

**SPECIAL COURT FOR SIERRA LEONE
OUTREACH AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE**



PRESS CLIPPINGS

Enclosed are clippings of local and international press on the Special Court and related issues obtained by the Outreach and Public Affairs Office

as at:

Wednesday, 21 April 2010

Press clips are produced Monday through Friday.
Any omission, comment or suggestion, please contact
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The Exclusive
Wednesday, 21 April 2010

Fayia Musa Denies Charge Against Taylor

Sierra Leonean Defence Witness Fayia Musa has denied one of the counts against Former Liberian President, Charles Taylor. Mr. Taylor is accused of supporting the RUF which allegedly enslaved the civilian population of Sierra Leone. At the beginning of his cross-examination on Monday the Former Agriculture Coordinator and Spokesman of the RUF refuted the Prosecution allegation that civilians were forcefully recruited to work on farms of the RUF... John Kollie reports...

Defence Witness, Fayia Musa has begun his cross-examination with a denial that the RUF forcefully recruited civilians and enslaved them on farms of the RUF.

But Prosecution Lawyer, Nicholas Kumjian reminded the Witness that the RUF and its supporters carried out a campaign of terror against the civilian population of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Kumjian quoted the testimonies of a Prosecution Witness who had said the civilians were forced and enslaved to work on the farms of RUF and beating was their pay.

But Mr. Fayia Musa the Former Agriculture Coordinator of the RUF testifying in The Hague said civilians worked on the RUF farms voluntarily to protect themselves against starvation.

Mr. Fayia also denied the testimonies of another Defence Witness who had told the court that Mr. Taylor's NPFL Forces par-

ticipated in the invasion of Sierra Leone.

Liberian Defence Witness John Vincent testified this month and said 75-percent of the first group of RUF called the Vanguard were Liberians.

But the current Defence Witness, Fayia Musa expressed doubt about the testimonies of his fellow Defence Witness, John Vincent. Mr. Fayia Musa said he was not a member of the RUF Military wing so he could not testify to the military activities of the Sierra Leone rebel organization.

The cross-examination of Defence Witness, Fayia Musa testifying in defence of Mr. Charles Taylor continues on Tuesday.

Tuesday, 21 April 2010

Charles Taylor Invited RUF Rebels To Visit Liberia In 1995 But Not For Military Advice, Witness Says

By Alpha Sesay

Charles Taylor invited Sierra Leonean rebels to visit his rebel headquarters in Liberia in 1995, but not to give them military advice, Mr. Taylor's defense witness told Special Court for Sierra Leone judges today in The Hague.

Fayia Musa said that in 1995, Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels received an invitation from Mr. Taylor to visit his National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) headquarters at Gbarngaha in Liberia. Mr. Musa, a former RUF rebel himself, said that the group's leader Foday Sankoh initially turned down the invitation, but at the behest of several senior RUF commanders, Mr. Sankoh allowed the RUF to visit the former Liberian president. Many RUF commanders, including the witness himself, were enthusiastic about the visit, Mr. Musa said. He said that prior to the visit, the RUF did not know why Mr. Taylor had invited the RUF delegation to Liberia. This raised a question from the Presiding Judge of the Trial Chamber, Justice Julia Sebutinde, about why the rebel forces were enthusiastic about visiting Mr. Taylor.

"You didn't even know the reason why Taylor had invited you. Why were you bending over backwards to go against the will of your leader to visit someone that hadn't stated the purpose?" Justice Sebutinde asked the witness.

"Well, we knew that he would not invite us into security problem at all. We also knew that he was his friend," Mr. Musa responded.

Prosecution counsel, Nicholas Koumjian, sought to know what the RUF hoped to achieve from the visit.

"What did you hope to gain out of going to Gbarngaha?" Mr. Koumjian asked.

"We did not know what we were going to get. First of all, we never knew Charles Taylor before. So one of the reasons why I wanted to go there was to see him, for the first time in my life," the witness said.

"Secondly, I wanted to see what actually he called us for, come what may," he added.

