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ONE) - RUSSIA RAISES FOREIGN AID SHARPLY. FOCUS ON NEIGHBOURS

Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the days when Cold War allies could count on its largesse, Moscow has embarked on a soft-power campaign of aid to increase its clout and burnish its international image. But the question is, has anybody noticed? "Russia's aims are a combination of prestige, geopolitics and the desire to avoid a destabilising collapse in a neighbouring country," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the journal [Russia in Global Affairs](#). "But Russia still does not have the image of a country that helps anyone else, which is not completely fair." A prominent aid recipient in the 1990s, Russia has quintupled its annual foreign aid budget in the past four years, from \$100 million to \$500 million, and created a \$7.5 billion fund to help struggling neighbours. It is considering setting up a national body to rival the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The moves are part of a bid to narrow the gap with its G8 partners, all long-time donors, and to compete with a wave of emerging market countries like China and South Africa whose increased contributions are redrawing the international aid map. Russia also wants to shore up its influence in former Soviet republics, many of which receive aid from the European Union and United States to the West and China to the east. **SOVIET UNION'S AID STARVED IT TO DEATH** The turning point for Moscow was its chairmanship of the G-8 in 2006, whose development agenda highlighted the modest size of Russia's aid budget. Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov was ordered to push forward an aid hike. President Dmitry Medvedev last year said Russia was seeking a new role, tackling global challenges like poverty and climate change "on par with other leading nations." "We have to act according to our status," said Viktor Zagrekov, head of the department of international organisations at [Russia's Foreign Ministry](#). The Soviet Union was among the largest donors in the world, spending around 1.5 percent of its economic output on friendly poor countries in the communist world, South America, Asia and Africa. It spent around \$26 billion in 1986 alone. But amid the economic chaos after the 1991 Soviet collapse, Russia became a net recipient of Western aid, a humiliation in the eyes of many Russians including Vladimir Putin, who championed self-sufficiency as president from 2000-2008. Moscow's new drive comes at a time when the number of donor countries is rising as the growth rates in many emerging economies surge ahead of their developed world peers. Russia still trails its G8 partners, spending less than 0.03 percent of GDP on official development assistance in 2009, budget figures show. The next lowest G8 member contribution was from Italy, which spent 0.16, while Britain spent 0.52 percent, according to the OECD. The United States has the largest budget in dollar terms, spending \$28 billion in 2009. A World Bank study estimated that new mid-income donors, including Russia and China, contributed \$10-15 billion to global aid programmes in 2008, while some developed countries were cutting their budgets in the wake of the global economic crisis. Emerging market rival South Africa has said it will set up its first foreign aid agency like those in developed countries, a step Russian officials say they are actively discussing. "They bring the perspective of mid-income countries that have succeeded," said Pedro Alba, World Bank head in Russia. **NEW AID LANDSCAPE** But aid workers also say that the growing power of those countries has redrawn the international aid landscape, replacing an East-West divide of donors and recipients with a number of regional powers with their own agendas. Russia has focused on the former Soviet Union with its aid, while other countries like China have often targeted areas where they have economic interests. Russia has projects in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Moldova -the poorest of the ex-Soviet republics- and devotes much of its funding to disaster relief rather than development. Its nascent efforts have so far yielded few public relations dividends, however. "There is still very little recognition of Russia as a donor internationally," said a senior official at a major development aid organisation who has worked in Russia. "The volume of money has grown significantly, but the Russians need to learn how to communicate their strategy," the official said. Andrei Bokarev, head of the finance ministry's international affairs department and a key aid official, said he aimed to change that by making communications a priority. "We have not had a systematic approach to communicating our goals," he admitted. But Russia will have to finesse its message to impress the international community while not alienating people at home. With one in seven officially living under the poverty line and millions struggling to make ends meet, Russians are leery about giving money away abroad. Three-quarters of Russians surveyed by the independent [Levada Centre](#) said they approved of aid to the world's poorest countries. But two-thirds said Russia is too poor to give aid and boost the livelihoods of its own citizens at the same time. (See also [Going East: Russia's Asia-Pacific Strategy](#))

