



NIAS Area Studies

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## IN FOCUS

### **Africa, Russia, and the War in Ukraine: Three reasons behind abstentions and silence**

*Despite the war's detrimental effects on Africa, the decision to abstain from condemning Moscow reflect the growing Russian influence on the continent.*

## AFRICA IN BRIEF

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## COMMENTARY

## Africa, Russia, and the War in Ukraine: Three reasons behind abstentions and silence

*Despite the war's detrimental effects on Africa, the decision to abstain from condemning Moscow reflect the growing Russian influence on the continent.*

Apoorva Sudhakar



Image Source: The Moscow Times/Valery Sharifulin/  
TASS Host Photo Agency

On 7 April, the UN General Assembly voted to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Among the 193 member countries, 93 voted in favour and 24 against the resolution. Of those who voted against the resolution, nine were African countries. Similarly, of the 58 abstentions, there were 19 African countries.

Previously, on 7 March, the UNGA voted on a resolution to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine; African countries accounted for 17 of the 35 abstentions. The above developments have garnered criticism from the West and the Africans themselves. In March, the US called “for a strong African response to Russian aggression.” Opposition parties in Africa have criticized the decision not to condemn Russia. For example, opposition leaders in South Africa believed the abstention placed the country “on the wrong side of history.”

What are the implications of the war on Africa? Why are African countries not condemning Russia?

### The War in Ukraine: Three implications for Africa

Africans in Ukraine and back home have borne the brunt of the Russia-Ukraine war since its breakout in February,

First, the treatment of African students in European countries. Africans faced a two-fold challenge among the thousands of foreign students who fled Ukraine. One, to escape the conflict. Two, [racism at the hands of security and border forces](#). African students said they were left stranded at Ukraine’s border with Poland after the Ukrainian military separated the fleeing students into two groups of white and non-white people. Some African students said they were given stale leftover food after the fresh food was distributed to Ukrainians. The evident discrimination drew the attention of the UN and the African Union. The [UNHCR Chief said](#) he was “humbled by the outpouring of support” to Ukrainian refugees but highlighted “the ugly reality that some Black and Brown people fleeing Ukraine – and other wars and conflicts around the world – have not received the same treatment as Ukrainian refugees.” The [AU Chair said](#) the treatment of African students was a breach of international law and reiterated that regardless of race and nationality, “all people have the right to cross international borders during conflict.”

Second, the threat of increased food insecurity. The war has raised concerns that [Africa will face increased food insecurity as prices continue to rise](#) in

several countries after Ukrainian supplies were cut off. Africa receives 40 per cent of Ukraine's export of corn and wheat. Similarly, African countries also depend on Russia for its fertilizer imports; Russia is also the leading exporter of nitrogen fertilizers globally. Therefore, rising prices of food and raw materials could lead to increased food insecurity.

Third, the diversion of aid. As mentioned earlier by the UNHRC Chief, global humanitarian support to Ukraine is welcome. However, the relief and aid are in contrast to the attention given to other crises such as Yemen. The New Humanitarian cites that days before the US and other donors pledged more than USD two billion to assist Ukraine, [donors failed to raise even a third of the USD 4.3 billion required for Yemen](#). On 12 April, BBC reported the World Food Programme's Executive Director's remark: "Don't make us take food from children that are hungry to give to children that are starving." The remark came after the WFP had to reduce the amount of food it delivered to Yemen, Chad, and Niger. The sudden focus on Ukraine is not only set to impact African countries requiring aid, but also other countries like Afghanistan and Myanmar.

### **Absence, abstentions and more: Three reasons behind Africa's silence**

Despite these detrimental impacts on Africa, African leaders have been hesitant to condemn Russia's moves. What are the reasons behind this?

First, Africa's ties with the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, several African countries were leading their independence movements. The Soviet Union had actively supported several movements against the colonial governments, including the African National Congress against the apartheid system in South Africa. Several African countries are still ruled by parties once supported by the Soviets and cherish the historical engagement. After Russia was subjected to

several sanctions in 2014, it turned to revive its ties in Africa, which were mellowed after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Second, strained relations with France and European powers. Recently, Sudan and Mali witnessed citizens calling for the French exit from African territories and a wave of support towards Russia. The anti-French sentiment grew after France's military intervention, which began in 2013 in Mali, could not end the Islamist violence in the Sahel region. France has been accused of [holding a paternalistic approach to its former colonies](#), thereby, adding to the people's resentment. Africans are more cautious regarding Western powers after the latter's intervention in Libya and the subsequent instability, and sought alternative partners. Russia, therefore, has taken advantage of this situation by forging closer ties with African countries.

Third, Russia's new inroads into Africa through military support. In 2021, a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Initiative (SIPRI) showed that [between 2016 and 2020, Africa received 18 per cent of Russia's arms exports](#). Further, Russia's arms exports to Africa rose by 23 per cent from 2011-15 to 2016-20. Mali, South Sudan, Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, and Libya are some countries that have close military ties with Russia. However, the West has also accused Russia of sending private military contractors, namely the Wagner Group, to help African governments. Russia has denied these claims and maintained that it had sent military instructors for training.

