

Africa

AN OVERVIEW

Africa is a vast continent of some 11,700,000 square miles (30,300,000 square kilometers), divided into 53 independent nations, and ranks second only to Asia in size. The African continent represents about 20 percent of the earth's total landmass, yet its population hovers around 10 percent of the world's total population. Though the growth rate continues to be high—despite the widespread AIDS epidemic—Africa ranks only third in the world, behind Asia and Europe (including western Russia), in continental population.

Most of the African landmass is high in elevation with comparatively few mountain ranges. The highest point, Mount Kilimanjaro, rises to an elevation of 19,340 feet (5,895 meters) above the East African plains in Tanzania. The Nile is the longest river in the world and flows more than 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometers) from its origin at Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea. Other major rivers include the Congo, the Niger, and the Zambezi. There are a number of islands off the coast of Africa, the largest of which is Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island (229,000 square miles, or 593,000 square kilometers). Divided into almost equal halves by the equator, Africa has warm temperatures most of the year, though these are moderated somewhat in high elevations and by ocean currents along the coast.

Africa divides geographically and culturally in two. The Sahara Desert, nearly the size of the United States, dominates the landscape of northern Africa. Culturally

and historically, North Africa is predominantly Mediterranean, Arabic, and Muslim. South of the Sahara is Black Africa. Though many West African countries are Muslim, and there are Swahili pockets (of Arab influence) in East Africa, Africa south of the Sahara has an incredible diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages. More than one thousand languages and dialects are spoken, and economies vary from mostly developed (South Africa) to pastoral, horticultural/agricultural to hunting and gathering. Most of the current political boundaries of African countries were drawn up by European colonial powers in the mid- to late 19th century; thus, many peoples found themselves divided into two or three different geographical sections, each belonging to a different colony. Since independence from Europe, beginning in the 1960s and finally ending with Namibian independence in 1991, African nations have had to struggle with a colonial legacy as well as increasing populations, heavy urbanization, low economic growth, civil war, ethnic violence, educational franchise, limited health care delivery, and disease. They have done so with widely varying degrees of success and failure. While the continent as a whole is rich in natural and human resources, and while there is great social and economic potential for Africans, the future of Africa is simply impossible to predict.

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