

Business and Politics in the Muslim World

West African News Monitoring

Weekly Report 137

12 – 18 September, 2010

By John-Paul

Presentation on 22 September, 2010.

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POLITICS

GHANA

Mills could resign - Bature

ALHAJI IDDRISU Bature, an outspoken member of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), says he has a strong feeling that President Mills will say goodbye to the presidency before the 2012 elections.

“I will not be surprised at all should President Mills drop a bombshell by resigning ahead of the 2012 elections, should these calculated attempts to run him down by his own colleagues continue,” he stated.

According to the former host of popular Radio Gold programme ‘Alhaji and Alhaji’, Mills wanted to bid farewell to the country’s topmost office in the heat of biting criticisms from stalwarts in the party but was prevailed upon by Mr. Ato Ahwoi.

Bature disclosed this in an interview with Angel Fm, a Kumasi-based radio station yesterday, claiming that had it not been for the swift intervention of Ahwoi, the president would have thrown in the towel a long time ago.

“Oh, yes, it was Mr. Ahwoi who prevailed on President Mills not to quit, assuring him (the president) that his detractors will fail; if not, President Mills had decided to call it quits a long time ago,” he stressed.

He noted that President Mills was so disturbed by the incessant criticisms and verbal lashings from his own party members, notably former President Rawlings and his cronies that he wanted to resign to have his peace of mind.

Alhaji Bature pointed out that President Mills would certainly not be the sole candidate for the NDC in the forthcoming primary to elect a flag-bearer for the 2012 elections, but he could shock his party and the nation by resigning should the unfounded criticisms continue.

The former friend of the Rawlingses categorically stated that should President Mills fail to lead the NDC into the 2012 elections, Vice President John Mahama would not become the candidate of the ruling party.

Alhaji Bature indicated that the NDC would be a huge loser if President Mills did not contest the 2012 elections on the party’s ticket, stressing that President Mills, on his part, would not lose anything should he walk away from the castle.

Describing the current rumblings in the NDC as unfortunate, the NDC top gun accused some elements he described as ‘wolves’ for being the cause of troubles in the ruling party and the President Mills-led administration.

Alhaji Bature observed that had it not been for the unflinching support of Ato Ahwoi, President Mills would not have become the president.

“Let me tell you that Mr. Ahwoi single-handedly ensured that President Mills became President and not the effort of the so- called powerful persons in our party,” he noted.

Alhaji Bature disclosed that when stalwarts in the party including ex-President Rawlings were championing the replacement of then candidate Mills for the reason that he was too frail, it was Ahwoi who fought relentlessly for candidate Mills.

According to him, even then the pressure became incessant and Mills wanted to throw in the towel, Ahwoi encouraged him to continue, promising to be with him till the end.

“Look, when the agitations became unbearable, it was Mr. Ahwoi who told then candidate Mills that even if it came to the point that he has to carry him in a wheelbarrow for campaign, he (Ahwoi) was prepared to do so he should stay on,” he disclosed.

Alhaji Bature said true to his words, Ahwoi did everything humanly possible to ensure that candidate Mills made history by becoming the first former vice president to ascend the highest office of the land.

He said he finds it unfathomable that after the priceless support Ahwoi rendered to then candidate Mills, some elements in the party would want President Mills to sideline Ahwoi now that he has become president.

However, a leading member of Friends of Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings (FONKAR), Dela Coffie, was not impressed by Bature’s submissions and threats of the President resigning.

According to Dela, President Mills can choose to resign “even today” if he decided but that would not be a burden on the party.

He said should he quit, the President would only be confirming assertions that he is a weak and visionless leader who does not have what it takes to provide quality leadership for the country.

According to Dela, it is only weak leaders who do not have big hearts to withstand criticisms, particularly those from his party, stressing that the party will wholeheartedly welcome his resignation if he decided to do so.

How Britain helped NPP win elections

Mr. Craig Murray arrived in Ghana in January 1999 to assume duty as the deputy British High Commissioner. He was in Ghana during the crucial 2000 Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

He has now retired from the British Foreign Service and has written a 219-page book 'The Catholic Orangemen of Togo and Other Conflicts I Have Known'.

