of Uhuru's inner circle. Gachagua knows that Ruto was elected due to his regional popularity – or to deride President Kenyatta's so-called Deep State. But, as ethnic nationalism takes center stage within Mt Kenya region, it appears that Gachagua will occupy the same space occupied by Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi and Speaker Moses Wetang'ula in Western Kenya.

Last week, Nyeri governor Mutahi Kahiga, declared that Gachagua was the new Mt Kenya kingpin – and that all politicians and politics should rotate around him. He also attacked former Murang'a governor, Mwangi wa Iria, for leading an onslaught against Gachagua. The DP says he has set a deadline of December 31 to woo his Mt Kenya opponents within Azimio to rally behind him and President Ruto. However, recent events show that he has been building bridges and reaching out to the opposition. The election of former Kiambu MP Kanini Kega, a Jubilee candidate, into the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) through Gachagua's intervention was the first indicator of how he wants to play politics.

Gachagua has recently been on a roll, issuing directives during his rallies and ordering ministers on what to do. His new commanding tone and confidence are indicators of a man in charge of his politics. More so, he has emerged as a defender of Mt Kenya businesses. During a public meeting in his Nyeri backyard, the DP warned Nairobi governor Johnson Sakaia against interfering with matatus in Nairobi, arguing: "We are the ones who elected you." This was after an outcry from Mt Kenya matatu owners.

While Governors are not supposed to take orders from the National government, Gachagua is ready to cross that line. It may come with his new docket. After being sworn in as President, Ruto announced that part of Mr

Gachagua's mandate as DP was to "coordinate intergovernmental relations between the national government and county governments". How the DP interprets that mandate will determine the working relations between the national and county governments.

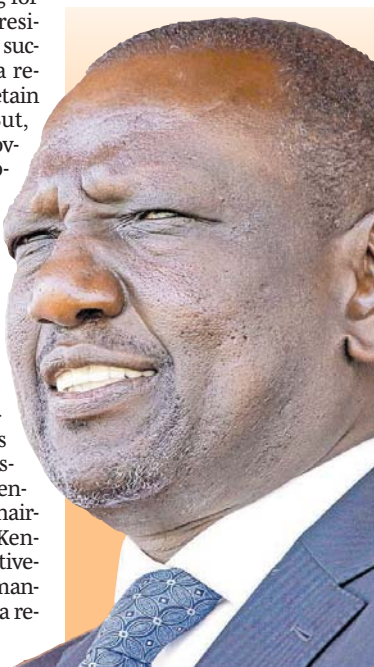
President Ruto unwittingly allowed Gachagua to create a new power base by giving the DP specific national roles. How far that will go before Gachagua collides with other interests or steps on some toes remains to be seen. During his reign as DP, Ruto had a hard time when President Kenyatta did not assign him any specific role. Unlike previous Vice-Presidents under Jomo Kenyatta, Moi and Mwai Kibaki, who were assigned ministerial positions, Ruto watched as Cabinet secretaries were given duties that the DP would otherwise perform. Though the new 2010 Constitution left the Deputy President minus any substantial role apart from being a principal assistant to the President, Ruto's decision to empower his deputy with critical duties comes with its political risks. He cannot take them away without a political fallout.

When Jaramogi was given such mandates, he stepped on various toes by issuing deportation orders as he tried to help Jomo Kenyatta navigate the post-colonial state. But, as he would later write, his efforts were interpreted as an effort to topple the Kenyatta government. More so, some critical dockets were removed from Home Affairs to tame him. Finally, after 488 days as Vice-President, Odinga was frustrated with the government leading to his resignation on April 14, 1966, to form the Kenya People's Union.

In his new role, Gachagua is chairing Cabinet committees and overseeing the implementation of cabinet decisions across all ministries and departments. He is also chairing the intergovernmental budget and economic council, the only constitutional role assigned to a DP.

More so, he is the liaison between the constitutional commissions and independent offices in matters that require government intervention, including budgets, policy formation, and implementation of their recommendations.

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President William Ruto.
PHOTO | FILE

opinion



■ Women are expected to dress for decency and modesty, but it is men who enforce the rules

Duale's Hijab jab amounts to intimidation

Defence Cabinet Secretary Aden Duale never sees political controversy as a banana skin. Indeed, if it were and he saw one across the street, he would cross over and slip on it. Unprovoked, Duale last week asked Kenyan women who are opposed to wearing the hijab to pack their bags and leave because “Muslim women will wear the hijab” in public spaces.

