

Opinion

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A selection of voices from the community, nation and world.

Mothers and children waited their turn outside a UNICEF-funded "health hut" in northern Nigeria last May. Calling the continent "hopeless" overlooks its promise and diversity — tossing out Africa's babies with its tainted bathwater.

Star Tribune photo by Kate Stanley



Africans on Africa

At the southern tip of the continent of Africa, a rich reward is in the making, an invaluable gift is in the preparation, for those who suffered in the name of all humanity when they sacrificed everything — for liberty, peace, human dignity and human fulfillment.

This reward will not be measured in money. Nor can it be reckoned in the collective price of the rare metals and precious stones that rest in the bowels of the African soil we tread in the footsteps of our ancestors. It will and must be measured by the happiness and welfare of the children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures.

The children must, at last, play in the open veldt, no longer tortured by the pangs of hunger or ravaged by disease or threatened with the scourge of ignorance, molestation and abuse, and no longer required to engage in deeds whose gravity exceeds the demands of their tender years.

— Nelson Mandela, South Africa. Speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, 1993.

Things have not gone well in Africa for quite a while. The era of colonial freedom that began so optimistically with Ghana in 1957 would soon be captured by Cold War manipulators and skewed into a deadly season of ostensible ideological conflicts, encouraging the emergence of all kinds of evil rulers able to count on limitless supplies of military hardware from their over-seas patrons, no matter how atrociously they ruled their peoples.

With the sudden end of the Cold War, these rulers or their successor regimes have lost their value to their sponsors and have been cast on the rubbish heap and forgotten, along with their nations.

— China Achebe, Nigeria. "Another Africa," 1998.

Democracy in South Africa must succeed for the sake of the subcontinent, indeed for the sake of the continent, since South Africa can become the locomotive to drive Africa's economic train. Africa needs a few success stories. It has been suggested that the West might well consider a financial aid package for the sake of democracy akin to the one it provided for President Yeltsin's Russian Federation... Be our partner in this exhilarating enterprise.

— Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa. "The Rainbow People of God," 1994.

Throughout history it has been the inaction of those who could have acted, the indifference of those who should have known better, the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most, that has made it possible for evil to triumph.

— Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia. Speech to the U.N. General Assembly, 1963.

As circumstances focus Western eyes on Africa, American visitors find the place less a mystery than they expected. Heartbreak is a fixture of the landscape, but so is hope. Africa's preposterous burdens oblige the world's comfortable to forsake the luxury of lamentation and join in imagining Africa's future.

Call of the conscience

By Kate Stanley

LAGOS, NIGERIA — The lights have gone out again in Lagos, but you don't even blink.

Your Nigerian friends have already explained: At NEPA, PLC — the National Electric Power Authority — blackouts come free with the service. Hence the joke: NEPA, PLC, the locals say, stands for "Never Expect Power Always, Please Light Candles."

This, you have come to understand, is Nigeria. A land of light humor and recurring darkness. The richest nation in Africa, yet one of the poorest. Spilling with oil, and clogged with lines at gas pumps. The continent's newest democracy, and capital of corruption. A place teeming with possibility — and with peril.

In other words, another African contradiction. Like lush, barren Mozambique. Like inspiring, faltering South Africa. Like thriving, devastated Botswana.

About promising, precarious Nigeria — the most populous country in Africa — the U.S. State Department has lots of advice: Don't use credit cards. Don't risk the roads. Don't fly in planes. Don't trust the cops. Don't walk into crowds. Don't go out after dark.

But you do all these things, and somehow you survive. The hotel in Lagos accepts your credit card. The perpetual traffic jam of Lagos — the mile-per-hour experience that Nigerians call a "go-slow" — is harrowing but not lethal. The plane to Abuja declines to crash. And neither cops nor crowds nor gloom of night keep you from your appointed rounds — though you're almost surprised that they don't.

That's the shocking thing about Africa: It's not shocking. This is true from Cape Town on the continent's tip to Kano in Nigeria's northland.

Not that all African nations are alike; far from it. But wherever in Africa you land, you're likely to find less strangeness than you anticipate.

You come expecting to be startled, or horrified, or repelled, or appalled. Instead you're stirred, and intrigued, and delighted, and entranced.

You come expecting grimness, and find loveliness. You come hoping you can bear the place, and after a while wonder whether you can bear to leave. You come feeling superior, and depart humble.

Oh, there's heartbreak in the mix, all right. How can one look at the lingering social apartheid of South Africa, Mozambique's swarm of flood victims, the over-packed slum-shacks of Lagos, the AIDS toll in Botswana, and not feel it?