A chapter in the book tells how the British government conspired to push then President Jerry John Rawlings and his National Democratic Congress (NDC) government out of power through the 2000 elections. The September, 2010 issue of the AFRICAWATCH has a seven-page article on that chapter in Murray's book.

The introduction to the article states: "Many people did not believe Jerry Rawlings when, after his retirement as president of Ghana in 2000, he kept telling all who had ears to hear that some powerful countries had plotted his downfall in the last years of his 18-year rule (first, as a military head of state for 10 years, and later a civilian president for eight years). He claimed that even the disastrous fall of the national currency, the cedi, in his last three years in office was manipulated by sinister forces.

From 1997, the cedi began an uncontrollable slide - from 05,000 to £1 in 1997, to ¢13,000 to £1 in 2000. Initially, Rawlings and his National Democratic Congress (NDC) government struggled to understand what had hit them. But try as they did, they could not control the fall of the cedi, resulting in a sharp economic downturn and severe hardship for the people, which forced them to vote with their stomachs and put Rawlings' NDC out of power in 2000. Now, from the sound of Craig Murray's book, Rawlings has been vindicated! In an extraordinary expose, Britain's ex-deputy high commissioner to Accra tells how he and his bosses in London conspired to put Rawlings out of power and how they implemented the plan. It was an extraordinary coup without guns! And Murray, as he says, was at the very heart of both the planning and the implementation!" An interesting aspect is: "When Murray woke up at 9:00 a.m., only two remote constituencies had not been declared and it was plain that John Kufuor had been elected even if the two constituencies went to Atta Mills. But, by law, Afari-Gyan could not formally declare Kufuor the winner until the two results had arrived.

Murray says: "This was now or never for the NDC; if they were to launch military action against the result, it had to be now. And my contacts were calling from all over Accra, giving me details of the movements and the sayings of key NDC figures and senior army personnel. There was undoubtedly a faction in the NDC that was looking to what could be done to cancel the result by military action. 'At the same time Kufuor and his people had become highly nervous. Why was the result not being announced? Were fraudulent results being prepared? Was it going to be stolen again? Was there a delay to enable the military to prepare?

'The NPP general secretary, Dan Botwe, was pressing hard for a declaration. Then, around 3:00 a.m., I received two pieces of news about the same time. Kufuor, on the

advice of his key advisers, including Hackman Owusu Agyeman, was going to declare himself president.

"Almost simultaneously, the NDC had decided that, in the event that Kufuor declared himself the victory, they would denounce it as an unconstitutional coup and move in the military. Just at this time, I also received a firm order from Rod Pullen; he had heard that things may be going pear shaped, and ordered me to leave the Electoral Commission building.' Murray said he phoned Hackman Owusu Agyeman and pleaded with him: 'Hackman, I hear you are going to declare victory.' Hackman replied: 'Well, it looks like we've won, and...' Murray cut him short: 'Hackman, please, listen to me. Do not declare. Hackman replied: 'But it's been...' Murray did not let him finish his sentence: 'Please Hackman, I beg you,' Murray pleaded. 'Tell John (Kufuor). Tell him from me, personally, that Craig says he has to trust him. Do not declare. Then come to the Labadi Beach Hotel. I will see you there in half an hour.'

Murray then shook Afari-Gyan's hand and made his way out of the EC headquarters at about 4:00 a.m. for the comforts of the bar of the Labadi Beach Hotel which became his HQ. 'Hackman duly arrived,' recalls Murray, 'and I explained to him urgently that Kufuor had, undoubtedly won. I told him that I absolutely guaranteed that Afari-Gyan would announce the true result when all constituencies were in. but I also knew that forces in the NDC were poised for a military takeover if Kufuor made an 'unconstitutional' early declaration.' Having succeeded in persuading Hackman and his colleagues to trust Afari-Gyan whom they did not trust on account of the 1992 and 1996 election results which the NPP insists to this day were stolen under his watch, Murray set about encouraging 'a wide variety of respected and senior elderly Ghanaians to send messages to John Atta Mills to concede defeat.'

Murray says: 'Atta Mills is an honourable man, and he did concede, to the absolute fury of Mrs. Rawlings. Mills thus killed off the chances of a coup. This all cleared the way for the formal declaration, made about 3:00 p.m., with Roger Gale and Nigel Jones supporting Afari-Gyan. I sat in the next room, enjoying beer. Then I went home and slept, completely exhausted.'