Asked by Mr. Koumjian whether they were "hoping for military support" from Mr. Taylor, the witness said "No, we were not hoping for military support at all."

"In fact, if I knew that it was for military support, I would not go," Mr. Musa said.

Mr. Musa explained that when they visited Liberia, Mr. Taylor took the RUF delegation to the Ghanaian capital, Accra, for sight-seeing.

This account by Mr. Musa sits in tension with other accounts given by Mr. Taylor and defense witnesses that after the fall-out between the RUF and Mr. Taylor's own rebel group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in 1992, Mr. Taylor no longer had any contacts with the RUF. It will be left with the judges to determine the weight to attach to any account given by specific witnesses.

Also in his cross-examination today, Mr. Musa told the court that reports that the RUF held civilians as hostages are false. He said that all civilians who stayed in RUF-controlled territory did so willingly because of reports that suspected rebels or RUF associates were being killed in Freetown and Guinea.

“The civilians decided to stay, they were not held hostage by the RUF. They were held hostage by the fear of being killed either in Guinea or in Freetown.” Mr. Musa said.

“I am not defending the RUF. A lot of things went wrong but that was the reality on the ground there. They stayed there on their own,” he added.

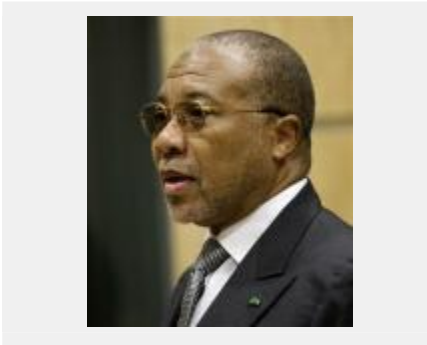
Mr. Musa denied prosecution suggestions that the civilians were not free to leave RUF territory.

Mr. Musa, a Sierra Leonean national, served as spokesperson and Agricultural Officer for the RUF during the country’s 11 years conflict. His cross-examination continues tomorrow

Reuters

Tuesday, 20 April 2010

Dutch court to re-examine Liberia arms dealing case



By Catherine Hornby

AMSTERDAM (Reuters) - The Dutch Supreme Court said on Tuesday it had quashed a lower court's decision to acquit a Dutch businessman accused of smuggling arms to former Liberian President Charles Taylor and ordered a new appeal hearing.

Guus Kouwenhoven was sentenced in 2006 to eight years in jail by a Dutch court for smuggling arms to Taylor's government between 2001 and 2003 in contravention of U.N. sanctions, but acquitted of war crimes for lack of evidence.

However, an appeals court in The Hague acquitted Kouwenhoven of arms dealing in 2008, saying it was not convinced of the trustworthiness of the testimony of some witnesses and that there was not enough other evidence to convict him.

The Supreme Court said on Tuesday that the appeals court had given insufficient reasons to refuse a request by the public prosecutor to hear two anonymous witnesses during the appeal.

It granted a new appeal filed by the public prosecutor based mainly on these grounds, a spokesman for the Supreme Court said.

"The court of appeal of Den Bosch will re-examine the case and that court has to hear those two witnesses," said Savornin Lohman, spokesman for the Supreme Court.

Known as "Big Gus" in Liberia, the former executive of the Oriental Timber Corp. and the Royal Timber Co. was accused of selling arms in exchange for timber concessions in Liberia, dubbed the "blood timber" trade by campaigners.

The charges stem from Liberia's civil war that started in 1989, spilled across borders, killed a quarter of a million people and spawned a generation of child soldiers.

Former Liberian President Taylor has been on trial in The Hague since June 2007 at the Special Court for Sierra Leone, and is the first African ruler to stand trial for war crimes.

CBS News

Tuesday, 20 April 2010

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/04/20/world/main6414739.shtml>

Volcano Ash Cloud Sets Off Global Domino Effect

Lack of Flights Entering, Departing Europe Stalls Africa War Crimes Investigation...