TWO) – CHINA SAYS EGYPT SHOULD DECIDE FUTURE ON ITS OWN

China said on Thursday foreign powers should stay out of Egypt's affairs, in an oblique swipe at the United States and some European countries that have put pressure on embattled President Hosni Mubarak to step down. "China advocates that Egyptian affairs should be determined by the Egyptian people, and should not face

outside interference," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu said at a regular press briefing. "We believe Egypt has the wisdom and ability to find the proper solution and get through this difficult time," he added. Beijing's stance reflects its reluctance to criticise authoritarian governments in the developing world and its long-held policy of denouncing foreign interference in domestic affairs, especially external criticism of Chinese policies. The Middle East is also a major source of oil for the fast-growing Asian economy. The White House said on Wednesday that Egyptian ministers must do more to meet the demands of protesters, who want an immediate end to Mubarak's 30 years of one-man rule and sweeping legislative changes.

THREE) – EU MEMBER STATES' REACTION TO EGYPT TROUBLES: BIG NOISE, NO IMPACT

Les crises tunisienne et égyptienne mettent avec cruauté en relief les imperfections d'une diplomatie européenne qui loin de parler d'une seule voix, comme elle en proclamait l'intention avec le traité de Lisbonne, le fait en ordre très dispersé et du coup souvent dans le désert. "Nous nous sommes dotés d'une Haute Représentante" de l'UE aux Affaires étrangères, Catherine Ashton, "mais ce sont les Etats membres qui continuent à communiquer" et souvent "en ordre dispersé", a déploré cette semaine le chef de file de la droite au Parlement européen, sa principale force politique, Joseph Daul. La vague de contestation sur la rive sud de la Méditerranée constitue la première grave crise internationale que l'Europe doit affronter, à sa porte de surcroît, depuis l'entrée en vigueur du traité de Lisbonne fin 2009. Un texte qui ambitionnait d'accroître sa visibilité sur la scène internationale, grâce notamment à un tout nouveau service diplomatique. Le bilan est peu flatteur. La chef de la diplomatie européenne Catherine Ashton, jugée au mieux inexpérimentée et peu réactive, est fustigée comme jamais. Au Parlement européen, on parle d'une erreur "de casting", tandis que les gouvernements peinent à dissimuler leur déception à son égard. Ils ne font toutefois rien pour lui faciliter le travail, multipliant déclarations et initiatives sans réelle concertation avec elle. "Il n'y a plus de pilote dans l'avion", résume un diplomate européen. Face à une Haute représentante très affaiblie, chaque capitale entend jouer sa propre partition. "La conception que j'ai de l'Europe, ce n'est pas que 27 chefs d'Etat et de gouvernement doivent se taire parce que nous avons la chance d'avoir Mme Ashton", a ironisé le président français Nicolas Sarkozy. **FRANCE, BRITAIN NOT PLAYING FAIR** La frustration est particulièrement grande parmi les "petits" pays de l'UE. Ils comptaient sur les nouvelles institutions renforcées du traité de Lisbonne pour faire contrepoids aux grandes diplomaties traditionnelles du Vieux continent, française et britannique en particulier, et doivent constater que ces dernières jouent modérément le jeu. "L'Europe doit parler d'une seule voix, la voix de Mme Ashton", s'est fâché le Premier ministre belge Yves Leterme. Le président de l'Union européenne Herman Van Rompuy, tout autant relégué au second plan, a lui aussi déploré les messages "trop dispersés" envoyés par les Européens sur l'Egypte et la Tunisie. A peine les 27 dirigeants de l'UE avaient-ils décidé vendredi lors de leur sommet d'envoyer mi-février Mme Ashton en visite en Tunisie et en Egypte pour y porter leur parole, que la baronne britannique se faisait griller la politesse par le ministre des Affaires étrangères de son propre pays, William Hague. Il s'est rendu sans attendre dès mardi à Tunis. Plusieurs autres de ses collègues frappent en coulisses à la porte de l'Egypte, pour être les premiers à y aller, souligne un diplomate. "Dans certaines capitales européennes, tout le monde n'a pas encore compris la nouvelle donne" du traité de Lisbonne, regrette un haut responsable européen sous couvert de l'anonymat. "Ce qu'il faudrait c'est que d'autres ministres ne se précipitent pas dans d'autres capitales (de la région) avant elle. Et pour faire quoi d'ailleurs ?", ajoute-t-il. Dans une étude qu'il vient de publier, le [Center for European Policy Studies](#) exhorte l'UE à "se doter d'un corps diplomatique de classe mondiale, capable de devenir un acteur de premier plan sur la scène internationale", en surmontant le "conservatisme" des chancelleries nationales "qui veulent en rester au statu quo". A défaut, "on aboutira à une diplomatie européenne de plus en plus inutile et obsolète", prévient-il. (See [Upgrading the EU's Role as Global Actor: Institutions, Law and the Restructuring of European Diplomacy](#) and also [Dignity, Democracies & Dynasties – in the wake of the revolt on the Arab street](#))