On the Sunday afternoon, with his work done, Murray drove to the home of the President-elect, John Kufuor. 'We were both in shorts and T-shirts, and we sat in his garden with our sandaled feet up, drinking Chivas Regal and discussing plans for Ghana in the coming year. 'After a whole generation of rule by Rawlings, Ghana had come through to genuine freedom and democracy. An African country had shown that real democracy was possible in Africa, with a change of power to the opposition after a good debate and a peaceful election. This was really the kind of progress I so desperately wanted for Africa. And I had helped to do it.'

Here, Murray could be permitted to blow a bit of his own horn, and why not - he had fought hard and dirty and had got the wishes of his bosses in London implemented in Accra! 'My main task was accomplished in Ghana,' he says, a bit smugly, 'and I could spend my last year there undertaking important but not stressful tasks and basking in the

friendship I had earned from Ghanaians.

'It should be stressed that I still had many friends in the NDC, who acknowledged that Ghana had benefited from a genuine election, and were even prepared to say that a short period out of power would do them good, enabling them to become a real party and not just a Jerry Rawlings fan club'."

COTE D'IVOIRE

Hurdles to clear for Ivory Coast election

Ivory Coast President Laurent Gbagbo's signing of a decree last week validating a final voter list removed what appeared to be the last political hurdle to repeatedly delayed elections scheduled for Oct 31.

The elections, in which 5,725,720 are registered to vote, are aimed at ending years of political instability and stalemate after a 2002-3 rebellion against Gbagbo divided the country and sent investment fleeing from West Africa's former economic hub.

The head of the U.N. peacekeeping, Y.J. Choi, met electoral commission leaders on Tuesday to assess the logistical hurdles remaining. He listed the following challenges to be overcome for the election to be held on time:

- Distribution of identity and electoral cards. Cards, both national ID cards and special electoral cards, have yet to be printed and sent out to polling stations for voters to collect.
- The electoral map. A decree must be signed to confirm the number of polling stations to which registered voters must be assigned, In 2000, there were 16,619 polling stations. Choi said this time, hundreds had still not been set up.
- Nomination of electoral agents. There are plans to name some 66,000 shortly before the vote.
- Setting up of logistical bases for organising the process in Abidjan, the main city, and the capital, Yamoussoukro.
- Accreditation of national and international observers; transport of electoral materials to polling stations; establishing a vote-counting centre.
- Security for the vote. This will be vital in an election likely to be disputed, fraught with tension and possibly violent. U.N peacekeepers and Ivorian security forces will be charged with keeping security. The rebels have agreed to keep to their barracks for the duration of the vote.

* In addition to the above listed by Choi, the electoral commission has pledged to post the electoral list in polling stations by Oct. 12.

GUINEA

Backers of Guinea election rivals clash in streets

One person was killed and dozens were wounded in clashes between supporters of rival candidates for Guinea's presidential election in the capital on Sunday, witnesses said. After the violence, the government said election campaigning had been suspended but there was no immediate threat of a delay to the planned Sept. 19 vote, which is meant to restore civilian rule to the world's top bauxite exporting nation.

Police used tear gas to disperse crowds in several places. The unrest followed a day of violence on Saturday between backers of favourite and ex-prime minister Cellou Dalein Diallo and his rival Alpha Conde ahead of a run-off vote.

"We have recorded at least one person shot dead by our rivals and have many injured. Our office in Hamdallaye (a Conakry neighbourhood) was ransacked," said Moustaphe Naite, a spokesman for Conde's RPG party.

Diallo's party confirmed clashes took place but denied any of its supporters had fired a weapon and said they were attacked by Conde's followers.

A Reuters reporter saw a pool of blood in the RPG office in Hamdallaye. Witnesses estimated the number of wounded over the weekend at about 50.

The clashes followed a court decision last week to jail two senior officials from the election commission, known as CENI, who were accused of meddling with the results of a first round of voting that took place in June.

"The decision is aimed at provoking the implosion of CENI and therefore delaying the election process so that the second round does not take place on Sept. 19," said Soulaymane Bah, a spokesman for Diallo's UFDG party.