- In Africa, a group of five people from Sierra Leone and Liberia had to abandon a fact-finding trip to the war crimes trial of former Liberian President Charles Taylor in The Hague.

UNMIL Public Information Office Media Summary 20 April 2010

[The media summaries and press clips do not necessarily represent the views of UNMIL.]

UN News in Liberia

UNMIL was not reported in the media today.

Local News on Liberian issues

President Sirleaf Mandates GSA To Examine Petroleum Consumption

[The Inquirer, The News]

- President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has mandated the General Services Agency (GSA) to review the consumption of petroleum products by government ministries and agencies.
- Information Minister Cletus Sieh said President Sirleaf has observed that most Government officials do not use the products for the intended purpose.
- There are indications that the provision of petroleum products to certain government ministries and agencies could be drastically reduced.

Brazil to Construct Mt. Coffee Hydro System, Information Minister Discloses

[The News, Daily Observer]

- Information Minister Cletus Sieh has disclosed that the Brazilian government would construct Liberia's hydro system which was completely destroyed during the country's armed conflict.
- Minister Sieh said the construction of the hydro by the Brazilian government is a result of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's recent visit to that country.
- The Information Minister was speaking during a joint press conference held yesterday with Presidential Press Secretary, Mr. Cyrus Badio, and Cabinet Director Momo Rogers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs following a cabinet meeting held at the Foreign Ministry.
- Mr. Sieh could not give details of the pending construction of the hydro at Mount Coffee in upper Montserrado County.
- He, however, said the Government of Brazil had consented to build the hydro.

Liberia's Finance Minister Indicted, Millions Unaccounted For

[New Vision, Daily Observer, Parrot, The News, Front Page Africa, The Inquirer, National Chronicle]

- The General Auditing Commission (GAC) says about US\$5 million remains unaccounted for at the Finance Ministry.
- The GAC says during the HIPC audit process, its auditors could not trace vouchers or concrete records to show the usage of the money.
- The spokesman of the GAC, Mr. Ernest Maximore said the fiscal outturn report prepared and submitted by the Office of the Finance Minister shows serious discrepancies.
- Mr. Maximore said there was unexplained variance between the fiscal outturn report submitted by the Finance Minister and the Budget and Finance Office, which has the mandate to raise all payment vouchers and maintain the accounting records on expenditure taken by the Ministry.
- According to the Commission's communications chief it was the fiscal outturn report from Finance Minister Augustine Ngafuan that was analyzed by the GAC auditors to derive the current outcome.
- The fiscal outturn report is the aggregate financial data of all line ministries and agencies that receive money through the Finance Ministry.
- Meanwhile, the GAC has further announced that an additional US\$1.6 million captured in the GAC's recent audit report remains unaccounted for and holds the Budget Committee blameworthy.
- Finance Minister Ngafuan then head of the Budget Bureau has since challenged the GAC audit report claiming it is full of inconsistencies, false variance and double-counting.

Government Awards Over US\$53 Million Contract For Electricity

[The Inquirer New Democrat]

- Government has awarded over US\$53 million Contract to a Canadian company to provide power supply to parts of Monrovia.
- In the agreement, Manitoba Hydro International limited is charged with the responsibility of providing electricity to thirty percent of Monrovia's population by the end of 2015.
- Under the deal, Manitoba will also manage the technical and commercial losses, and capital cost to minimize the cost of service at the Liberia Electricity Corporation (LEC).
- Speaking at the signing ceremony, Lands, Mines and Energy Minister Eugene Shannon said US\$29 million was made available through a grant from Norway.
- Dr. Shannon disclosed that USAID provided US\$11.5 million for the project, while the World Bank and its Output Base AID gave US\$13 million for the management of the project.
- Acting LEC Managing Director Joseph Mayah said the contract will boost the operation of the corporation.