FOUR) - CHINA URGES LIFTING OF WESTERN SANCTIONS ON ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe is an important ally to China and Beijing will seek to further strengthen ties, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said of a country isolated by the West under President Robert Mugabe's rule. Mugabe has been shunned by Western countries for decades. He has looked to China to shore up a shattered economy by showcasing rich mineral resources and the world's second biggest platinum reserves, which China covets to fuel its booming economy. "Let me be frank. We believe there should be a lifting of sanctions," Yang said after

meeting Mugabe. The United States and European Union have been at loggerheads with China over its support for Mugabe. Yang said China wanted to enhance ties in sectors including infrastructure, mining and agriculture, with Mugabe telling reporters he wanted "cooperation to intensify." "The relationship is in very good shape," Yang said. A government minister told Reuters last month the state-run China Development Bank could fund up to \$10 billion in Chinese investment in Zimbabwe's mining and agriculture sector. Such an investment would dwarf Zimbabwe's GDP, which is expected to be about \$6 billion this year. But analysts say the announcement could be aimed at trying to prod wary Western investors into sinking more money into Zimbabwe out of fear they will lose ground to China. A private weekly reported last week that Beijing had offered Zimbabwe \$3 billion for vast platinum reserves but said the deal was likely to be rejected by the government over its terms. Yang will also meet Mugabe's governing partner and rival Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai in a visit that concludes on Friday. Yang then departs for other African states. He arrives at a time when political tension is rising in the troubled country after a spate of violence led to mutual accusations of blame between Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change. Mugabe and his inner circle have been subject to Western sanctions since his ZANU-PF party won re-election in 2000 after a violent campaign and began seizures of white-owned farms. China, which has ties with ZANU from the 1970s, has been increasing its investments, which however lag behind what Beijing invests in neighbouring Mozambique, Zambia and Angola. China's exports to Zimbabwe amounted to \$159 million in 2010 while the southern African country exported \$57 million worth of goods, according to official figures.

FIVE) - WEST AFRICA CENTRAL BANK THREATENS THOSE WORKING WITH GBAGBO CAMP

La Banque centrale des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (BCEAO) a menacé vendredi de "sanctions" les banques opérant en Côte d'Ivoire qui travailleraient avec le camp du président sortant Laurent Gbagbo, non reconnu par les institutions de la région. "La BCEAO rappelle aux établissements de crédit de l'Union monétaire ouest-africaine (UMOA) que ses agences sont fermées depuis le mercredi 26 janvier 2011, sur l'ensemble du territoire de la Côte d'Ivoire, jusqu'à nouvel ordre", souligne dans un communiqué le gouverneur par intérim de la BCEAO, Jean-Baptiste Compaoré. Cette fermeture avait suivi la réquisition des agences de la BCEAO en Côte d'Ivoire décidée fin janvier par le gouvernement Gbagbo. Dans les faits, elle signifie une rupture totale entre la banque centrale basée à Dakar et le camp du président sortant, qui tente de mettre sur pied, via les agences réquisitionnées, un nouveau système bancaire à l'échelle ivoirienne. "La BCEAO demande instamment aux établissements de crédit de l'Union, et en particulier ceux établis en Côte d'Ivoire, de s'abstenir de contribuer à la violation de la fermeture de ses agences" dans ce pays, poursuit la banque. "Toute opération effectuée par un établissement de crédit avec lesdites agences ou dans leurs locaux (...) est passible de sanctions", insiste le gouverneur, évoquant même la menace d'une "exclusion" des systèmes de paiement pour les banques contrevenantes. Depuis le scrutin du 28 novembre, la Côte d'Ivoire est déchirée entre Laurent Gbagbo et Alassane Ouattara, reconnu président élu par la communauté internationale, qui presse en vain le sortant de céder le pouvoir. L'un des enjeux de leur lutte est le contrôle de l'économie et des finances publiques du pays. L'ancien gouverneur de la BCEAO, l'Ivoirien Philippe-Henry Dacoury-Tabley, proche de Laurent Gbagbo, avait été poussé à la démission le 22 janvier. Il lui était reproché de ne pas avoir appliqué une décision de l'Union économique et monétaire ouest-africaine de donner à M. Ouattara tous les pouvoirs de gérer au nom de la Côte d'Ivoire les affaires liées à cette institution et à la BCEAO. Il était accusé d'avoir autorisé des décaissements en faveur du régime Gbagbo de l'ordre de 60 milliards FCFA (91,5 M EUR).

