

# U.S. Says It Wants Trade, Not Aid, in Africa. Cuts Threaten Both.

President Trump’s slashing of foreign assistance threatens road and energy projects that diplomats and experts say align with U.S. priorities.

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U.S. funding for this overpass in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, ends in August. It's unclear if the project will be finished by then. Issouf Sanogo/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

 **By Elian Peltier**  
Reporting from Abidjan, Ivory Coast

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Commuters in Abidjan, one of West Africa’s largest cities, joke that it is impossible to run two errands a day because of traffic. A new overpass on the way to the airport could make their journeys smoother. About 120,000 vehicles will move through it every day, according to the Ivorian agency overseeing its construction.

For years, as the work continued, a billboard told Ivorians who made it possible: “Financed by the American people.” But they are not so sure of that promise anymore. The billboard was removed earlier this year because President Trump has gutted U.S. foreign aid, leaving large infrastructure projects financed by the United States facing an uncertain future.

Now, construction workers in Abidjan are rushing to complete the overpass before the Trump administration turns off the funding. It is a sign of how African investors and government leaders, as well as drivers, are adapting to the new U.S. strategy on the continent.

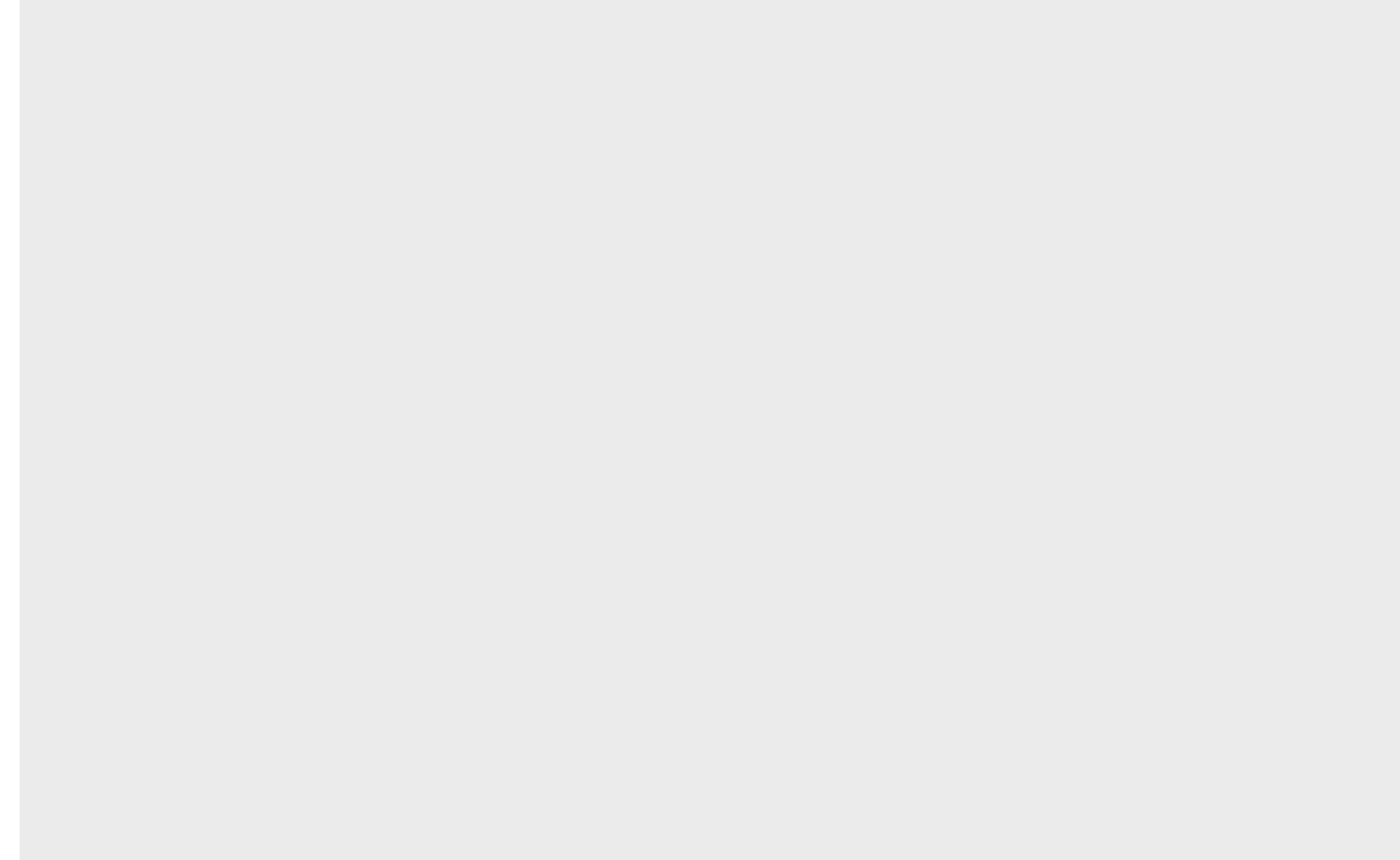
The United States is not so much in a financing mood. It wants deals.