In Africa, heartbreak is a given — not a surprise. It pervades the landscape — like sunlight, like the grass of the South African veld. It's a quiet, abiding presence. Indeed, everyone talks these days about Africa's heartbreak. About the continent's ubiquitous wars and famines and floods. Its terrifying HIV rates and pulverizing poverty. Its greedy despots and ethnic barbarism and pestilence and government sloth.

These afflictions have prevailed since Europe released its choke hold on Africa, but now they must be faced. They're harder to overlook in the age of the Internet and CNN.

And they're more dangerous to over-



Imagining Africa

A continent's hope

look in the age of AIDS: The world's poor don't often travel. The world's viruses generally make a point of it.

Thus do conscience and self-interest conspire to force Western eyes on Africa.

Yet most of the current chatter about Africa is idle or ignorant. Most is accompanied not by help, but by hand-wringing. As Africa struggles with preposterous burdens, the world's comfortable do little more than lament its lot.

And lamentation seems to be giving way to shrugging. In May, The Economist magazine ran a cover story declaring Africa "The Hopeless Continent."

"While brutality, despotism and corruption exist everywhere," the magazine observed, "African societies, for reasons buried in their cultures, seem especially susceptible to them."

A nasty insult, that — hardly paying fair tribute to the white world's long record of warmongering and plundering. But never mind the West's own violent propensities or its historical role in Africa's plight. Let's stick with the present.

Hopelessness is an attitude, not a fact of life. Those who call Africa hopeless have determined not to care about it. They've chosen to write off 54 diverse countries in a fell swoop — tossing out millions of African babies with a bit of tainted bathwater.

Why can't these baby-tossers imagine Africa as it could be? Why can't they take heart from the green of Africa's spring, the glimmer of its democratic renaissance? The unquenchable light in Nelson Mandela's eyes?

What keeps them from taking note of the great phoenix of South Africa? Uganda's quest against AIDS and poverty? Malawi's guarantee of free primary education? Botswana's tribal tradition of democracy? Mozambique's economic reforms? Nigeria's move from military rule?

Perhaps what keeps them from noticing, from hoping, is convenience. There's a certain comfort, after all, in pronouncing a thing beyond help. It relieves one of responsibility for acting.

But thoughtful human beings don't allow themselves the graceless luxury of hopelessness. They don't shun the sick just to save themselves a trip to the medi-

cine cabinet. They rush into burning houses to save children they've never seen. They seize the spark of hope even out of cold ashes and breathe it into a fire of possibility.

At least that is what the thoughtful human beings in Africa — the vast majority — are doing. But who will seize the spark, stoke the fire of imagination, on this side of the sea?

You will. You must. Because it's easy — because saving a kid in Kaduna from cholera costs less than your morning cappuccino. Because you can — because it wouldn't hurt you to live a bit more simply, as the bumper sticker says, so that others may simply live.

Because there's no alternative. Because you know an obscenity when you see one: "Hopeless continent" — like "expendable child" — has no place in the human vocabulary.

A tale of four nations

A glimpse of sub-Saharan Africa, home to 642 million of the world's poorest people.

	South Africa	Mozambique	Botswana	Nigeria
Population	42.1 million	17.3 million	1.6 million	124 million
Income per capita	\$3,160	\$230	\$3,240	\$310
Adult illiteracy rate	16%	57%	26%	37%
Fertility rate (births per woman)	2.5	4.9	3.8	5.6
Infant mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 babies)	59	140	62	74
Child malnutrition	9%	41%	27%	39%
Life expectancy	51 years	37.5 years	39 years	51.5 years
Adult HIV prevalence	20%	14%	36%	5.4%
Access to safe water	59%	32%	70%	39%
Ethnic makeup	Black 75.2%, White 13.6%, Mixed race 8.6%, Indian 2.6%	Tribal groups including Makua Lowme, Thonga, Malawi, Shona 99.6%, Other races 0.4%	Tswana 95%, Other tribes 4%, White 1%	House-Fulani, Igloo and Yoruba plus about 300 other ethnic groups
Religions	Christian 68%, Muslim 2%, Hindu 1.5%, indigenous 28.5%	indigenous 50%, Christian 30%, Muslim 20%	Christian 60%, indigenous 40%	Muslim 50%, Christian 40%, indigenous 10%
Languages	11 official languages, including Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, Zulu	Portuguese (official), indigenous dialects including Makua, Tsonga, Sena Lomwe	English (official), Tswana	English (official), 300 dialects including Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani

Sources: World Bank, UNAIDS, UNFRA, U.S. Census Bureau, World Health Organization, CIA World Factbook