Fifty-one Lawyers Admitted As Attorneys-at-Law

[The Inquirer, Front Page Africa]

- Fifty-one graduates of the Louis Arthur Grimes School of Law have been admitted as Attorneys-At-Law to the Montserrado County Bar Association.
- Their admission took place Monday at the Temple of Justice in Monrovia, performed by Resident Judge Yussif D. Kaba of the Sixth Judicial Circuit Court.
- In his admission statement, Judge Kaba stated that the entire judicial system has come under serious attack from both internal and external forces.
- The Judge told the new lawyers that regardless of these challenges and criticisms they have a professional responsibility to restore their integrity from being undermined.
- He made specific reference to the US State Department's recent report which amongst other things cast a dark cloud over the judicial system of Liberia's integrity.
- Judge Kaba said the Liberian judicial system has lots of confidence and respect for the US government judicial system and it will always maintain that confidence.
- He also used the occasion to challenge the US state Department and all other institutions that have similar notion about the judicial system in Liberia to produce proof of their claims.

Star Radio *(News monitored today at 09:00 am)*

President Sirleaf Holds Emergency Cabinet Meeting

- President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Monday held an emergency cabinet meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Monrovia.
- It was widely believed that the damaging audit reports from the General Auditing Commission (GAC) were high on the agenda.
- But Information Minister Cletus Sieh said instead the meeting was centred on the 2010/2011 fiscal budget and other issues.
- The latest GAC audit reports pointed frauds at the Ministries of Finance, Health and Education and could hamper government's quest to meet the HIPC Completion point.
- The impromptu cabinet meeting came less than three days after the GAC released an audit report indicting Finance Minister Augustine Ngafuan.

President Sirleaf Mandates GSA To Examine Petroleum Consumption

(Also reported Truth FM, Sky FM, and ELBC)

Liberia's Finance Minister Indicted, Millions Unaccounted For

(Also reported Radio Veritas, Truth FM, Sky FM, and ELBC)

Government Awards Over US\$53 Million Contract For Electricity

(Also reported Radio Veritas, Truth FM, Sky FM, and ELBC)

PUL Backs US State Department Report

- The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) says it agrees with the US State Department report that some journalists in the country are still receiving money for the publication of stories.
- PUL's President Peter Quaqua did not elaborate, but said the issue of ethical breach remains a challenge to the Liberian media.

- He urged journalists never to allow people to rob them of their integrity in the execution of their reportorial duties.
- The PUL President spoke Monday at the opening of a three-day Development Journalism Workshop in Monrovia intended to enhance the skills of media practitioners on the reportage on development issues in the country.
- For his part, an official of the United Nations Development Programme, Cleophas Torori observed there has not been enough reportage on development issues in Liberia.
- Mr. Torori challenged the participants to use the skills acquired for the benefit of the country.

(Also reported Radio Veritas, Sky FM, and ELBC)

Truth FM *(News monitored today at 10:00 am)*

President Sirleaf Constitutes Special Probe Committee

- President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has constituted a special presidential committee on the Firestone – Kparnyah Town dispute.
- The committee mandated by the President to look into the dispute between the residents of Kparnyah Town and Firestone Plantation Company is chaired by Morris Dukuly.
- Members of the committee include a representative each from the Kparnyah Town community and Firestone Plantation Company, Cllr. David Gibson, Ms. Eva Flomo, Ms. Betty Sayway and Rev. Bartholomew Colley.
- The Ministry of Internal Affairs will serve as ex-officio to the committee.

International Clips on Liberia

Under Secretary William J. Burns Travels to Africa

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/04/140467.htm>

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William J. Burns is traveling to Africa from April 19 to April 25 on a seven nation tour to expand relations with key African partners in the areas of democracy, sustainable economic development, health and education, and peace and security. In Senegal Under Secretary Burns has scheduled meetings with President Abdoulaye Wade and other senior Senegalese officials to discuss democratic reforms and our close cooperation on counternarcotics and counterterrorism. Under Secretary Burns will also participate in a roundtable with representatives of non-governmental organizations. In Liberia, he will meet President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, as well as Liberian political opposition figures, on continuing Liberian efforts to build political and economic stability.