Wearing the hijab, Duale argued, is in keeping with Islamic culture. But by asking those opposed to wearing the hijab to seek alternative citizenship or domicile, the minister was saying that there is absolutely no middle road on this matter. It is non-negotiable; take it or leave it. Clearly Duale considers himself a guardian or custodian of Muslim women's decency and modesty.

I say modesty because that is what the hijab is supposed to be about. The hijab is mentioned eight times in the Koran, and it is about Muslims, both men and women, dressing decently, behaving modestly, covering their private parts and avoiding sexual exploration. But, it must be said, not all wearers of the hijab don it for similar reasons. It is a controversial piece of clothing.

One, as *World Is One TV* has reported several times, some women wear it because of religion, others because of their culture, some because that's what the family does unfailingly, others for identity. Some wear it all the time and others only when they are at prayer. This hijab is forced on some and it is readily and freely worn by others.

Two, some in Europe, governments included,



**KWENDO
OPANGA**

argue that Muslims who want to make European countries their home, must live by the ways of the countries they adopt and, wearing the hijab sets them apart, says they are different and do not want to be integrated into their new cultures. Indeed, for security reasons, a number of European countries have banned the hijab altogether.

Three, some argue that the hijab is not a must-wear item because this is not decreed in the Koran as are the five pillars of Islam, namely profession of faith (*shahada*), prayer (*salat*), alms (*zakat*), fasting (*sawm*) and pilgrimage (*hajj*). Therefore, the argument goes, wearing of hijab is not obligatory but voluntary. Needless to say, opinion here is sharply divided.

Four, of course, the pieces of cloth used for the purpose above vary. Khimar covers the head, neck and shoulders. The burqa covers the whole body. Niqab covers only the face. Chador covers the whole body save for the eyes. Hijab covers the head and neck.

But who are wearing all these forms of covering for decency and modesty? It is

women. Who enforces of these values? Men.

Five, the men, especially men of power, complicate the matter. Consider this: In 1936, Reza Shah Pahlavi, former Shah of Iran, banned all veils. Mobs pounced on women found wearing them, roughed them up and tore their scarves. In 1981, the Ayatollahs who took power in Tehran in 1979, issued an edict that made wearing the hijab compulsory. Women found not wearing it were taken into custody.

In Turkey, some accounts say Mustafa Ataturk banned the wearing of headscarves in public places when he introduced changes to the constitution in 1924. Others say he only actively discouraged wearing of headscarves. Whatever the case, in 2013 then Prime Minister, and now President, Tayyip Erdogan, lifted the 89-year-old ban.

Last, Duale appeared to suggest that media were out to intimidate him because they called him out for asking women to wear hijab or check out of the country. No, it is Duale who intimidated Kenyan women.

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opinion

■ The President must institute a clear communications machinery for focussed messaging

Babbling leaders fouling our air with verbal drivel



MACHARIA
GAITHO

We are seeing again how 100 days into office, the most consistent element of President William Ruto's young administration is inconsistent messaging.

One can almost be certain that when some cabinet secretaries open their guarded mouths, what comes out will be discordant, uncoordinated, undisciplined garbage which serves only to highlight confusion in government.

Verbal gaffes have become the order of the day. Ultimately they not only make a laughing stock of the culprit, but reflect badly on a new government that seems to project confusion rather than order.

Any time a careless utterance from some senior leader must be immediately followed by denials, clarifications and threats against the reporting media, the message is that something is very wrong within government, where too often the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing.

Amidst all the clutter and noise, it becomes difficult to discern what the Kenya Kwanza government's key policy planks are, beyond habitually blaming the former government of President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto for its own failure to deliver.

It is to his credit that President Ruto has given his cabinet secretaries wide latitude to run their respective dockets without constant reference to his office, and to expound widely on government policies and programmes.

If the result has been nothing short of disastrous, then the President must crack the whip. Those prone to unbridled tongues must be firmly told to shut up and refrain from public statements unless reading an approved script.

The President must institute a clear government communications machinery that will seek to ensure coherent, focussed and disciplined messaging across the entire system. This should start with his own household, where some young lass has incited public exhortation for styling herself as occupant of the non-existent 'Office of the First Daughter'.