### **What can Africa expect now?**

It is important to note that the whole African continent has not remained silent. The African Union and the Economic Community of West African States condemned the Russian moves in Ukraine. Similarly, 28 countries voted in favour of the resolution condemning Russia. Despite

this, the countries which abstained hold strategic importance to the West. Therefore, Africa has three options: continue to maintain its neutrality, attempt to smoothen the withered ties with Russia,

or let the emerging divide between Africa and the West grow.

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### Recent publications from the NIAS Africa Studies

Anu Maria Joseph, "Looking Back: Darfur conflict and its key drivers," *Africa Weekly*, 12 April 2022

Sankalp Gurjar, "The rise of East African Community: From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean," *Africa Weekly*, 12 April 2022

"60 years of Algerian independence," *Africa Weekly*, 29 March 2022

"Libya: Political Polarization and Parallel Governments," *Africa Weekly*, 22 March 2022

Nireekshan Bollimpalli, "Africa's slow COVID vaccination continues. Four reasons why," *Global Politics*, 13 March 2022

"Europe and Africa: Will AU and EU be equal partners?," *Africa Weekly*, 15 March 2022

## AFRICA IN BRIEF

13 April-19 April

By Apoorva Sudhakar and Anu Maria Joseph

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### SOUTH SUDAN

#### UN body warns of increased food insecurity

On 14 April, News24 reported the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund's (CERF) warning on rising food insecurity in South Sudan. The CERF said 100,000 people had fled the Abyei Administrative Area (AAA) following increased communal fighting in February and March. The CERF said the displaced people outlined the "restoration of peace as their most critical demand, as well as food, water, shelter, and non-food items." The news report says UN agencies in South Sudan have warned that humanitarian crises could raise food insecurity by seven per cent. The Food and Agriculture Organisation's country representative also said the food insecurity has been driven by heavy flooding since 2019. (Lenin Ndebele, "[South Sudan food insecurity likely to rise, UN agency says](#)," *News24*, 14 April 2022)

### SOMALIA

#### Over 200 lawmakers sworn after several delays in elections

On 14 April, 290 lawmakers were sworn in, marking a significant development in Somalia's much awaited parliamentary elections. The lawmakers will then elect a speaker and deputies for the parliamentary Houses and subsequently elect a new president. The development comes after parliamentary and presidential elections have been delayed since February 2021, when President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed's term expired. The lower house elections were expected to be completed by 15 March; however, the polls were delayed. ("[Somalia swears in lawmakers as UN warns of 'real risk of famine'](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 15 April 2022)

### NIGERIA

#### Nigerian authorities unwilling to investigate mass abductions, says Amnesty International

On 13 April, a press release from the Amnesty International marked eight years of the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok on 14 April 2014. The press release said, of the 276 abducted, 16 were killed and 109 remain missing. It outlined that 1500 children had been abducted by armed groups since and that 204 children are in captivity since 2014. The Amnesty International Nigeria Director opined that Nigeria had failed to protect its children and added: "In all cases, the Nigerian authorities have remained shockingly unwilling to investigate these attacks or to ensure that the perpetrators of these callous crimes face justice." ("[Nigeria: Eight years after Chibok more than 1,500 children abducted by armed groups](#)," *Amnesty International*, 14 April 2022)

#### Death toll from attacks in Plateau state rises to 154

On 13 April, community leaders said the death toll from the gunmen attacks across four villages in Plateau state had risen to 154. A senior councillor of Garga rural district said gunmen pursued and shot dead several people who tried to escape the attack; mass burials were being held. The gunmen attacks of such scale are rare in Plateau state. The attacks took place a week after gunmen attacked a passenger train, killed eight people, and held several people hostage, in the neighbouring Kaduna state. ("[Death toll in Nigeria's Plateau state rises to 154 - community leaders](#)," *News24*, 13 April 2022)

## SOUTH AFRICA

### Death toll from floods climbs to 443; government releases emergency funds

On 18 April, Al Jazeera reported the death toll from the recent floods in the east coast had risen to 443; 63 people remain unaccounted for. Most casualties were recorded in Durban. The floods affected more than 40,000 people. The Finance Minister said USD 68.3 million would be used immediately, and a second phase of funds will focus on recovery and repair. The floods have disrupted power lines, water supply and highways. ("[South Africa flood toll rises to 443; dozens still missing](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 18 April 2022; "[S.Africa releases emergency funds for deadly floods, nearly 400 dead](#)," *The Standard*, 15 April 2022)

