

'Africa is not one country'

On Friday, 8 January 2010 three members of Togo's football squad were killed in a machine-gun attack on the team's vehicles in northern Angola. The team was in the country to participate in the African Nations Cup.

By [Justice Malala](#) 18 Jan 2010



The attack received international media attention, with footballers across the world stopping to observe minutes of silence in honour of the fallen team members. The Togo team left Angola a few days later, foregoing the tournament.

Within hours of the attack, a massive explosion of questions began to be raised about the safety of the 2010 FIFA World Cup tournament in South Africa. Journalists and football administrators across the world suggested that the South African football spectacle would be equally unsafe and some even toyed with the probability of not attending at all.

In the days since the attack South Africa's 2010 local organising committee has gone out of its way to reassure fans, footballers and administrators about the safety of South Africa. Danny Jordaan, chief executive of the committee, asked: "Why are we being asked to explain ourselves when the incident took place in another country thousands of kilometres away?"

Jordaan's comment reminded me of an article written by celebrated Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina and published by *Granta* magazine in 2005. In the third paragraph of the piece, titled "How To Write About Africa," he says:

"In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular."

So what is happening here?

Once again, the massively huge African continent is being reduced to one dark mass - and all of it is dangerous. Instead of looking at the Angolan incident, isolating it and studying it, once again one incident in a remote part of one African country is being held up as the whole continent.

It is a tragedy that this is happening. I am the first to admit that South Africa has its problems. When Thabo Mbeki was in charge of South Africa, I voiced doubts about hosting the World Cup here. My reasons were

clear and specific. Mbeki had said South Africa does not have a crime problem and that it was our “perception” that there was.

Fortunately, the Jacob Zuma administration has explicitly said crime is a problem and it is now in the process of instituting some serious measures to curb this scourge. The route to solving problems, as Zuma is ably demonstrating, is to admit that they exist in the first place.

So what does a shooting in a formerly war-torn country such as Angola have to do with South Africa, really? Over the past four weeks the England cricket team has been touring South Africa. The nation was at a standstill, glued to the screen. Nothing, absolutely nothing, happened to that team or the thousands of visitors who came here to watch them play.

Last year South Africa hosted the Indian Premier League cricket tournament, with games played in all our major centres and global television coverage. Not a single violent incident was recorded, and the organisers were so impressed with everything from security to infrastructure that they have expressed keenness to repeat the staging of the event here.

Last June South Africa hosted a successful FIFA Confederations Cup which was won by Brazil after an unexpectedly inspired showing by the United States, which went to the finals. Participants included countries as diverse as Spain, Egypt, Iraq and New Zealand. There wasn't a single major incident, leading to FIFA declaring that there was no plan B to take the 2010 World Cup to any other country.

The hysteria over the Angola shooting needs to be looked at in this context. Africa is a massive continent, made up of numerous countries of diverse cultures and problems - many unique to their locales. It is not one thing.

A shooting in Angola - clearly motivated by separatist tendencies in one region and by a single grouping - is absolutely and totally unrelated to the staging of a football tournament in South Africa. As Wainaina's article suggests, such hysteria exposes commentators' underlying and unsubstantiated fears about Africa.

The time for these are past.

What now? Writing from here on the southern tip of this beautiful continent, all I can say is that I have never seen a country and a people look forward so much to anything in their lives. Our economists speak of the expected fillip to our economy when the world arrives here. Our politicians are pulling up their socks. Our workers are intensifying their efforts to finish various infrastructure projects.

South Africa is waiting, and is determined to stage a successful tournament. This place is nothing like Angola, and should not falsely be equated with that country.

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