Election commission president Ben Sekou Sylla and his head of planning El Hadj Boubacar Diallo were jailed for a year for illegally withdrawing some results sheets in the first round. Conde's RPG had brought the charges against the pair.

"The government has suspended campaigning until further notice but we are not putting into question the date of Sept. 19," government spokesman Aboubacar Sylla told Reuters.

FEARS OVER POLL

Even before the jailing of the election officials, some first round results had been cancelled and doubts emerged over poll preparations, raising concern that the run-off could be challenged and trigger violence.

Witnesses said the clashes on Sunday were over by midday, but a number of arrests were made. Diallo's UFDG said 24 people were wounded in Saturday's clashes.

Guinea is seeking to return to civilian rule after a coup ushered in a military government following the death of long-time leader Lansana Conte in December 2008.

Having won 43 percent of the vote in the first round, against Conde's 18 percent, Diallo will go into the run-off as the favourite.

Diallo and Conde are from the large Peul and Malinke ethnic groups respectively and clashes between the two could break out if the outcome of the run-off is disputed.

Guinea PM hints at possible poll delay

Guinea's prime minister said on Monday that maintaining public order was more important than holding a planned Sept. 19 presidential election on time, but stopped short of announcing a delay in the poll.

Prime Minister Jean Marie Dore's comments, the strongest sign yet of a possible poll delay in the top bauxite exporter, follow a weekend of violence between backers of presidential hopefuls Cellou Dalein Diallo and Alpha Conde.

"We are due to hold an election on the 19th (but) the conditions must be right. The most important of these conditions is security," Dore said on state television.

"The priority must be given to public order as an election is not possible if there is chaos," he added.

Police deployed extra forces around Guinea's capital Conakry on Monday after street fighting between supporters of rivals in the run-off left one dead and 50 injured over the weekend.

The violence prompted authorities to suspend all campaigning and rallies before Sunday's decisive second-round vote but, until now, there had been no word on the possibility of delaying the poll, which is aimed at restoring civilian rule.

The European Union and the United States, which have both been involved in months of diplomacy aimed at stabilising the fragile West African state, earlier called on rival political factions to refrain from violence.

A police official said security forces were watching the large Conakry market of Madina where witnesses said stallholders had shut their shops and some had gathered stones for possible use if more fighting broke out.

Madina market is seen as a potential flashpoint as it houses large groups of Guinea's two main ethnicities -- Peuls who largely backed former Prime Minister Cellou Dalein Diallo in the first round, and Malinke who mainly back his rival Alpha Conde.

No major incidents were reported as both candidates met the prime minister over a possible decision to restart campaigning.

After the meetings, Diallo, who is favourite in the poll, vowed to ensure his campaign remained peaceful while Conde called for greater transparency in the election body, CENI.

"The election list must be made available and published on the internet, which has not yet been done. The increase in the number of polling stations must be completed," Conde said.

TEARGAS

Violence flared after a court last week jailed the head of the national election commission and his planning director for meddling with the results of the first round in June.

They were convicted after a complaint was filed by Conde's RPG party, which argued Conde's first-round score of 18 percent would have been much higher had it not been for such tampering. Diallo came out well ahead with 43 percent.

The RPG has called for an overhaul in arrangements to stage the run-off, including a greater role for the interior ministry, a demand which the UFDG sees as an attempt to stall the vote.

It is not clear who now controls the CENI or whether the election can go ahead until a new head is appointed.

Police used teargas on Sunday to disperse crowds in several areas of Conakry. Conde's RPG said one of its supporters had been killed by UFDG backers, but Diallo's party denied any of its supporters had fired a weapon.

Heads of the U.S. and EU missions in Conakry recalled that Diallo and Conde earlier this month had signed a protocol pledging to ensure the poll went ahead peacefully.

"If all respect both the letter and the spirit of the agreement then constitutional order can return to Guinea."

Guinea is seeking to return to civilian rule after a coup ushered in a military government following the death of long-time leader Lansana Conte in December 2008.

Convicted Guinea election chief dies in Paris

The head of Guinea's electoral commission has died in Paris after a long illness, officials said on Tuesday, shortly before a presidential election runoff in the the west African state.