Dutch court: New appeal for alleged arms smuggler

The Hague, Netherlands (AP) -- The Dutch Supreme Court has overturned the acquittal of a businessman accused of supplying arms to former Liberian strongman Charles Taylor and ordered a new appeals hearing in the case. Guus Kouwenhoven was convicted in 2006 of breaching a U.N. arms embargo by trading weapons for timber in Liberia and sentenced to eight years imprisonment. However his conviction was overturned in 2008. Appeals judges said there was not enough reliable evidence and acquitted him of all charges. On Tuesday the Supreme Court ordered a fresh appeal hearing. The court said prosecutors should have been allowed to present two new witnesses at the original appeal. His lawyer could not be reached for comment. Taylor is on trial in The Hague by a special war crimes court.

IMF board to review Liberia's loan program in June

Washington (Reuters) - The International Monetary Fund said Monday it will submit the fourth review of Liberia's loan program to its board in June, which could result in the country receiving an additional \$6.8 million. In a statement, the IMF said it also expected a document to pave the way for Liberia to clear its debt under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative would be reviewed by the IMF and World Bank management, parallel to the loan review. "Significant progress was achieved in advancing structural reforms critical to the extended credit facility program and the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative," the IMF said. It said a preliminary understanding had been reached with Liberia on fiscal policies for the financial year beginning July 1 and on a revised debt strategy to prevent the re-emergence of unsustainable levels of debt. The West African country cut its foreign debt to \$1.7 billion in August through a \$1.2 billion buyback of outstanding government debt that had been in default since the 1980s, a key step in normalizing relations with the investment community.

Steinem Supports Liberian Radio Effort

Author and activist Gloria Steinem is supporting an effort to equip a new radio station in Liberia so it can offer information and encourage people to vote in that country's next election. Steinem initially approached MIW founder Joan Gerberding about the effort to get the station operating in time to provide information before the election, writing in a note that went out to the MIW membership, "I have the perfect way for radio women to change the world -- at least, one country that has become one of the rare democratic hopes in Africa." Agnes, a Liberian woman, is working to establish the station, and the effort is being supported by Abby Disney, who made *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, a highly regarded 2008 documentary on the Liberian election that put President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in office as the first female head of state in Africa. Agnes, who has a professional background in radio, was a key figure in that documentary. The goal of the fundraising effort is to raise about \$20,000 or so before April 30, in order to ship radio equipment in time for the next election.

Fairview case draws scrutiny from Liberian ambassador, says abuse of adopted children has his country concerned

<http://newsok.com/fairview-case-draws-scrutiny-from-liberian-ambassador/article/3454788#ixzz0IY9eKTGA>

FAIRVIEW — The Liberian ambassador to the United States says he's monitoring the controversial child welfare case involving four Fairview children adopted from his country. Ambassador Milton Nathaniel Barnes said the girls' attorney, Melvin Johnson, of Atlanta brought the case to his attention last month. "We are watching this case and others that involve Liberian children with great concern," Barnes said. "In many cases these children are adopted by well-meaning people, but things somehow go terribly wrong." The four sisters, ages 5 to 16, were removed last week from their parents' custody. Ardee Tyler, 51, and his wife, Penny Tyler, 45, of Fairview were convicted in February of abusing a fifth adopted daughter. The couple received 10-year suspended sentences. Separate from the criminal case is a controversial child welfare case that has dragged on for two years. The case now includes state prosecutors, and a new judge is reviewing a previous judge's decision to close the case and allow the four girls to remain with their adopted parents. This is thought to be the first time in state history that judicial review is being used in a child welfare case, authorities said.

