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Related Categories: Corruption; Resource Security; Global Health; Central Africa; China; East Africa; North Africa

SWISS UNFREEZE TUNISIAN EX-PRESIDENT'S ASSETS

On January 18th, Swiss officials announced that they intended to lift a freeze on more than \$60 million linked to the family of former Tunisian president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Swiss authorities originally froze the assets in 2011 when Ben Ali fled his country during the Arab Spring uprisings, stipulating that the sanctions would extend for a maximum period of ten years. Though Ben Ali died in 2019, officials intimated that the unfrozen funds would likely go to his living family members, provoking outrage from Tunisian advocacy groups who consider the assets to be "ill-gotten goods" from Ben Ali's autocratic and corrupt tenure.

The resulting diplomatic spat between the two countries constitutes an anomaly in a relationship that has improved markedly since Ben Ali's departure. Switzerland and Tunisia are trading partners and regularly cooperate on issues such as migration, security, and democratic development in North Africa. The affair also reflects heightened national anxieties within Tunisia itself, as police forces clash with protesters responding to plummeting consumer prices, massive youth unemployment, and an economy that has contracted by nine percent in the last year alone. These trends, and the attendant civil unrest in the country, threaten to undermine the democratic growth experienced by the country in the wake of the revolution that toppled Ben Ali a decade ago. (*Washington Post*, January 18, 2021; *AllAfrica*, January 18, 2021)

VACCINE DIPLOMACY AT PLAY ON THE CONTINENT

Vaccine distribution on the African continent represents a gargantuan effort, and global powers are stepping in to assist in the undertaking. While globally-funded COVID vaccine distribution accelerator COVAX has raised \$6 billion to distribute COVID-19 vaccines worldwide, this effort reportedly still needs \$2 billion to meet immediate global demand, including in most African countries. Moreover, while facilities in different nations, such as "a globally recognized genomic and infectious disease laboratory in Nigeria," have successfully developed effective vaccines, a lack of funding and resources has limited its ability to distribute doses. To make up for these shortcomings, China, Russia, and India have all signed deals with various African countries, including Morocco, South Africa, Guinea, and Egypt, to supply millions of doses of their own respective inoculations to African citizens. (*Quartz Africa*, January 9, 2021)

CHINA GAINS ACCESS TO MORE CONGOLESE COBALT

Eurasian Resources Group (ERG), a natural resources extraction company and subsidiary of Swiss-based commodities trading company Telf AG, is poised to sell its Metalkol cobalt extraction operation in Kolwezi, Congo, to a collection of "mostly Chinese companies." Metalkol is responsible for 18,000 tons of cobalt – roughly ten percent of the world's supply – each year. Roughly 75 percent of the global supply of cobalt is sourced from Congolese extraction facilities, a majority of which are owned by various Chinese companies. Cobalt is used in a variety of electronic devices and electric vehicles as a lithium ion battery component, demand for which is expected to dramatically increase in coming years. Mining operations make up the largest percentage of the DRC's export economy and China dominates the global electric vehicle production market. (Reuters, January 11, 2021)

SUDAN AND SOUTH SUDAN TO INCREASE OIL PRODUCTION...

Sudan and South Sudan have formally agreed to an oil production agreement. Per the new deal, Sudan will provide local expertise and technologies to neighboring South Sudan, which is home to significant oil reserves. The agreement also recognizes the need to jointly develop laboratories, seismic data processing capabilities, and training for future relevant subject matter experts.

The deal is an important step forward for the economies of both countries, each of which has been wracked by ongoing domestic conflicts as well as a COVID-19-related decline in exports. The deal is also a significant symbolic development; a partial cause for the second Sudanese Civil War, the outcome of which was the secession and establishment of South Sudan as an independent state, was the region's control over oil reserves and the impact of their loss on the Sudanese economy. (*Dabanga Sudan*, January 17, 2021)

...WHILE TENSIONS WITH ETHIOPIA ESCALATE

In what has been described as "a dangerous escalation" by Sudanese military officials of ongoing deadly border clashes, an Ethiopian military plane allegedly violated airspace over Sudan in mid-January. Tensions between the two countries have flared in recent weeks after the Sudanese military moved to occupy the al-Fashqa region, which is legally within Sudan's national borders but historically populated by Ethiopian migrant farmers. Ethiopia has been embroiled in a civil war since early November, after its national military forces moved to fight the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the country's northern Tigray region – a conflict that has already claimed hundreds, if not thousands, of lives, and drawn in neighboring Eritrea. While the Ethiopian government denied the charge that one of its military planes violated Sudanese airspace, its track record of false and misleading statements have left observers skeptical. (*Al Jazeera*, January 13, 2021)