Ms Charlene Ruto could be forgiven for getting rather ahead of herself. She is not the first member of an emergent ruling dynasty to get confused by the allure of power.

However, when an experienced politician holding a key docket like Cabinet Secretary for

Defence makes statements that have potential to provoke religious tensions, he must be firmly put in his place.

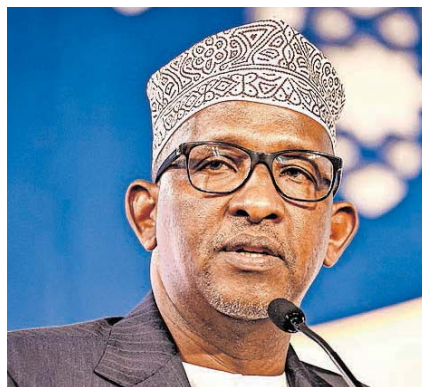
Mr Aden Duale is no newcomer to power. He occupied key leadership positions throughout the two terms of the Jubilee government, and by now must be able to distinguish between the garbage a politician on the hustings will be allowed to spew and the responsible, measured tones that should emanate from the mouth of one who speaks for the government.

His statement on the right of Muslim women to wear the hijab head covering should in ordinary circumstances be welcomed in a country with a long tradition of religious freedom and tolerance for diversity. What is unacceptable is when a statement from the Defence Cabinet Secretary is laced with what will be construed as threats and menaces.

There may well be room for debate on whether he said that those opposed to hijab can leave Kenya and go settle in another country, or that Muslim women who don't wear the head covering be similarly run out of town.

The excuse that he was addressing a community forum is neither here nor there, for the uproar was national, not local.

Duale would do well to remember that he is the Defence Cabinet Secretary for the Republic of Kenya, not for Garissa County, the Somali community or the Islamic faith.



Defence Cabinet Secretary Aden Duale addresses a congregation at Sir Ali Muslim Club, Parkroad, Nairobi, on December 20. PHOTOISILA KIPLAGAT

If unsure of his remit and desirous of establishing himself as a community kingpin, he has every right to resign as a Cabinet Secretary and go back to Garissa politics or seek office in the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims or other such body.

He should also be firmly put back on track if drunk with the illusion of power. In Kenya, the CS for Defence has over the years been a mere figurehead. The military leadership reports directly to the president, who is Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces and effective Cabinet Secretary for the docket.

Duale has ignited an unnecessary debate that in the fullness of time will expose his own limits in that he cannot, for instance, decree a dress code in the military.

In any case, there was no urgent need for threats on wearing of the hijab because there was no indication that the modestly and dress of Muslim faithful was being curtailed.

If at some time there is need for a policy on Muslim, Akorino, Sikh and other religious attire within the military, the police and other uniformed services, this will be looked at carefully through established mechanisms, not platform theatrics.

Duale is not alone in the penchant for careless talk. He takes the lead from Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua, who is becoming a living legend in verbal drivel.

Far from learning to guard his tongue as Deputy President, Gachagua has upped the frequency of unscripted utterances and actions that expose the disaster in government communications and messaging.

From thoughtless public talk, Gachagua has graduated to roadside policy declarations and actions that signal regression to the populist governance style of the Moi era.

We have seen him receiving wads of banknotes at fundraisers, and now see him completely flouting government human resource procedures by ordering instant employment of fellows who petition him at public gatherings.

Gachagua is another one who seems to imagine that high office makes him an untouchable who operates above the law and outside the usual restraints of public service.

He will sooner or later learn that he is being given a very long rope to hang himself.

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the limelight



A fan of Argentina clings to a pole in Buenos Aires province and cheers as the national team parades on board an open-top bus on December 20 after winning the Qatar 2022 World Cup tournament. PHOTO | AFP



Cars drive past Christmas and New Year decorations in downtown Tbilisi, on December 20. PHOTO | AFP



This aerial photo taken on December 21 shows motorists travelling in a flooded area in Matangkuli, Indonesia. PHOTO | AFP



Elephant keeper Kiapi Lakupanai plays with two calves at Reteti Elephant Sanctuary in Namunyak Wildlife Conservancy in Samburu on October 12. The sanctuary has been overwhelmed with orphaned and abandoned calves due to the current drought. PHOTO | AFP



Qataris work on a black and gold Arab cloak (*bisht*) at the Al Salim store in Doha on December 20. The store created the *bisht*, made famous by Argentinian footballer Lionel Messi. PHOTO | AFP