SIX) – TUNISIA PARLIAMENT AUTHORIZES PRESIDENT TO RULE BY DECREE

Le Sénat tunisien a adopté mercredi à l'unanimité une loi autorisant le président intérimaire Foued Mebazaa à gouverner par décrets-lois, contournant ainsi le Parlement bicaméral hérité de l'ère Ben Ali, a constaté l'AFP.

SEVEN) – GERMANY CHARGES MOROCCAN AGENT OF SPYING ON WESTERN SAHARA REFUGEES

German federal prosecutors have charged a 43-year-old Moroccan with spying on exiled opposition activists for his country's intelligence service. Germany's Federal Prosecutors Office said in a statement Thursday the man, identified only as Mhamed J., gathered photos and other intelligence on members of the Polisario Front independence movement between October 2009 and October 2010. Prosecutors have charged the Moroccan

with spying for a foreign agency and reporting the activities of exiled opposition members. The statement gave no further details. Prosecutors could not immediately be reached for comment. Morocco says Western Sahara is part of its kingdom but has been locked for decades in a dispute with the Polisario Front over claims to the territory.

EIGHT) – MOROCCAN REGIME URGED TO REFORM BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE

Depuis les révoltes de Tunisie et d'Égypte, des voix plus pressantes se font entendre au Maroc pour réclamer des réformes, mais sans remettre en cause la monarchie dans ce pays jusqu'ici épargné par la contagion. "Beaucoup pensent qu'une réforme constitutionnelle permettant au Maroc de se doter d'institutions plus modernes est nécessaire", estime Driss Benali, économiste et analyste de la scène marocaine, évoquant une évolution vers une monarchie dotée de moins de pouvoirs. Cette semaine, un important mouvement islamiste marocain, l'association Justice et Bienfaisance - non reconnue mais tolérée - a réclamé un "changement démocratique urgent" au Maroc, en saluant les événements de Tunisie et d'Égypte. "Il est injuste que la richesse du pays soit accaparée par une minorité", a accusé le mouvement, dans un texte publié sur son site. Le Maroc, où les inégalités demeurent fortes, ne connaît pas de mouvements de contestation importants, mais les récentes convulsions en Tunisie et en Égypte ont été suivies attentivement dans les grandes villes grâce à Al-Jazeera. De jeunes Marocains ont lancé récemment sur Facebook un mouvement, soutenu par quelques milliers de sympathisants, en faveur de manifestations pacifiques, le 20 février prochain, pour une "large réforme politique". Et un débat s'amplifie sur le web sur l'opportunité ou non de changements. Le prince Moulay Hicham, cousin du roi Mohammed VI a averti dans des interviews à des médias étrangers que le Maroc "ne serait probablement pas une exception" dans la contestation actuelle. En visite à Rabat, le commissaire européen à l'élargissement Stefan Füle a pour sa part demandé aux autorités marocaines d'aller plus loin dans les réformes en particulier pour l'éradication de la pauvreté. Mais les autorités se déclarent "sereines", soulignant que le pays est "engagé depuis longtemps dans un processus irréversible de démocratie". Elles ont toutefois maintenu les subventions pour éviter une hausse des prix des denrées de base comme la farine, le sucre ou le gaz butane. Pour Driss Benali, "la société marocaine n'est pas à l'abri de ce qui se passe ailleurs" et "plutôt que de subir les événements, il vaudrait mieux les anticiper et faire des réformes". Le Maroc est une "monarchie constitutionnelle", dans laquelle le monarque dispose de pouvoirs très étendus. Considéré comme l'un des plus importants mouvements islamistes au Maroc, Justice et Bienfaisance, qui revendique jusqu'à 200.000 adhérents, ne conteste pas la légitimité de la monarchie mais refuse de reconnaître le statut de "Commandeur des croyants" du souverain chérifien. "C'est un islamisme contestataire, qui cherche à faire des changements de manière pacifique (...) Il ne parle pas d'abolition de la monarchie", dit à l'AFP Mohamed Darif, spécialiste de l'Islam. "Il existe aussi des islamistes "intégrés", avec le Parti Justice et Développement (PJD) qui fait partie de l'opposition parlementaire. Au delà de la particularité de sa monarchie, le Maroc, pays de 32 millions d'habitants, comporte un certain nombre de points communs avec la Tunisie, note de son côté l'économiste Najib Akesbi: "une population jeune, largement désoeuvrée, en butte à des problèmes de formation et d'emploi et sans perspective d'avenir avec un horizon politique assez fermé". M. Akesbi évoque aussi "la corruption et le népotisme", soulignant que le Maroc (85e) est classé nettement derrière la Tunisie (59e) dans le dernier classement de Transparency International sur la corruption.