International Clips on West Africa

Guinea

Russia urges Guinea to protect RusAl plant

MOSCOW (RIA Novosti) Russia hopes that the Guinean government will help ensure the security of a plant run by Russian aluminum giant RusAl that has been hit by recent militant attacks, the Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday. "Moscow closely watches the development of the situation at the enterprises of United Company RusAl in the town of Fria where extremist elements made an attempt to seize the Friguia alumina plant," the ministry said in a statement. The attack, which happened earlier this month, temporarily paralyzed the production process at the enterprise and threatened the lives of RusAl's Russian personnel in the West African country, the statement said. The Russian Foreign Ministry also expressed hope that the persons responsible for the attack would be brought to account. RusAl, the world's biggest aluminum producer, is fighting attempts by the Guinean junta that seized power in the West African country last year to renationalize the Friguia alumina refinery, which RusAl bought from Guinea in 2006 for \$19 million. The Guinean junta has valued the asset at \$257 million and accused RusAl of failure to pay a large sum of taxes and royalty, which has allegedly brought up the company's debt to \$860 million. RusAl has repeatedly said it legitimately acquired the Guinean refinery, which produces about 52,000 metric tons of alumina a month, and insists that the dispute be resolved in an international tribunal. Guinea is the world's biggest exporter of bauxite, which is refined into alumina that is then processed into aluminium.

Guinea honours trade unionists, journalists posthumously

(PANA) Conakry, Guinea - The Guinean government Monday posthumously decorated trade unionists Ibrahim Fofana, and Haja Magbit Bangoura as well as journalists Aboubacar Lansana Camara and Bamba Lamba, who died in a car crash Friday night, PANA reported. Dr. Fofana was the secretary general of the Trade Union of Workers of Guinea (USTG), while Bangoura was a member of the National Transitional Council (CNT), an advisory body. The two trade unionists were honoured with the rank of Chevalier of the Order, while the two journalists were awarded the National Order of Merit during a ceremony held at the Palais du Peuple, attended by Prime Minister Jean Marie Dore, and several local and foreign personalities. Head of national television, Fode Tass Sylla said his two colleagues were killed as they were in the trunk of the four-runner jeep used by the unionists who were going to Fria to open discussions between workers of the bauxite plant, who have been on strike for several days, and their employers. The Prime Minister offered government's condolences and gave to each of the grief-stricken family 6 million CFA francs to off-set the funeral expenses. A banker by training, Mr. Fofana, 57, became popular during the general strikes of 2006 and 2007 during which many demonstrators died.

Radio Netherlands Worldwide

Wednesday, 21 April 2010

Kenya truth commission under fire

By Claire Wachira, Nairobi



Nairobi, Kenya

Almost two years after the birth of Kenya's Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC), set up in the aftermath of violent

presidential elections, problems continue to plague the body.

Kenya's disputed elections in December 2007 sparked violence which left some 1,500 people dead and 300,000 displaced. The TJRC was subsequently formed in August 2008 to investigate and recommend actions regarding abuses committed between the country's independence in 1963 and the last elections.

In the latest controversy, TJRC commissioners last week asked chairman Bethuel Kiplagat to step down, pending allegations of past injustices. The commissioners said Kiplagat's departure was necessary to insulate the TJRC against a credibility crisis which had culminated in vice chair Betty Murungi resigning after she had called on her boss to quit.

However, Kiplagat has denied any wrongdoing and refused to go, saying the tussle should be resolved in a lawful manner.

Kiplagat, part of former President Daniel Arap Moi's regime, faces allegations ranging from corruption to links to the Wagalla massacre, in which Somali Muslims were killed by Kenyan troops in 1984.

"The TJRC is not about the chairman, it is about the victims of past injustices," says Njonjo Mue of New York-based International Centre for Transitional Justice. "The commission has a two-year mandate and much of the first year has been squandered on account of one person. This clearly cannot be allowed to continue."

Even before its official start, the TJRC was already controversial. Sceptics point to problems with establishing a truth commission in a state where the impunity infrastructure responsible for rights violations and corruption is still intact. It would be difficult, these critics say, to expect the body's officials to demand accountability from themselves.

One point of contention is the Commission's authority to look into incidents that took place over a period of almost half a century.

“This has caused a lot of problems between people and communities in Kenya and is therefore a priority for the commission,” Kiplagat explained, adding that the TJRC would examine the reports compiled by previous commissions to determine “their truth and factualness”.

Kiplagat further said that the Commission was making progress, pointing out that it had completed its civic education programme at the coastal region and in Nairobi .