## ENVIRONMENT

### Fuel ship sinks off the Tunisian coast raising concerns of environmental damage

On 15 April, a fuel ship carrying 750 to 1000 tonnes of fuel sank off the Gabes coast. Following distress calls from a location near Gabes, the Tunisian navy rescued all seven crew members aboard. The vessel was heading to Malta from Equatorial Guinea. Tunisia's Environment Ministry said bad weather had caused the accident and outlined that water had seeped in up to two metres. On 17 April, Tunisia's Defence Ministry said other countries had offered to assist Tunisia to control the environmental damage. ("[Fuel ship sinks off Tunisia, threatening environmental disaster](#)," *The Standard*, 17 April 2022)

## REGIONAL

### 35 feared dead after boat capsizes off Libyan coast

On 15 April, a boat carrying 35 people capsized off the Libyan coast; the International Organization for Migration said six bodies had been discovered and the rest 29 are missing and presumed dead. The boat departed from Sabratha city, a major point from where Africans leave for

Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. The IOM said the incident took place when at least 53 deaths have been recorded in accidents off the Libyan coast within a week. ("[Boat capsizes off Libya, leaving 35 people dead or presumed dead](#)," *The Guardian*, 16 April 2022)

## INTERNATIONAL

### EU suspends military training projects in Mali

On 12 April, the European Union decided to suspend major military training programmes in Mali like the relations with the Malian transitional military government relapse. The EU High Representative to Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrel, mentioned the presence of Russian mercenaries and the reports of human rights abuses by the Malian troops and foreign fighters led to the decision. Borrel said: "We are halting the training missions for the [Malian] armed forces and national guard." He added the developments in Mali "have forced us to see there were not sufficient guarantees ... on non-interference by the Wagner group." He accused the Wagner Group of being "responsible for some very serious events which have led to tens of people being killed in Mali in recent times". The EU has two training missions in Mali, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) and the European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP), to train soldiers and police, respectively. The EU's decision came following the Human Rights Watch's report on the alleged killing of 300 people in a military operation by Malian forces alongside foreign fighters in the town of Moura. ("[EU winds down military training operations in Mali](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 12 April 2022)

### The world is not treating the human race equally, says WHO chief

On 13 April, WHO chief Tedros Ghebreyesus, referring to the world's response to Ukraine, opined there was a

difference in the attention given to “black and white lives.” Ghebreyesus said: “I need to be blunt and honest that the world is not treating the human race the same way,” adding, “Some are more equal than others. And when I say this, it pains me. Because I see it. Very difficult to accept – but it's happening.” Ghebreyesus said that while the attention to Ukraine is necessary, Ethiopia, Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan did not receive a “fraction” of the attention. (Taiyler Simone Mitchell, [“WHO chief says crises in Ethiopia and other places deserve as much attention as Ukraine,”](#) *Business Insider South Africa*, 16 April 2022)

#### UN allocates USD 100 million for six African countries and Yemen

On 14 April, the UN relief chief, Martin Griffiths, announced the allocation of USD 100 million in Africa and the Middle East to fight the spillover effects of the Ukraine war on the most vulnerable people. He said: “Hundreds of thousands of children are going to sleep hungry every night while their parents are worried sick about how to feed them. A war halfway around the world makes their prospects even worse. This allocation will save lives”. The CERF funding will support six African countries and Yemen. A USD 30 million will be allocated for Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya. Another USD 20 million each will go to Sudan and Yemen. South Sudan and Nigeria will receive USD 15 million each. The Ukraine conflict has worsened the food security issues in these countries, driven by economic instability, armed conflicts and environmental issues. (“[UN releases \\$100 million to fight hunger in 6 African countries and Yemen,](#)” *UN News*, 14 April 2022)

#### UK’s plan to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda sparks criticism

On 14 April, the UK announced a plan to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda; UK’s Home Secretary Priti Patel said anyone who enters the UK illegally would be considered for the relocation. Patel said the relocated people “will be given the support including up to five years of training, integration, accommodation, health care, so that they can resettle and thrive.” Prime Minister Boris Johnson termed the scheme an “innovative approach, driven by our shared humanitarian impulse and made possible by Brexit freedoms.” The move garnered criticism; the UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection said: “People fleeing war, conflict and persecution deserve compassion and empathy. They should not be traded like commodities and transferred abroad for processing.” In Rwanda, the opposition criticised the government for accepting the agreement to receive asylum seekers. The Democratic Green party of Rwanda (PVDR) said rich countries with their money and influence “should not shift their international obligation to receive refugees and transfer them to third countries.” The leader of DALFA-Umurinzi said Rwanda should address its own political and social problems before hosting refugees from other countries. (Radina Gigova, Sharon Braithwaite, Jorge Engels, Sarah Diab and Bethlehem Feleke, [“UK announces controversial plan to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda,”](#) *CNN*, 15 April 2022; Ignatius SSuuna and Jason Burke, [“Rwandan opposition criticises deal to accept UK’s asylum seekers,”](#) *The Guardian*, 14 April 2022)

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### About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

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### About the team

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Anu Maria Joseph is a postgraduate scholar at Department of Political Science in Madras Christian College, Chennai. Her areas of interest include democracy in Africa, human rights issues, ethnic conflicts in Africa, Afro-European and Afro-China relations.

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