NINE) – 140 DIE IN FIGHTING IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

Two days of fighting in Southern Sudan between the region's army and a rebel faction has killed nearly 140 people, mostly civilians, a southern army spokesman said Friday. A former high-ranking southern army member who rebelled against the southern government following April elections broke a January cease-fire by attacking the towns of Fangak and Dor on Wednesday, said Col. Philip Aguer, the spokesman for the southern army. Renegade commander George Athor's troops captured Fangak on Wednesday, and the fighting continued through Thursday until the southern military retook it, Aguer said. No new fighting was reported on Friday. Aguer said 89 civilians in the two towns were killed, along with 20 southern soldiers and police officers. Aguer also said 30 of Athor's men were killed. The Associated Press attempted to reach Athor and his top aide for comment but the phone calls to the remote region did not go through. A U.N. spokesman, Kouider Zerrouk, said Friday that the U.N. mission in Sudan "is very concerned about the renewed fighting ... and the resulting civilian casualties." U.N. leaders have engaged both sides and are urging an immediate end to the attacks, Zerrouk said. Last week in Upper Nile state, which borders Jonglei, more than 60 southern soldiers who are members of

the northern Sudanese army died in a mutiny related to the imminent breakup of the country. Ongoing insecurity, the widespread presence of small arms, and severe underdevelopment due to decades of civil war are just some of the problems facing Southern Sudan in the run-up to its independence declaration. The aid group Doctors Without Borders said Friday it was responding to a huge influx of wounded patients. About 50 patients have been admitted to its health facilities. "We are mainly seeing patients with gunshot wounds, and many have significant abdominal and limb injuries," said Tim Baerwaldt, head of mission in Southern Sudan. Medical supplies and personnel have been flown to Malakal, the major town in Upper Nile state, the medical group said.

TEN) – SUDAN GOVERNMENT ARRESTS MARIAM AL-MAHDI

Sudanese security forces arrested the opposition Umma party's spokeswoman Mariam al-Mahdi on Thursday, a relative said, the latest detention in a crackdown on anti-government protests. "Security forces took her away before she could get into her car," said Habab Mubarak, a cousin. Female relatives of dozens of people detained during demonstrations in the past month tried to deliver a statement of protest to government offices on Thursday but many others were also arrested, she added.