Thousands of penguins (Manchots Royaux) are pictured on December 21 on the Desolation Island in the southern Indian Ocean. PHOTO | AFP



Athletes perform at a beach exhibition ahead of the 10th Mombasa Open Tong-IL Moo-Doo International Martial Arts Championship last weekend. PHOTO | AFP

africa lens

■ GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

SERIAL LA NIÑA'S TRAIL OF RUIN



Members of the South Africa Police Services recover the body of a person who went missing in the floods in Soweto on December 11. PHOTO | AFP

South Africa has suffered a series of extreme weather episodes that have left thousands dead, homes and property destroyed and infrastructure damaged

• By Chris Erasmus

Thousands of South Africans have been forced out of their low-lying shacks and homes and numerous lives, households and livelihoods have been lost as a previously rare climate phenomenon has, as a result of global climate change, become a repeat-episode disaster.

Parts of South Africa, including Johannesburg and its environs, have experienced repeat bouts of extreme rainfall events in recent days, with more of the same set to come.

The ‘culprit’, say climatologists, is a “cut-off low”, a usually rare phenomenon, but which has become increasingly common and which some in the scientific community are sure is part of global climate changes as documented by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Complicating the picture is the fact that 2022 is another ‘La Niña year’, the third in a row, reflecting shifts in how the Pacific Ocean surface currents and water distribution are changing.

La Niña (Spanish for “the girl”), typically means wetter weather and higher tempera-

tures in the southern hemisphere summer, while El Niño (the boy) tends to mean the opposite.

The two states are the cool and warm phases of an ocean-atmosphere interaction that is referred to as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO).

The pattern shifts back and forth every two to seven years and brings with it some predictable changes in temperature and precipitation.

La Niña is the cool phase of ENSO, but this

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africa lens

Continued from Page 11

does not necessarily mean cooler temperatures are to be expected, but rather that there are cooler-than-average temperatures in the Pacific Ocean, which causes a shift in weather patterns globally.

Southern Africa is hotter and drier, while Eastern Africa is colder and wetter during El Niño events, the two regions experiencing significant and opposite effects.

During La Niña events, East Africa is drier and hotter while Southern Africa is wetter and cooler in the southern hemisphere summer.

La Niña ordinarily lasts between six and 24 months. Since 1950, there have been 24 El Niño and 17 La Niña events, 10 immediately following an El Niño year.

The La Niña conditions currently pertaining are likely to persist, at least into early 2023.

Late summer is expected to feel the worst of La Niña, with higher-than-normal rainfall predicted for much of the southern part of the continent; predictions are for the latter part of the season to see heaviest rainfalls.

But South Africans have already been going through a string of severe climate events, seemingly only tangentially linked to the ENSO cycle, being a series of “cut-off lows”.

Each packed the destructive punch of a major storm system, dumping huge quantities of water in extremely short periods, and triggering many flash-floods, with accompanying damage and loss of life.

A cut-off low is a cold-core low (usually formed offshore, over the ocean), where wind in the upper levels of the troposphere is “cut off” from the primary westerly winds of the

La Nina’s trail of destruction

jet stream. These systems form when a trough in the upper-air flow pinches off and separates into a closed circulation that moves slowly, drawing in both maritime and moist Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone bodies of moisture-laden air, once on land.

The confluence of air bodies results in enormously impactful events lasting just hours but causing severe damage, mostly through flash floods that turn tiny rivulets into raging rivers filled with deadly detritus and debris.

While the system remains in place, wet air continues to be drawn in and dumped, causing repeat bouts of heavy flooding and damage.

There is some debate as to the exact linkage between global climate change and the series of what climatologists admit should be a ‘rare’ phenomenon, but which has become common.

South Africa suffered severely in a similar event in April, two more (or one very long one in two bouts) having hammered much of the country in recent days, and with yet another such system looming just off the coast, and on track to hit the Western Cape this weekend.

That part of the country is just beginning to dry out from the previous cut-off low which caused widespread damage last weekend, es-

pecially inland around Johannesburg, claiming 14 lives in a single wash-away, with others missing.

In both the south-western part of the country and its central highland regions of greater Johannesburg, the repeat cut-off lows have brought devastation to local communities, usually the poorest and least resilient to such impact.

