

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytimes.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

From
ALEXANDER PAYNE
Director of
SIDEWAYS

June 10, 2009

Battle to Halt Graft Scourge in Africa Ebbs

By [CELIA W. DUGGER](#)

LUSAKA, Zambia — The fight against corruption in Africa's most pivotal nations is faltering as public agencies investigating wrongdoing by powerful politicians have been undermined or disbanded and officials leading the charge have been dismissed, subjected to death threats and driven into exile.

"We are witnessing an era of major backtracking on the anticorruption drive," said Daniel Kaufmann, an authority on corruption who works at the [Brookings Institution](#). "And one of the most poignant illustrations is the fate of the few anticorruption commissions that have had courageous leadership. They're either embattled or dead."

Experts, prosecutors and watchdog groups say they fear that major setbacks to anticorruption efforts in [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#) and [Kenya](#) are weakening the resolve to root out graft, a stubborn scourge that saps money needed to combat poverty and disease in the world's poorest region. And in Zambia, a change of leadership has stoked fears that the country's zealous prosecution of corruption is ebbing.

The perils of challenging deeply rooted patterns of corruption have been brought home recently with the suspicious deaths of two anticorruption campaigners. Ernest Manirumva, who worked with a nonprofit group, Olucome, investigating high-level corruption in Burundi, was [stabbed to death](#) in the early morning hours of April 9. A bloodstained folder lay empty on his bed. Documents and a computer flash drive were missing, said the president of Olucome, Gabriel Rufyiri.

And in the Congo Republic, Bruno Jacquet Ossebi, a journalist who had announced he was joining a lawsuit brought by Transparency International to reclaim the ill-gotten wealth of his country's president, [died of injuries](#) from a fire that raced through his home in the early hours of Jan. 21.

The broader anxieties about Africa's resolve to combat corruption have emerged from troubled efforts in several countries.

In oil-rich Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, where watchdog groups say efforts to combat corruption are [backsliding](#), [Nuhu Ribadu](#), who built a well-trained staff of investigators at the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, said he fled his homeland into self-imposed exile in England in December. Officials had sent Mr. Ribadu away to a training course a year earlier, soon after his agency charged a wealthy, politically connected former governor with trying to bribe officials on his staff with huge sacks stuffed with \$15 million in \$100 bills. Mr. Ribadu, who was dismissed from the police force last year, said he had received death threats and was fired upon in September by assailants.

"If you fight corruption, it fights you back," he said.

In South Africa, home to the region's biggest economy, a new crime unit with less statutory protection from political interference was stripped of the authority to both investigate and prosecute crimes. It will take over from the Scorpions, the prosecuting authority's elite investigating unit that had achieved high conviction rates and built potent corruption cases against [Jacob Zuma](#), who became president of South Africa in April, and Jackie Selebi, the national police commissioner and an ally of former President [Thabo Mbeki](#). The Scorpions were abolished last year and the country's chief prosecutor, Vusi Pikoli, who had pushed forward with both cases, was fired.

"Even people of good will would be slow to take on people in high places again because history will have told them it comes at a high cost," said Wim Trengrove, a private lawyer who assisted the state with the prosecution of Mr. Zuma.

And in Kenya, the economic anchor of east Africa, scandals have continued to flourish and anticorruption prosecutions have languished since John Githongo, who was the country's anticorruption chief, sought safety in self-imposed exile in England in 2005. Aaron Ringera, who apparently advised Mr. Githongo in taped conversations in 2005 not to push for prosecutions of President [Mwai Kibaki's](#) ministers, is the current anticorruption chief. Mr. Ringera said in an e-mail message that Mr. Githongo had twisted advice he offered him "in his own best interests." In an interview, he said he had recommended prosecuting eight ministers, but had been blocked by either the courts or the attorney general.

The search is on for more effective ways to tackle corruption, including intensified legal efforts to prosecute multinational corporations that pay the bribes and reclaim loot that African political elites have stashed abroad.

Transparency International's suit seeks to force the French justice system to investigate how the leaders of Gabon, the Congo Republic and Equatorial Guinea and their families acquired tens of millions of dollars in assets there. Still others say rich countries and international organizations that provide billions of dollars in aid to African countries each year must more vigorously use their leverage to make sure aid does not fuel corruption.

Based on his finding that more than \$1 trillion a year is paid in bribery globally, Mr. Kaufmann, formerly director of global programs at the World Bank Institute, estimates there are tens of billions of dollars of corrupt transactions each year in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr. Githongo, who failed in trying to fight corruption from the inside, has returned to Nairobi to start a nonprofit group to mobilize rural people to press politicians to clean up a rotten system.

"Going after big fish hasn't worked," he said. "The fish will not fry themselves."

Zambia recently won rare convictions against former military commanders and Regina Chiluba, the wife of its former president, on corruption charges. [Frederick Chiluba](#), president from 1991 to 2001, will himself face a verdict in July on corruption charges. His sumptuous wardrobe — Lanvin suits, silk pajamas and handmade Italian shoes of snakeskin, satin and ostrich — became an emblem of greed in one of the world's poorest countries.

But anticorruption leaders say they sense less commitment to tackle corruption since the election of

President Rupiah Banda. "I'm inside," said Maxwell Nkole, who leads a task force set up to investigate the Chiluba-era abuses. "The tempo, the intensity to tackle corruption is dropping."

The Banda administration vigorously denies that charge, and says it will prosecute officials who stole \$2 million from the Ministry of Health. At stake are hundreds of millions of dollars in grants from the United States' [Millennium Challenge Corporation](#) that Zambia is eligible for. On a recent afternoon, ambassadors from rich nations, the United States and Britain among them, mingled at a party on the lawn of Mark Chona, the first chief of the Zambian anticorruption task force. In welcoming them, he issued a sharp warning.

"Your money is being stolen," he said. "Don't sit silent. You don't know how much influence you have."

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