ELEVEN) – 16 KILLED AS SOUTH SUDAN EX-REBEL ARMY CLASHES WITH 'REBELS'

At least 16 people died in clashes between a renegade militia and south Sudan's army, the military said on Thursday, raising fears for stability of the oil-producing south as it prepares to declare independence. The fighting with forces loyal to George Athor in south Sudan's Jonglei state on Wednesday and Thursday broke a shaky ceasefire with the southern government and followed the killing of a south Sudan minister inside his office, underlining insecurity even in the region's capital Juba. There have been fears that old divisions could re-surface during the build-up to secession, which is due to take place on July 9. "George Athor's forces attacked an SPLA (the southern Sudan People's Liberation Army) base in Jonglei state. Four SPLA soldiers were killed and 12 of Athor's men," said SPLA spokesman Philip Aguer. "This is a violation of the ceasefire agreement. Not only has he attacked SPLA, he has been planting landmines as well." Aguer said Athor's men launched the attack in the Jonglei community of Door on Wednesday morning. **CHEATING ALLEGATIONS** Athor's militia also staged two assaults near the settlement of Fangak on Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning, and two vehicles carrying SPLA soldiers hit a landmine on Wednesday, Aguer added. He could give no casualty figures. Athor, who was a senior officer in the southern army, rebelled after saying he was cheated out of the governorship of Jonglei state in April 2010 elections. Athor blamed the SPLA for attacking his forces first, but said that he was open to talks. "If the other side is willing, we can continue talks but if they are not willing then I would say this is the end of the peace agreement between us and them," he told Reuters via satellite phone from his jungle hideaway. Athor agreed the ceasefire with the southern army in January, just before voting started in the referendum. Southern leaders accused Khartoum of backing Athor when he first rebelled but did not repeat the accusations on Thursday. "We call on George Athor to look at this great moment in our history and make a logical decision for peace," said Aguer. Adding to unrest in the south, southern soldiers in a northern army unit in neighbouring Upper Nile state mutinied last week after refusing to redeploy north as part of a separation of forces before the south's independence. The southern army said on Thursday that the death count from those clashes had climbed to 60.

TWELVE) – THE NEW SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

Some are calling it the second scramble for Africa – the growing appetite of external interests in securing huge tracts of land in Africa, displacing the small-scale farmers who form the backbone of the continent's own food security. The issue has been one of the main talking points at this year's World Social Forum. And whilst there are no immediate answers, activists are warning about its effects on African people's livelihoods and food security.

For activists like Mercia Andrews, from the South African agrarian reform organisation, [Trust for Community Outreach and Education](#), "there is a massive land grab taking place and Western countries are coming into Africa and using African land to feed themselves to ensure their own food security at the expense of Africans."

Andrews is also a member of the [People's Dialogue](#), a network of African and Latin American indigenous and rural organisations. "They [big companies] are once again displacing the poor and vulnerable," she says.

Multinational agribusiness corporations and investment banks are leading the rush to secure land. The countries that have been targeted are found all across sub-Saharan Africa: Sudan, Tanzania, Namibia, Senegal, and others.

A [report by the International Food Policy Research Institute](#) in 2009 said the acquisition of farmland in developing countries was "one of the lingering effects of the food price crisis of 2007/8" as governments – particularly in the oil-rich but arid Persian Gulf, but including South Korea and Libya – sought to guarantee a source of affordable food in the future. These agents join corporate prospectors for land who have sought to establish vast farms to grow food, cash crops such as sugar cane, oil palms and jatropha.

According to the World Bank, 42 million hectares were acquired by foreign interests across the global South between August 2008 and October 2009. Lungisile Ntsebeza, Professor and Research Chair of Land Reform at the University of Cape Town, describes it using the term "a new scramble for Africa", referencing the 19th century division of the continent by European colonial powers.

A [list of banks and agribusinesses](#) active in what they anticipate will be a newly-profitable area has been compiled by the farmer advocacy group GRAIN. These include Saudi Star Agricultural Development, which plans to spend as much as five billion dollars acquiring half a million hectares across Ethiopia in the next 15 years; the Altima One World Agriculture Fund, a partnership between hedge fund Altima and the World Bank's private sector investment arm, the International Finance Corporation; Jarch Capital, which has put U.S. investors' money into a controversial 400,000 ha holding in South Sudan; and Singapore's Nauru Investments, with extensive holdings in oil, rubber and cane plantations in Côte d'Ivoire.

Farmers are worried that the buying or leasing of arable land will make adapting to climate change even harder for them. Moses Shaha, from the Eastern and Southern African Small-scale Farmers Forum, a movement with members in twelve African member states said, "We feed the nation and yet we now have to worry about land grabs. Climate change is taking away our livelihood and affects our farmers, who already do not understand this." He said he had come to Dakar to network with other organisations and strategise over an effective way forward.