In parts of Soweto, homes and streets were inundated with the most recent expression of this climatological phenomenon, while low-lying shantytown dwellings were washed away, with hundreds losing homes, documents, money and all possessions.

There was also substantial damage to infrastructure, with two lanes of one major Johannesburg highway washed out and electricity and fresh water provision to thousands of households out for the foreseeable future.

More than 300 people were evacuated from one area of Soweto, ahead of repeat inundations expected.

In the Western Cape, 1,500 people require urgent assistance, says private aid agency Gift of the Givers.

Many more are expected to be at risk should the next cut-off low system fully develop and land, as expected.

Previous cut-off low events, producing severe floods, have wreaked havoc across South Africa.

In April this year, days of heavy rain across KwaZulu-Natal in south-eastern South Africa led to hugely destructive floods of historic proportions, especially around Durban.

There were some 435 recorded deaths, dozens still listed as ‘missing’, and widespread damage to thousands of homes as well as critical infrastructure, including transportation, communication and electrical systems. Fresh water provision to some hard-hit areas has yet to be restored.

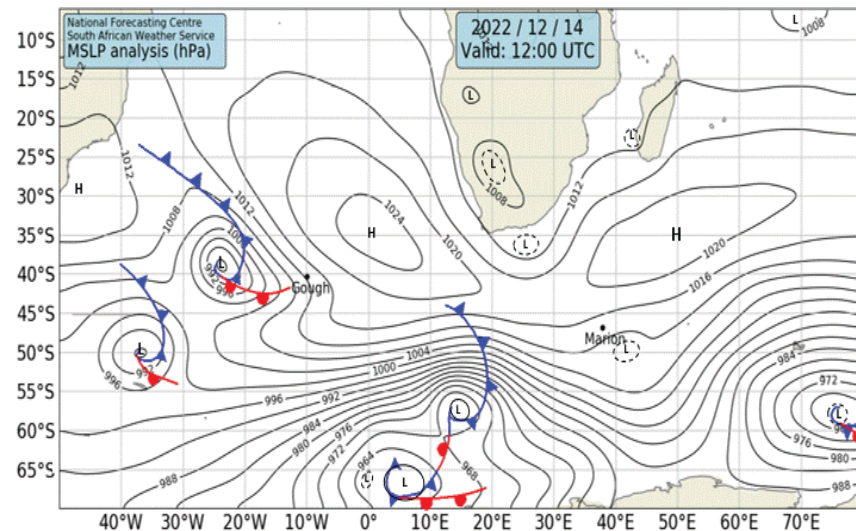
That event was one of the deadliest disasters in South Africa so far this century, costing an estimated US\$1.57 billion and requiring the declaration of a state of disaster.

Laingsburg, a relatively large agricultural town located in the Western Cape Province, on the verge of the semi-arid Great Karoo, was partially destroyed in a flash flood in 1981, also caused by the same cut-off low phenomenon.

In that event, 104 people died with only 32 bodies recovered. Of 184 houses in the portion of the town hit by the flash flood, only 21 remained untouched by the raging waters, the rest destroyed or too badly damaged to salvage.

With a huge cut-off low now looming and making its way towards South Africa’s south-western coast, officials say they are prepared for yet another round of disaster-level flooding.

The much bigger cut-off low en route was scheduled to land Friday into Saturday, with the SA Weather Services already issuing flood and severe weather alerts for that period.



Weather map produced by the SA Weather Service showing developing cut-off low off the south-western coast of Africa, portending further damaging and dangerous downpours for South Africa and neighbouring territories. CREDIT: SOUTH AFRICAN WEATHER SERVICE

global lens

■ COP-15 BREAKTHROUGH

PEACE PACT WITH NATURE



Norwegian Minister for Climate and the Environment, Espen Barth Eide (centre) and other participants applaud at a plenary meeting of the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) in Montreal, Canada, on December 19. PHOTO | LARS HAGBERG / AFP

President Joe Biden supports deal and launches a domestic ‘30 by 30’ plan even though the United States is not a party to the biodiversity convention

● Montreal

Countries reached a historic deal on Monday to reverse decades of environmental destruction threatening the world’s species and ecosystems in what the UN chief hailed as “a peace pact with nature”.

After the marathon COP15 biodiversity summit in Montreal

ran into the small hours, chair Chinese Environment Minister Huang Runqiu declared the deal adopted and banged his gavel, sparking loud applause.