Ben Sekou Sylla's death follows his conviction in absentia last week by a Guinea court for electoral fraud in June's first round of voting. The ruling triggered fighting between rival political factions and raised doubts as to whether Sunday's second round could go ahead.

"We are making the required preparations for bringing the body back from Paris and for the burial," said Foumba Kourouma, an official at the electoral body CENI.

The election in the top bauxite producer is meant to transfer power from a military junta to civilians and draw a line under decades of authoritarian rule.

The death of Sylla, 57, is unlikely to affect organisation of the poll directly. CENI Vice President Aminata Mame Camara is the commission's interim head but there is a political dispute over whether she is the right official to oversee the run-off.

Police deployed extra forces around the capital Conakry on Monday after one person died and 50 were injured over the weekend in fighting between supporters of the two candidates, Cellou Dalein Diallo and Alpha Conde.

Caretaker Guinea Prime Minister Jean Marie Dore said on Monday that maintaining public order was more important than keeping to the Sept. 19 run-off date, giving the strongest sign yet that the poll might be delayed.

Guinea postpones presidential poll

Guinean authorities postponed on Wednesday a presidential election run-off due in four days, casting doubt on the minerals-producing West African state's bid to return to civilian rule.

Street battles left one dead and 50 injured this week as rival political camps traded accusations of attempted vote-rigging, while turmoil within the election body itself had made a delay to Sunday's poll look increasingly inevitable.

Election officials emerging from hours of talks in the capital Conakry blamed the postponement on a lack of necessary voting equipment and said it could take up to two weeks for arrangements to be in place.

"This is a hope that has been unfulfilled, an important opportunity that has gone by the wayside," junta leader Sekouba Konate, who has won international plaudits for his decision to relinquish power, told national television.

Foumba Kourouma, a member of the election commission CENI, said authorities would continue talks on Thursday to determine when the election run-off could be held.

Analysts have said a successful election in Guinea, seen as a linchpin of stability in a region scarred by three civil wars, is key to billions of dollars in planned mining investments and could draw a line under decades of authoritarian rule since its independence from France in 1958.

Favourite and former Prime Minister Cellou Dalein Diallo's camp had insisted the run-off must take place on time, while his rival Alpha Conde says several conditions must be met before a fair poll can be held.

"We know it is going to be postponed given the delays in the provision of the necessary equipment," a source close to Diallo said just before Konate confirmed the delay.

SNATCHED VICTORY?

A source close to negotiations between CENI and the two rival camps over arrangements for the run-off vote said 1,250 new voting stations were due to be installed. The credibility of June's first-round vote was marred by reports of voters having to travel 30 km (20 miles) to cast their ballot.

Conde scored 18.25 percent in the first round, while Diallo took 43.69 percent, short of the majority needed for victory.

Conde and Diallo come from Guinea's two largest ethnic groups, the Malinke and Peul respectively and there is a risk that clashes between the two could unsettle fragile neighbours such as Liberia and Sierra Leone with similar ethnic mixes.

"A delay means the Peul will not be happy. They will see this as a victory snatched from them and there is a likelihood of civil clashes between ethnic groups," said analyst Sebastian Spio-Garbrah at London-based DaMina Advisors.

Mining companies drawn to the world's top exporter of the aluminium ore bauxite, which also boasts major iron ore reserves, could also be unnerved by a protracted delay.

Joint ventures of Rio Tinto and Chinalco, and Vale and BSG Resources, have together announced more than \$5 billion in iron ore investments between them this year.

Guinea vote delay risks raising tensions

Guinean authorities said on Wednesday a presidential run-off would be delayed by as much as two weeks because of organisational failings, a move some fear could trigger unrest.

The poll is meant to complete a transition to civilian rule in the junta-led West African bauxite exporter and could be its best chance at ending an era of harsh authoritarian rule since independence from France in 1958.

* The decision to delay the vote could anger Guinea's biggest ethnic group, the Peul, raising the risk of ethnically driven clashes.

Cellou Dallein Diallo, a former prime minister who was well ahead in June's first round, belongs to the Peul ethnicity which accounts up 40 percent of the population and had been pushing for the run-off to take place as planned on Sept. 19.

