

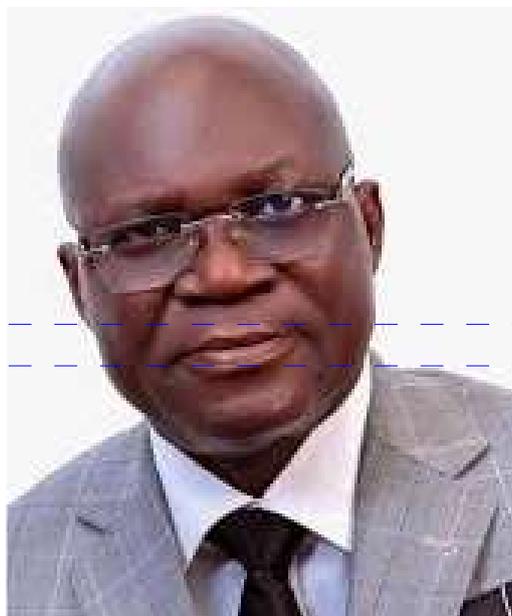
# Where was Africa in Davos?

By Reuben Abati

To state the truth, Africa was significantly nowhere at the World Economic Forum which took place this January 19 – 23. You may say absent figuratively, sidelined more specifically, and that has been very much the pattern over the years. The World Economic Forum was established in 1971 by Professor Klaus Schwab to provide a forum for the global powers to come together to discuss global markets, create new models and discuss stakeholder capitalism – a tribute to multilateralism, an elite meeting point for political leaders, the private sector, captains of industry, civil society, celebrities and the youths of the world. It was not until 1992 that South African leaders F.W. de Klerk, and Nelson Mandela made a joint appearance at the Forum. Africa was later invited but we went there as a problem to be solved, a case for aid, a kind of beggars' opera, not as a partner with a seat at the table and a voice. African leaders have been in attendance since then, showing up, taking photographs, shaking hands, with the local African media exuding much excitement about the scenery, the snow-capped Swiss Alps, and some of their leaders making statements on the margins but no one must be mistaken to think that Africa has any bargaining power. The pattern was the same this year, and even more so as Africa's voice was muffled, low toned in the conversation.

The theme for this year's 56th World Economic Forum was "The Spirit of Dialogue" to address five key questions: co-operation in a more contested world, unlocking new sources of growth, investment in people, emerging technologies and how to build prosperity within planetary boundaries. The invitations showed an inclination to be inclusive, and in retrospect, global players this year, trooped to Davos as they have always done ritualistically, out of commitment to what has become an annual pilgrimage. It is a big opportunity for networking for governments and businesses, and a great business, and tourist season for the otherwise snowy, wintry, sleepy resort of Davos in Switzerland.

Africa showed up as it has always done since 1992, with



delegations from across the continent. The Nigeria delegation was led by its Vice President, Senator Kashim Shettima, and there were Nigerian voices speaking about trade, and Nigeria as an investment destination. Nigeria even went a step further this year by having a House of its own at the Davos Boulevard where events were held to showcase the country. Vice President Shettima commissioned the Nigeria House where he affirmed Nigeria's intention to engage with the global economy from the front row, ready to open up to the world, and tell Nigerian stories. It was a historic moment. Other speakers included the Minister for Industry, Trade and

Industry, Mrs. Jumoke Oduwole, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Solid Minerals Development, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Yusuf Tuggar. Vice President Shettima would later speak at a panel titled "When Food Becomes Security" where he made a case for climate-smart agriculture and modern farming, noting that "we have no business being poor", given Nigeria's vast arable land. Similarly, Minister of Finance Wale Edun speaking at a session titled "How can we better invest in people?" on Wednesday, 21 January, promoted Nigeria's Reform Agenda: Nigeria's emphasis on foreign investment to seek jobs, productivity and inclusive economic growth as the country moves from stabilization to consolidation. He said Nigeria aims for less borrowing, and more investment to drive growth. But if the government chooses domestic borrowing, rather than foreign capital sources, would it not crowd out the private sector in the domestic capital markets, given the huge deficit of N23. 85 trillion in the 2026 Budget.? Other African countries like South Africa also had their sovereign pavilions in Davos, and there were other African leaders pushing the African narrative: Sierra Leone's President Julius Maada Bio spoke about African prosperity, Rwanda and Liberia also attended. There was also much talk about African Continental Free Trade (AfCFTA). But whereas Africa's presence was seen, the continent still remained at the margins selling potentials. The need to move the African narrative from the margins to the centre is the major challenge for African leaders participating at the Davos annual meeting.

This would bring much higher value than the promise to hold the WEF Spring summit in South Africa in April 2027, after seven years. The last Africa meeting was held in Cape Town in September 2019. The World Economic Forum is about power, the most powerful countries of the world and their leaders across disciplines naturally dominate the conversations and set the agenda for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, while the weaker countries of the world are expected to align or at best stand by as spectators. The inequity in geo-politics was most evident at this year's WEF. The big men of the world came to discuss the urgent contemporary issues – technology, artificial intelligence, rare earth materials, climate change, and the other major issues that divide the world: trade tensions and tariffs, Greenland, conflicts and the realization that global rules have been ruptured, trust violated, and the world is becoming far more insular than it ever was. They went to Davos to have a dialogue as old allies grapple with the contradictions of their own making. The key statement in this direction was made by the Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney who had most recently been in China on a state visit, and who obviously resents US President Donald Trump's efforts to place "America First" in everything. Carney's speech titled "Principled and Pragmatic: Canada's Path" was a direct condemnation of America's aggression against other states, and how Trump's conduct has resulted in a "rupture in the rules-based international order." Carney called on "middle powers" to come together in the face of economic coercion by "greater powers" which threatens the same institutions that middle powers rely upon including the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations. Carney was widely praised for his candour.