“We are finally starting to forge a peace pact with nature,” UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, hailing the accord.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said the deal was a “foundation

for global action on biodiversity, complementing the Paris Agreement for Climate.”

And the United States hailed the outcome as a “turning point”, voicing appreciation for the role of frequent adversary China. State Department spokesman Ned Price called the deal “sweeping and ambitious”.

American President Joe Biden

supports the deal and has launched his own ‘30 by 30’ plan domestically, but the United States is not formally a party to the biodiversity convention because of opposition by Republicans in Congress.

After four years of fraught negotiations, more than 190 other states rallied behind the

Continued on Page 14

global lens

Deal reached on environment

Continued from Page 13

Chinese-brokered accord, which was aimed at saving Earth's lands, oceans and living species from pollution, degradation and the climate crisis.

"We have in our hands a package which I think can guide us all to work together to hold and reverse biodiversity loss, to put biodiversity on the path of recovery for the benefit of all people in the world," Huang told the assembly.

He overruled an objection from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which had refused to back the text, demanding greater funding for developing countries.

The deal pledges to secure 30 per cent of the planet as a protected zone by 2030, stump up \$30 billion in yearly conservation aid for the developing world and halt human-caused extinctions of threatened species.

Environmentalists have compared it to the landmark plan to limit global warming to 1.5C under the Paris agreement, though some warned that it did not go far enough.

Brian O'Donnell of the Campaign for Nature called it "the largest land and ocean conservation commitment in history".

"The international community has come together for a landmark global biodiversity agreement that provides some hope that the crisis facing nature is starting to get the attention it deserves," he said.

"Moose, sea turtles, parrots, rhinos, rare ferns and ancient trees, butterflies, rays, and dolphins are among the million species that will see a significantly improved outlook for their survival and abundance if this agreement is implemented effectively."

The CEO of campaign group Avaaz, Bert

Wander, cautioned: "It's a significant step forward in the fight to protect life on Earth, but on its own it won't be enough. Governments should listen to what science is saying and rapidly scale up ambition to protect half the Earth by 2030."

The text pledges to safeguard the rights of Indigenous people as stewards of their lands, a key demand of campaigners.

But observers noted it pulled punches in other areas -- for example, only encouraging businesses to report their biodiversity impacts rather than mandating them to do so.

The 23 targets in the accord also include saving hundreds of billions of dollars by cutting environmentally destructive farming subsidies, reducing the risk from pesticides and tackling invasive species.

At times, the talks looked at risk of collapsing as countries squabbled over money.

How much the rich countries will send to the developing world, home to most of the planet's biodiversity, was the biggest sticking point.

Developing countries had been seeking the creation of a new, bigger fund for aid from the Global North. But the draft text instead suggested a compromise: creating a fund under the existing Global Environment Facility.

That concern was echoed by the Democratic Republic of Congo, home to the Congo Basin, a rich haven of biodiversity.

Current financial flows for nature to the developing world are estimated at around \$10 billion per year.

A DRC delegate spoke up in the plenary to demand annual funding rise to \$100 billion -- but Huang declared the framework passed, angering DRC's allies. — *AFP*

Unpacking the global biodiversity deal

• Montreal

After years of negotiations, the world has agreed on a landmark deal to protect vanishing species and ecosystems.

Here are some of the strengths of the pact made at the UN meeting in Montreal called COP-15, as well as where it fell short.

The cornerstone of the agreement is the so-called '30 by 30' goal -- a pledge to protect 30 per cent of the world's land and seas by 2030 -- up from about 17 per cent of land and seven per cent of oceans currently.

The oceans target had reportedly been opposed by some countries but made it into the final text. Some experts had said that 30 per cent was a low aim, insisting that protecting 50 per cent would be better.

Indigenous rights were addressed throughout the text, including in areas covered by the 30 by 30 pledge -- safeguarding Indigenous peoples' right to remain stewards of land they use and ensuring they are not subject to evictions in the name of conservation.

The International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity praised the text for its "strong language on respect for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities".

The text approves the objective for rich countries to provide "at least US\$20 billion per year by 2025, and ... at least US\$30 billion per year by 2030", approximately double and then triple the current international aid for biodiversity.

The framework demands people receive benefits from "genetic resources" originating in their countries: natural assets, such as medicine or cosmetic ingredients in plants, which may be sourced in a developing country but then have their genetic information mapped and shared with researchers and companies abroad.