"A delay means the Peul will not be happy. They will see this as a victory snatched from them," said Sebastian Spio-Garbrah, analyst at Damina Advisors.

Diallo's rival, veteran opposition leader Alpha Conde belongs to Guinea's second-largest ethnicity, the Malinke, making up 35 percent of the country's population.

Conde has led the effort to postpone the vote. He argues that irregularities in the first round worked against him and has demanded that arrangements for the run-off be improved.

Peul and Malinke spill across borders into Sierra Leone and Liberia, with Malinke also in northern Ivory Coast -- countries all recovering from recent civil wars.

Skirmishes already broke out between supporters of the two rival camps in Guinea's capital Conakry last weekend, killing one and injuring dozens.

* The delay will be seen as a victory for Conde, though few believe it will be enough to win him the contest.

Conde came in second in the initial round of voting June 27 with 18.25 percent. Diallo took 43.69 percent and has since won alliances he expects will give him a win.

"Any delay certainly looks to favour Conde and may make a second round closer than his first round tally would have suggested," said Christopher Melville, analyst at Menas.

* Mining companies will be disappointed but investment plans will likely hold unless the country dips into severe turmoil.

Companies like Vale, Rio Tinto RIO.N (RIO.AX: Quote, Chinalco and BSG Resources have together announced more than \$5 billion in iron ore investments this year in a country already the world's No. 1 bauxite supplier.

Analysts say the sector has been eager for political stability in the resource-rich country.

"Delays to the election would be a concern," said Tom Wilson, analyst at Control Risks. "The mining industry is simply looking for a democratically elected government to be in place, and is less concerned with which candidate wins."

Both candidates have said they will take a second look at mining contracts, particularly those signed by the junta-led government. But experts believe neither would take an aggressive approach to renegotiations.

Guinea election body fails to set new poll date

Guinea's electoral commission failed to meet on Thursday to set a date for a presidential election run-off, casting doubt on the country's bid to return to civilian rule.

The commission had on Wednesday postponed the election which had been scheduled for Sept. 19. It said it would meet on Thursday to set a date.

"The meeting which was to have taken place today (Thursday) did not happen," said CENI official Foumba Kouroumba. "It has been postponed without a new date fixed."

Analysts have said a successful election in Guinea, seen as a linchpin of stability in a region scarred by three civil wars, is key to billions of dollars in planned mining investments and could draw a line under decades of authoritarian rule since its independence from France in 1958.

Street battles killed one person and injured 50 this week as rival political camps traded accusations of attempted vote-rigging, while turmoil within the election body itself had made a delay to Sunday's poll look increasingly inevitable.

Election officials in the world's biggest bauxite exporter gave no reasons for the postponement of Thursday's meeting.

On Wednesday, they blamed the election delay on a lack of necessary voting equipment and said it could take up to two weeks for arrangements to be in place.

The United Nations called on Guineans to avoid violence in the runup to and during the election.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon "warns those who may attempt to disrupt an orderly and peaceful transition that they would be held accountable by Guineans and by the international community as a whole," the UN said in a statement on Thursday.

Favourite and former Prime Minister Cellou Dalein Diallo's camp had insisted the run-off must take place on time, while his rival Alpha Conde says several conditions must be met before a fair poll can be held.

Conde scored 18.25 percent in the first round in June, while Diallo took 43.69 percent, short of the majority needed for victory.

Conde and Diallo come from Guinea's two largest ethnic groups, the Malinke and Peul respectively and there is a risk that clashes between the two could unsettle fragile neighbours such as Liberia and Sierra Leone with similar ethnic mixes.

Security Council Calls for Setting of New Date for Presidential Run-Off

Holding peaceful, free and fair elections is vital to re-establishing constitutional order in Guinea, the Security Council stressed today, voicing regret at the postponement of the presidential run-off and urging that a new date be set quickly.

The second round of Guinea's presidential polls was originally scheduled for this Sunday, but electoral authorities this week decided to delay the run-off, citing technical reasons.

"The members of the Security Council regretted the postponement of the second round of the presidential elections and urged the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) to set a new date and organize it as soon as possible," Ambassador Ertugrul Apakan of Turkey, which holds the Council presidency this month, said in a statement read out to the press.