For Elizabeth Mpofo, a small-scale farmer from Masvingo in Zimbabwe, the issue is simple, "We must tell our governments that what they are doing is wrong. We as farmers must be bold and courageous and challenge them. We must also tell farmers about the seriousness of the situation

THIRTEEN) – SCHENGEN AREA TO KEEP CONGO OFFICE OPEN

La "[maison Schengen](#)" de Kinshasa, où sont reçues les demandes de visa des Congolais désirant se rendre en Europe, ne fermera pas, en dépit des protestations, a assuré mercredi le ministre congolais des Affaires étrangères, Alexis Thambwe Mwamba, cité jeudi par la radio onusienne Okapi. Cette "maison Schengen, ouverte l'an dernier à la suite d'une initiative belgo-portugaise datant de 2003, est un guichet unique de dépôt des demandes de visa pour la majorité des pays Schengen en RDC (Belgique, France, Portugal, Allemagne, Luxembourg, Pays-Bas, Suède, Danemark, Norvège, Finlande, Islande et, prochainement, la République tchèque). Nombre de Congolais -notamment des musiciens voulant se produire en Europe- estiment toutefois que l'obtention d'un visa se révèle plus difficile depuis l'ouverture de cet établissement, installé dans une annexe de l'école belge de Kinshasa. Des manifestations ont eu lieu pour réclamer sa fermeture. Ce que Thambwe a exclu mercredi au cours d'un forum qui a réuni les ambassadeurs de l'Union européenne en RDC, les hommes d'affaires congolais, les associations de la société civile et autres groupes professionnels ainsi que des experts de son ministère, selon Radio Okapi, parrainée par l'ONU. "Les échanges entre les parties ont été francs et directs", a ajouté la radio. "Il n'y a jamais eu une approche, je dirai de corporation ou de rétorsion contre un certain nombre de groupements qui demandent des visas pour l'espace Schengen", a pour sa part indiqué l'ambassadeur belge, Dominique Struye de Swielande. Mais M. Thambwe a averti que la RDC se réservait "le droit de réciprocité en cas de refus injustifié d'un visa à un compatriote congolais".

FOURTEEN) - 7 DEAD IN CENTRAL AFRICA CLASHES WITH REBELS

Sept rebelles de la Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP), qui n'a jamais signé les accords de paix, ont été tués lors d'affrontements avec l'armée à Bria, dans l'est de la Centrafrique, a-t-on appris vendredi de source militaire.

FIFTEEN) – TANKER HIJACKING ESCALATES PIRACY CRISIS

The hijacking of a large U.S.-bound oil tanker marks a significant shift in piracy in the Indian Ocean and the crisis could "strangle" vital shipping lanes, tanker association [INTERTANKO](#) said on Wednesday. Armed pirates seized the Irene SL tanker, carrying about \$200 million worth of crude off the coast of Oman on Wednesday, and the second tanker hijacking by seaborne gangs in two days. "The hijacking by pirates of 2 million barrels of Kuwaiti crude oil destined for the U.S. in a large Greek tanker in the middle of the main sea lanes coming from the Middle East Gulf marks a significant shift in the impact of the piracy crisis in the Indian Ocean," Joe Angelo, managing director of INTERTANKO, told Reuters. "If piracy in the Indian Ocean is left unabated, it will strangle these crucial shipping lanes with the potential to severely disrupt oil flows to the U.S. and to the rest of the world," said Angelo, whose members own the majority of the world's tanker fleet.

