

Africa Briefs

DR Congo's Tshisekedi Puts AU Push Behind Pan-African Grand Inga

Newly installed as Chairman of the African Union, DR Congo President Félix Tshisekedi is reportedly using his new platform to push the Inga III Dam project on the Congo River beyond the discussion phase, into actual construction. He correctly identifies its pan-African impact, as also that of the larger Grand Inga project of which it is a part. Conceived almost a century ago, the smaller Inga I and II were completed in 1972 and 1982, leaving five larger dams under discussion. When completed, the Grand Inga complex will generate an astounding 40,000 MW of electricity, twice that of China's Three Gorges Dam.

Although details of Tshisekedi's efforts are not known, it is significant that he has triggered a sudden reaction from the dam's naysayers, working especially through the environmental movement. On Feb. 19, the South Africa-based geopolitical think tank, Institute for Security Studies, published a report provocatively titled, "Can Tshisekedi Really Revive Grand Inga?" which noted the game-changing effect Inga III's 11,000 MW could have on the region, with potential to export power to Angola, Namibia, Botswana, and even South Africa. A South African opposition newspaper tried to tell Finance Minister Tito Mboweni that importing dependable power from Congo would be too expensive, and that the funds would be much better spent on domestic solar and wind ventures.

In years ahead, the dam would

power industrialization of the lower Congo River region, for which offers from Chinese companies to build ore-smelting facilities and a petroleum refinery are already on the table.

New Nigerian WTO Head Takes Over Agency Under Stress

History was made Feb. 15 when Nigeria's Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was confirmed as both the first woman, and the first African to head the World Trade Organization. An economist with a 25-year career at the World Bank as a development specialist, the 66-year-old Okonjo-Iweala also served as Nigeria's finance minister twice from 2003-2006 and again from 2011-2015, briefly acting as foreign minister in 2006.

Any desire Okonjo-Iweala may have to help her native Africa will be tempered by the onrush of the Great Reset, with its emphasis on ESG constraints—Environmental, Social, and Governance—for future investments, a recipe for low-energy, low-technology projects, as opposed to large-scale projects such as a continental rail network.

On her first day in office, she called for increased efforts to transfer COVID-19 vaccines to third world countries, and also for an agreement to prevent over-fishing of the world's oceans.

Violence Hitting Nigeria from All Sides as Elites Plan a 'Failed State'

There is a clear attempt to break up Nigeria and bring down the Buhari government, which is bring-

ing industrial development to Nigeria and working with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

On Feb. 17, former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria John Campbell, now a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, gave the keynote presentation at a round table discussion—provocatively titled "The Nigerian State and Insecurity"—sponsored by the Pentagon's Africa Center for Strategic Studies. There, Campbell expanded on the theme of his latest book, that Nigeria never was a nation-state (in the European sense of a common language and culture), so no one should be surprised if its differences overpower its similarities and it collapses.

Violence is indeed surfacing in all areas of the country, beyond the northern sector which has been plagued with a growing jihadist insurgency since 2015. In the normally quiet Southeast, several police stations have come under attack in the last week from gunmen who, in the latest night-time attack on the Iboko Police Station in Ebonyi State, also attempted to set it on fire.

The nation has seen the resurgence of kidnappings of children at boarding schools, to the point that the northeastern state of Yobe has now shuttered all schools. Just east of Yobe, in the critical border state of Borno, the capital city Maiduguri has come under siege, forcing a military deployment in response, with the attackers reportedly using rocket-propelled grenades, seemingly an upgrade in weaponry. Maiduguri is just 100 km from the four-nation conjunction of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, all bordering Lake Chad.

First COVAX Vaccines Arrive in Africa

The first 600,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine under the UN's COVAX protocol arrived in Ghana on Feb. 24, making headlines in western media. Produced for Astra-Zeneca by the Serum Institute of India, they make Ghana the first of 92 of the world's poorest countries set to get free vaccine in coming weeks and months. The COVAX shipment follows by two weeks the delivery of vaccine to Africa from China's Sinopharm, which first landed in Guinea on Feb. 11.

As laudatory as the headlines were, however, the articles could not avoid the reality of the insufficiency of COVAX as a result of development delays and vaccine hoarding by rich countries. Dozens of African countries have turned to China or Russia for supplies. Nigeria received almost 4 million free doses on March 2 and Angola 600,000. Côte d'Ivoire, DR Congo and Ghana are also recipients. As for Senegal, a recipient of China's Sinopharm vaccine last week, it has reportedly turned around and offered several thousand of their 200,000 scarce free doses to neighboring Guinea-Bissau and Gambia, in true "win-win" spirit.

South Africa's Unemployment Rate Hits Record Levels

The official unemployment rate in South Africa reached 32.5% in the fourth quarter of 2020, an increase of 1.7% from the previous quarter, and is now the highest since statistics were first published in 2008. Although the government's Statistics SA office reports in its

Quarterly Labor Force Survey, that the number of employed persons actually increased in the fourth quarter by 333,000 to reach 15 million, the number of unemployed persons increased by twice that much, 701,000 to reach 7.2 million.

The full picture, however, takes this from "depression" levels, to approach a total breakdown. Including the "discouraged" workers (those no longer looking for work), which increased by 235,000, and the number of people who were not economically active for other reasons—both included in the "expanded definition"—Statistics SA points out that the real unemployment rate reached 42.6% in the fourth quarter.

Eskom Near Accepting Bids for 'Repurposing' Older Coal Plants

Plans by South African state-owned electric utility Eskom for the sale of the Komati coal-fired power plant have reached maturity, and the company will soon be accepting public bids for the "repurposing and repowering" of these state-owned resources. Eskom's "Just Energy Transition" office head Mandy Rambharos made the announcement at the annual RES4Africa (Renewable Energy Solutions) webinar, on March 2, according to a report by Energy Governance South Africa—a network of NGOs including the World Wide Fund for Nature South Africa. Komati is only the first of several multiple-unit plants scheduled for conversion in coming years.

In the past year, Eskom has conducted "social impact" studies to establish the effect that plant shutdowns will have on local communities, studies which have yet to be of-

ficially published, likely because of the picture of devastation they will reveal. A Feb. 16 article by *Bloomberg News* is headlined, "Thousands of jobs in jeopardy as SA moves away from coal."

While these plants were built in the 1960s and '70s, and many are no longer producing power, their official sale to private investors is a bridge which cannot be re-crossed. In a nation that already suffers from rolling blackouts on a regular basis, this action will only serve to decrease reliability of the national electric grid.

Nigerian Food Systems Summit Draws 700 Participants

A summit organized by Nigeria under the banner of the United Nations' Food Systems Summit (FSS) 2021 drew an overflow response of 700 participants on Feb. 23, indicating the immediacy of the nationwide agriculture crisis. Announced by the UN Feb. 18, the FSS is "an unprecedented commitment to ensure that the voices and opinions of millions of the world's most remote rural people [are heard] through the Independent Summit Dialogues," according to its website. Nigeria's early participation will make it among the first nations to mobilize for the UN's proposed series of Food Systems Summits.

Among the reported speakers were Vice President Yemi Osinbajo; Zainab Ahmed, Minister of Finance, Budget and National Planning; and Rasaki Sanusi, a nutritionist from the University of Ibadan. Nigeria is planning a series of six summits across the country in the coming months.

The UNFSS is aiming for a global conference in September.