The issue raising the most furore is a ruling dating from 1972. The act grants individuals amnesty from prosecution for human rights violations committed during the 1963-1967 Shifta war between troops and secessionist ethnic Somalians.

“That decision, which has never been reversed, was a grave mistake and continues to clog this process into an abyss, denying its legitimacy and raising a lot of suspicion,” transitional justice expert Ndung’u Wainaina said.

Money is also a problem: besides the less than 80 million shillings (EUR 768,000) allocated in last year’s budget, the Commission has been starved for cash with donors making it clear they will not fund it until some of the problems are resolved.

With the arrival this month of International Criminal Court investigators in Kenya to probe gross cases of post-election violence, the Kenyan public expects the TJRC commissioners to recommend the price perpetrators would have to pay, and retribution for victims.

“We must understand what a truth commission is, its consequences and its commitments. I lost so many things, and the least I can ask for is justice,” says Michael Gichuki, who was displaced following the post-elections unrest. “I want the people who perpetuated the violence to be prosecuted.”

The Commission is scheduled to hand over a report by December 2011 to the president, who in turn will give it to parliament for approval.

Radio Netherlands Worldwide

Wednesday, 21 April 2010

ICC looms over Sudan elections

By Mohammed Abdulrahman, Khartoum



Khartoum, Sudan

President Omar Hasan al- Bashir, one of the International Criminal Court's most wanted alleged war criminals, is the winner of last week's first open

elections held in Sudan in over two decades.

Few people in Sudan dare to openly discuss the ICC's arrest warrant charging Bashir with war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur. Nevertheless, the ICC remained a looming shadow throughout the electoral process, which in itself was riddled with fraud accusations.

Bashir came to power in a military coup in 1989, and has ruled the country ever since. In 2003 rebels took up arms in Darfur, accusing the government of neglecting the remote region. Khartoum's harsh handling of the revolt resulted in a humanitarian crisis which the United Nations estimates claimed 300,000 lives.

President Bashir has repeatedly dismissed the ICC's allegations, dubbing it as a Western conspiracy. Most opposition parties boycotted the elections before voting started, citing irregularities and saying that the election outcome would be irrelevant. The US this week described the elections as neither free nor fair.

In polling centres and other political venues in the capital of Khartoum last week, supporters of the ruling National Congress Party were the only ones who would mention the issue of the ICC warrant.

Amani Alsaydeh, a young journalist working for a pro-government newspaper, said: "The false and fabricated accusation of the ICC have only made president Bashir stronger and more popular."

Some reporting on issues connected with the ICC has trickled through the local media during the elections, something usually not tolerated in normal times. The Akhirlahza daily this week reported on a small town in western Sudan, where six ballot papers were found with hand-scribbled "to the Hague" written next to Bashir's name, in reference to the ICC premises.

Former presidential mentor Hassan al Turabi, now one of the few outspoken critics of Bashir, this week repeated his call for the president to hand himself over to the ICC. "Crimes committed in Darfur should not go unaccounted for. Bashir is politically responsible for the crimes in Darfur. He has to face trial and prove himself innocent if he is," Turabi says.

Former Prime Minister Sadik Almahdi, currently leader of the opposition Umma party, used the ICC issue in his campaign. Almahdi warned that re-electing an internationally "wanted" president would isolate Sudan on the international fora.

Almahdi points out that good international relations are vital for Sudan in the run up to a referendum scheduled for January next year. The referendum is to decide on the independence of South Sudan, one of the main points of the 2005 peace agreement between Khartoum and the rebels.

Darfuri activists and rebel sympathizers have consistently endorsed the ICC claim. However, political parties have largely avoided touching the ICC issue during their campaigns, leaving room for themselves to tackle the issue after the dust of the elections has settled.

As opposition parties maintain relations and exercise influence on Darfur rebel movements, reaching a deal to achieve peace in Darfur is expected to remain complicated. Many observers anticipate that the ICC issue will return to dominate Sudan politics following the formation of the new government in the next few weeks.