“Trade, not aid, is now the pillar of our policy in Africa,” Troy Fitrell, the State Department’s top Africa official, said in a speech last week at a business summit in Abidjan. Minutes after he finished speaking, U.S. and Ivorian companies signed more than half a dozen deals, including to supply drones for agriculture and mining, and scanning systems for border monitoring.

Mr. Trump has broken with the terms that defined decades of U.S. involvement in Africa: He has shrunk the U.S. Agency for International Development, imposed tariffs that threaten a [free-trade mechanism](#) with dozens of African countries, and rolled back anti-corruption standards for American companies doing business with foreign partners.

The Trump administration has also begun [dismantling a little-known agency](#) established by Congress in 2004 that finances the overpass in Ivory Coast and dozens of large infrastructure projects in a short list of countries. These include projects to expand electricity grids, build roads or increase women’s employment in places such as [Indonesia](#), Nepal and [Senegal](#).

The funds go to governments, selected for their growth potential and good governance, rather than nonprofit groups. As China brings [stadiums](#) and [railroads](#) to Africa and Turkey builds airports, these projects could also [strengthen American influence](#), experts say. Even as they align with Mr. Trump’s pro-trade policies, they now hang in the balance.



The Chinese-built Laurent Pokou Stadium in San Pedro, Ivory Coast. Joao Silva/The New York Times

Mr. Fitrell said last week that the United States would prioritize commercial diplomacy in Africa. The continent will be home to a quarter of the world’s population by 2050, but countries south of the Sahara account for only 1 percent of U.S. trade in goods. The Trump administration’s strategy is meant to boost that, said Mr. Fitrell.

Yet African leaders and American experts, diplomats and entrepreneurs have said that the agency, known as the Millennium Challenge Corporation, has boosted commercial diplomacy and directly benefits U.S. interests.

Some have criticized the decision to shut it down. Erin Collinson, the director of policy outreach at the Center for Global Development in Washington, called it “incredibly shortsighted.”

“The M.C.C. was funded as a unique aid agency that went around the U.S.A.I.D. model and in a singular direction: promoting economic growth,” she said.

This month, the U.S. ambassador to Ivory Coast, Jessica Davis Ba, visited the construction site of the overpass, which was started under the first Trump administration, and said that U.S. companies would benefit from better roads in the country. They include Cargill, which exports cocoa beans from Ivory Coast, and Exxon Mobil, which has deals for the exploration of two offshore oil blocks.

Mr. Fitrell said the Millennium Challenge Corporation’s future has not yet been decided. The Trump administration has said it is willing to continue financing some infrastructure projects in Africa, like a \$4 billion [rail corridor in Angola](#) meant to improve America’s access to cobalt and copper.

The agency spent \$1.7 billion last year — less than 2 percent of the \$59 billion in [U.S. foreign assistance obligations](#). It received waivers for five of the 20 projects it was planning or implementing before the Trump administration instituted a [90-day funding freeze on foreign aid](#) earlier this year. The overpass in Abidjan got an extension of a few months.

The deadline to complete the project before the funding runs out is early August, and it is unclear whether the Ivorian government will be able to pay for any final touches needed after that.

On a recent morning, construction workers checked the waterproofing of the four-lane overpass towering over the jammed intersection while commuters baked in the sun. They had yet to lay out the asphalt.

Hassan Koné, 39, said he and the passengers in his van had been stuck in traffic for two hours. American flags fluttered in the hot wind. Mr. Koné watched them, then sighed, “The Americans need to hurry up and finish what they’ve started.”

**Elian Peltier** is The Times’ West Africa correspondent, based in Dakar, Senegal.

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