



Guinea

## Blood and diamonds

ABIDJAN

One of Africa's worst-run countries faces violent change

A GENERAL strike has kept banks, schools and markets shut for more than two weeks; tens of thousands of people have been on the streets to demand the ailing president's departure; and more than 40 of their number have been shot dead by the security forces. Guinea's president, Lansana Conté, who has survived assassination attempts and coup plots, has never been closer to losing power.

The strike, the third in the past year, has become overtly political in tone: the trade union leaders' main demand now is for Mr Conté to step down. It was started on January 10th to protest against the freeing of two of his friends, who had been accused of corruption; it is widely believed that the president went to the prison in person to get them freed. But the roots of the unrest lie in the country's dismal economic state, which the unions and protesters blame on the president.

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Mobile phones in Africa

## Buy, cell, hold

A plan is afoot to create a pan-African market based on mobile phones

THE technology revolution may be coming to poor countries via the mobile phone, not the personal computer, as it did in rich ones. And just as the internet encouraged an entrepreneurial ethos, and with it the creation of a few too many dotcom firms, Africa's surge in mobile-phone use may unleash the same sort of business energy, but tailored to local needs.

One such initiative is about to begin. TradeNet, a software company based in Accra, Ghana, will unveil a simple sort of eBay for agricultural products across a dozen countries in west Africa. It lets buyers and sellers indicate what they are after and their contact information, which is sent to all relevant subscribers as an SMS text message in one of four languages. Interested parties can then reach others directly to do a deal.

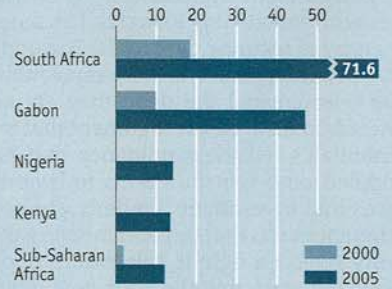
Listing offers is free, as is receiving the texts. TradeNet plans to earn revenue by putting advertisements in the messages, though it hopes the service will become so useful that recipients will eventually want to pay. For the moment, though, the company is busy signing up users and swallowing the cost of sending the messages.

Mobile-phone use in sub-Saharan Africa is soaring (see chart). Whereas only 10% of the population had network coverage in 1999, today more than 60% have it, a figure expected to exceed 85% in 2010, according to the GSM Association, an industry trade group. This provides the infrastructure for businesses like TradeNet to function.

TradeNet is the brainchild of Mark Davies, a British dotcom tycoon who gave up the rat race and went to Africa in 2000. In 2005, he started the prototype

See how they roam

Mobile phone subscribers, per 100 inhabitants



Source: International Telecommunication Union

with his own money and about \$200,000 from aid agencies. An early set of trials last year generated a plethora of trades, such as a sale of organic fertiliser between a person in Yemen and another in Nigeria.

A number of other mobile-phone market-places taking shape also started as aid projects. For example, Trade at Hand, a project funded by the UN's International Trade Centre in Geneva, provides daily price information for fruit and vegetable exports in Burkina Faso and Mali, with plans to add more countries. And Manobi, a telecoms firm based in Senegal, providing real-time agricultural and fish prices to fee-paying subscribers, is also backed by aid money. But TradeNet's approach is unique so far because it collects valuable economic data—names, locations, business interests and telephone numbers—and then sells them to advertisers. The price of economic development may be junk mail by mobile phone.

blem starts at the top. Mr Conté, who took power in a coup in 1984, has been sick for several years. He is rarely seen in public, preferring the comfort of his farm in the countryside. His hold on power and influence on events in his country have regressed at the same pace as his health.

Emboldened by their initial success at bringing the country to a standstill, disrupting even the bauxite industry, union leaders then called for Mr Conté to resign, and organised a rally in the capital, Conakry, for January 22nd. Chanting protesters marched on the presidential palace. The security forces fired on the demonstrators, killing at least 30 and injuring more than a hundred. Since then, however, there have

been talks between union leaders and the government.

Gilles Yabi of the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based think-tank, suggests that Mr Conté should appoint a prime minister, with wide powers, to form a unity government. Other countries, he says, should help out but "must not encourage, in the name of artificial stability, a flimsy compromise that will only hold for a few months". The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional group, wants the presidents of Nigeria and Senegal to mediate. As *The Economist* went to press, Mr Conté agreed to appoint a prime minister. But the strike was continuing. ■