But campaigners complained the COP15 text did not contain enough "milestones" for marking progress.

For example, the text says human-induced extinction of known threatened species must be halted, and, by 2050, the extinction rate of all species reduced tenfold -- but there aren't targets that countries must hit before that year. — *AFP*



Chinese Minister for Ecology and Environment Huang Runqiu shakes hands with Vice-Prime Minister and Environment Minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eve Bazaiba Masudi, before a plenary gathering in Montreal, Quebec, on December 19. PHOTO | AFP

SCIENCE & TECH

China deploys high-tech anti-riot tools



● Beijing

Chinese police have deployed sophisticated surveillance tools in a push to stamp out a nationwide wave of unrest, using facial recognition software and location data to track down and detain protesters.

Frustration over prolonged Covid restrictions has boiled over, triggering protests demanding an end to lockdowns and greater political freedoms at a scale unseen in decades.

As Beijing announced a crackdown against the protests, its vast security apparatus swung into high gear, using state-of-the-art surveillance to track down activists, according to a human rights lawyer offering free legal advice to protesters.

"In Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, police have seemingly used very high-tech methods," said Wang Shengsheng, a lawyer based in the city of Zhengzhou.

"In other cities, it seems like they have relied on surveillance footage and facial recognition," she told *AFP*.

Beijing police may have used phone location data either captured from on-site scanners or Covid health codes scanned by people taking taxis to areas where protests took place, she said.

"Many callers from Beijing were confused as to why they were contacted by police when they genuinely just walked past the protest site and didn't take part," she added.

"We have no idea how exactly they did this."

Wang has received over 20 calls in recent days from protesters or people whose friends and relatives have been detained. Most detentions she was told about lasted under 24 hours. — *AFP*

FRANCE BETS ON TECH TO BEAT CHINESE CAVIAR



● France

At the fish farm near Bordeaux, Christophe Baudoin is running an ultrasound device over the belly of a large sturgeon to check its eggs.

"Caviar!" he shouts as the monitor shows the right sparkle around each little round ball.

"Over-mature!" comes the next shout, indicating the fish's pregnancy cycle has gone too far and the eggs have softened -- losing the crucial crunch. It will go back in the lake to await another cycle in two years.

For the company, Sturia, it's an incredibly laborious process -- they ultrasound some 20,000 fish a year for a total of 300 tonnes of caviar -- but climate change has made it vital.

Many fish are coming out "over-mature", in part because warmer waters have accelerated the pregnancy cycle.

For the guys standing in the water, scooping up the huge fish for inspection, the winter days when 10 centimetres (four inches) of ice coated the lakes are not entirely missed.

But the change is still shocking.

"It's been 10 years since we've seen any ice on these lakes," said Baudoin.

One in five of the fish died in 2021, when water temperatures hit 30 degrees, five degrees above a sturgeon's comfort zone.

"You might not know each one by name, but it's never nice to pull out a dead fish -- and of course the cost for the group is enormous," said Sturia boss Laurent Dulau.

Fished to the brink of extinction in the wild -- including the once-rich Russian and Iranian waters of the Caspian Sea -- sturgeon now exist almost exclusively in farms, most of them in China.

Sturgeon were fished in France's Gironde river for centuries, but their eggs were given to children, old people and pigs until Russian nobles fleeing the Communist revolution a century ago showed locals their potential.

It became a delicacy in Paris after Armenian emigrants Melkoum and Mouchegh Petrossian convinced the Ritz Hotel in Paris to serve caviar in the 1920s.

Farming only started in France

in the 1990s, and since it takes up to a decade to raise a sturgeon, progress is painstaking.

Unable to compete with China on quantity, French producers focus on sustainable and healthy farming.

The ultrasound avoids unnecessary killing and Sturia sends the meat to be used for rilletes pate, the collagen-rich gonads for cosmetics, and the skin for leather and a specialist glue favoured by violin-makers.

Dulau said the focus on traceability and quality is rebuilding caviar's image after the over-fishing crisis. "The idea is to produce less, but produce better," he said. "People will eat less because it's a lot more expensive, but it will be so good that they'll be satisfied."

"It's bizarre at a time when restaurants are always saying they source their products locally. We sell more to Singapore than restaurants 10 kilometres down the road," he said.

But he said the transparency of French production will win over buyers. "We can't be number one in production, but we can lead the way in creativity and science." — *AFP*



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