Carney did not mention Trump by name but everyone knew the target of his statements. Trump, ever ready to fight back, did not waste a moment. When it was his turn to speak the following day, he declared that "Canada lives because of the United States" and accused Carney of ingratitude, the man he calls Governor Carney, Canada being the 51st state of the United States in his own reckoning. Trump would subsequently disinvite Carney to the "Board of Peace", which he had set up to oversee the US peace plan for Gaza rehabilitation. The fight with Carney did not end there. The previous week, PM Carney had visited China, and met President Xi Jinping on January 16. At their meeting, both leaders reached some agreements on trade tariffs: China will lower levies on Canadian Canola oil from 85% to 15% by March, Canada will tax Chinese EVS at the most favored nation rate of 6.1% down from 100%. What has since followed is a threat from President Trump on Truth Social that "If Canada makes a deal with China, it will immediately be hit with a 100% tariff against all Canadian goods and products coming into the United States"

President Trump obviously does not like to be upstaged. Carney stealing the show in Davos was perhaps too much for him to bear. Trump had to be the most dominant world leader at the Forum. He was the star guest. Ahead of his visit, there had been protests in Davos and all over Europe over the question of America's planned acquisition of Greenland, the semi-autonomous region of Denmark, which Trump says is crucial for the strategic security of the United States, and which he threatened to acquire by military force if need be. Days earlier, Trump had threatened to impose tariffs on European allies including the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland if they continued to oppose his plan to annex Greenland. European leaders who he had dismissed as "weak" were also waiting for him. President Emmanuel Macron threatened that Europe would have no option but to invoke the anti-coercion instrument, "the Trade Bazooka," which may harm transatlantic trade, but send a strong signal to Trump and the United States. Ahead of the WEF, eight European countries had sent troops to Greenland in a symbolic evocation of Article 5 of the NATO treaty. Trump was not just upending the global order; he was threatening the NATO alliance. He sent a text message to Norway's Prime Minister, Jonas Stoere to show his annoyance over the refusal to give him the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize. He further threatened to impose 200% tariffs on French wines in a leaked private chat. Europe refused to be intimidated. The people torched American flags. About 300 persons took to the streets of Davos, chanting "Trump, not welcome."

When he eventually spoke in Davos – a long speech, full of self-praise, that was more than one-hour long, Trump



was far more conciliatory than expected. He backed down from his threat to use military force in Greenland referring to the framework of a future deal that had been discussed with NATO Chief Mark Rutte in Davos. He would rather build more military bases in Greenland and also build “a Golden Dome Defence System to protect the US from long-range missile strikes.” He abandoned talks of a trade war with Europe, and appeared more open to dialogue. He used the occasion to promote his vision of American exceptionalism and his personal achievements. “People are doing very well.

They're very happy with me... The USA is the economic engine on the planet. And when America booms, the entire world booms. It's been the history.” Still in Davos, the other major development was the Board of Peace, set up by President Trump to implement his 20-point plan to end Israel's war in Gaza, a three-tier governing structure with representatives from around the world. The White House had invited countries and figures around the world to sit on the board which would be chaired by Trump himself. The invitees came majorly from the US, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Even the Pope was invited. From Africa, only Egypt and Morocco! In November 2025, the United Nations had backed the plan, granting it international legitimacy. But when the signing ceremony was held on the sidelines of the WEF in Davos, fewer than 20 countries signed up. Trump had been saying the Board could “replace the United Nations”. He would be Chairman of the Board indefinitely. Members will serve

for three years after which they must pay one billion dollars for a permanent seat. The focus will no longer be the rebuilding of Gaza, but to tackle conflicts all over the world. Many countries declined: Britain (concerns about having to sit in the same room with Putin when peace is the subject), France and Norway (concerns about the UN), China (acknowledged the invitation but did not commit), Ukraine (said Russia is an enemy and Belarus is Russia's friend). Italy, Ireland and others raised concerns about governance and transparency. On the whole, there are key lessons to be learnt from the 56th edition of the WEF. The best way to check a bully is to stand up and resist the bully's tactics. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, France, and the United Kingdom resisted US President Trump by being clear and firm about where they stand in the order of things. Solidarity is also important. By bonding together, the European countries were able to show strength, not the weakness that Trump had associated with them. Dialogue is important in resolving tensions. When Europe spoke with one voice, Trump was compelled to listen. The world is for the powerful, not the weak. For Africa to get a front seat at the table, our leaders must learn to be more strategic. They must learn to make power moves, and pay less attention to the tourism value of international engagements and the estacodes that come with such outings. Having one strong ally is not enough. The landscape of global power politics is changing. Africa must cultivate new friends, to strengthen connections in an emerging new international order with a different set of rules.