SIXTEEN) - CHAD ARMY AND MILITIA USING CHILD SOLDIERS, SAYS REPORT

Boys in their early teens are serving as soldiers in Chad's army and militia groups operating in the east of the country, [Amnesty International](#) said Thursday. "It is tragic that thousands of children are denied their childhood and are manipulated by adults into fighting their wars," Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International's Africa programme director, said in a statement. "The Chadian government - and the Chadian and Sudanese armed groups operating in eastern Chad - must immediately stop the recruitment and use of children under 18 and release all children from their ranks," he said. According to Amnesty International, which collected witness testimony from more than 40 former and serving child soldiers, boys as young as 13 are fighting while even younger children are used as porters? Hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom fled the conflict in the Darfur province of neighbouring Sudan, live in camps in eastern Chad, providing ample recruitment opportunities for the army and Darfur rebel groups, Amnesty International said. "There is nothing to do here; there is no work, no school, no money and I am poor," a former child soldier living in a camp told researchers, adding in a reference to the Justice and Equality Movement, a Sudanese rebel group, "In the JEM, I am not paid, but when we are in combat, we take stuff from the enemy." The group called on Chadian President Idriss Deby to order his army commanders to stop recruiting children to fight and cooperate with demobilization programmes. The claims came two days before Red Hand Day - a global day aimed at calling for strong action against the use of children as combatants. According to figures published on the website of the organizers, about 250,000 children are currently fighting in wars. (See full text of report "[A compromised future: The plight of children recruited by armed forces and groups in eastern Chad](#)".)

SEVENTEEN) - GAS, GOODS AND CASH DRY UP AS IVORY COAST IMPASSE TURNS INTO ECONOMIC DISASTER

Power cuts, shortages of medicine and cooking gas, empty cash machines, depleted shops and piles of uncollected trash: these were things Ivorians used to see as the scourge of their poorer West African neighbours. Not anymore. An election dispute between Laurent Gbagbo and rival Alassane Ouattara is slowly turning Ivory Coast's political crisis into an economic disaster -and the mood on the streets is sour. "There's no more business. No one even has any money to fix their cars anymore," said 70-year-old Abidjan mechanic Lamine Sylla, gloomily surveying his yard of rusty old wrecks. "We're in serious difficulty. Right now we have no hope." Ouattara won the Nov. 28 presidential election, according to U.N.-certified results. But Gbagbo has defied international pressure to cede power, with backing from a thus far loyal military that has entrenched his position and crushed dissent. Early hopes that the poll would end years of stalemate and economic stagnation -
- unlocking foreign investment and allowing the world's top cocoa producer to retake its place as the region's

economic hub -- now seem dead and buried. Donors have suspended planned debt relief and Western countries have imposed sanctions on Gbagbo, his inner circle and various entities helping him stay in power. West Africa's regional central bank has also severed ties with his government. Gbagbo responded by seizing the bank's local office, forcing it to cut off Ivory Coast operations, which has created problems for banks to clear cheques or provide liquidity. Many cash machines are empty and banks have put limits on withdrawals. The sanctions and a one-month cocoa export ban imposed by Ouattara to starve Gbagbo of funds have left the industry in disarray, with beans piling up in the bush or being smuggled out of the country. "The impact of this crisis on trade is catastrophic," said market trader Fidele Sacre. "We don't have any more customers." **SIGNS OF DECAY** The skyscrapers, palm-fringed motorways, towering space-age cathedral and lagoon-side resorts that earned Abidjan favourable comparisons with European cities are still there. But a decade of crisis, dating from the civil war of 2002-03, has left paint peeling off walls, roads potholed, hotels faded and the lagoon reeking from industrial and human filth. No one knows how much sanctions and deepening financial crisis will worsen things, but early signs are not encouraging. "Before, I was selling 10 mobile phones a day," said Kadidiatou Sanoussi, surrounded by shelves of phone gadgets in her small stall in downtown Abidjan. "Now even to sell three is a struggle. Cheques from customers are bouncing." The state oil firm Petroci told Reuters last month that European Union sanctions aiming to squeeze Gbagbo may shut down its ailing 80,000 bpd refinery within months. The firm is struggling to supply cooking gas, and it is on course to run out within days. Petrol at the pump may be next. "I give it one more week before cooking gas runs out and then everyone's in real difficulty," said Desire Kouadio, manager of a local gas delivery firm. "Everyone will have to switch to charcoal, which is expensive and hurts our forests." Restaurants and shops selling imports have few customers. Destitute women send children to beg near a flyover lined by mountains of rubbish. Medical officials say pharmacies are no longer restocking medicines because of shortages and cash problems. A U.N. news agency (IRIN) report last week said supply disruptions were preventing AIDS patients from getting needed ARV treatments. "The EU sanctions are hurting imports because many of the ships bringing goods in are European," said a senior banking official who declined to be named. "Problems exporting means there's no longer money to pay for them anyway."

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