They stressed the importance of ensuring "a peaceful, free and fair electoral process in Guinea, the only way to re-establish the constitutional and democratic order."

The statement followed a closed-door meeting of the Council on the latest developments in Guinea, where violent clashes last weekend in the capital, Conakry, claimed at least one life and injured dozens of others.

In addition, the head of Guinea's electoral commission reportedly died overnight on Monday, a week after being convicted of falsifying results in the first round of the presidential ballot held in June, in which Cellou Dalein Diallo and Alpha Conde scored the highest number of votes among the 24 candidates who entered the race.

Council members expressed their deep concern at last weekend's clashes and called on the Guinean authorities to promote a calm and peaceful electoral environment.

They also urged the supporters of the two presidential candidates to refrain from any provocation, incitement to hatred or recourse to violence.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Representative for West Africa, Said Djinnit, has been consulting with key stakeholders in Guinea, including the two candidates, members of the Government, electoral authorities and the UN Country Team in an effort to help resolve the current crisis.

Mr. Ban, in a statement issued yesterday, called on authorities in Guinea to swiftly resolve all technical and logistical obstacles to holding the run-off, adding that this is

vital "to create the conditions necessary for the holding of transparent and credible elections as soon as possible."

UN Envoy Heads to Guinea to Defuse Political Tensions Before Presidential Poll Run-Off

The top United Nations official in West Africa is heading to Guinea on Thursday for talks with the country's presidential candidates, electoral authorities and other prominent politicians to try to resolve the tensions that have led to deadly clashes ahead of the run-off round in long-awaited presidential elections.

Said Djinnit, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for West Africa, told the UN News Centre that he hopes the dialogue will help ensure there is no repeat of the political violence that claimed at least one life last weekend in the capital, Conakry.

"I am very concerned about the situation," he said. "We all deplore the violence and we will do everything we can to assist Guinea to try to defuse the tensions."

His office, known as UNOWA, is consulting closely with the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The run-off round of the presidential election is due to be held this Sunday, but Mr. Djinnit said technical and logistical problems "made it almost impossible" for the ballot to be successfully staged then.

He said he had received reports indicating that the run-off round may be postponed for two weeks.

Cellou Dalein Diallo and Alpha Conde will contest that round after they scored the highest number of votes of 24 candidates who entered the first round in June.

Those polls were widely considered to be the first free elections in a country that has been plagued by misrule, dictatorships and coups since independence in 1958.

But tensions have risen since then because of delays in counting the votes and technical problems associated with staging the second round.

The head of Guinea's electoral commission reportedly died overnight on Monday, a week after he was convicted of falsifying results in the first round of the presidential race.

Mr. Djinnit urged Guinea's political players not to waste the opportunity to make progress, given it comes less than a year after members of the military shot more than 150 unarmed demonstrators who had been participating in a peaceful pro-democracy protest on the streets of Conakry. Countless others were sexually assaulted or otherwise physically attacked.

International condemnation, including from senior UN officials, followed and a Government of national unity was established in January as part of a transition to a more democratic order.

"They have made so much progress," Mr. Djinnit noted. "They are so close to victory and success. It would be so sad if they missed it at this late hour."

BENIN

Benin president denies role in alleged fraud

Benin's President Boni Yayi has denied involvement in an alleged savings fraud, speaking publicly for the first time about accusations made by lawmakers in the impoverished West African country.

Yayi, talking to reporters during a visit to Finland, said on Wednesday the accusations were politically motivated ahead of an election scheduled for March next year.

Members of Benin's parliament have tried to impeach Yayi for his alleged involvement in a scheme which swindled thousands of people out of their savings and which has already led to large-scale street protests and the sacking of a minister.

"We are a few months away from elections ... we have to look at this as one of the punches thrown when elections approach," he told reporters. His spokesman in Benin has previously said the president was not involved. Members of parliament accuse Yayi of hosting officials from ICC Services, a firm accused of stealing some 100 billion CFA francs (\$196 million) in deposits after promising returns of 20-50 percent.

"I have put everyone (involved) in prison and I have put in place a programme for forcing those in prison to make reimbursements, and that programme is underway, they have started," he said, adding that experts from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund would suggest ways of returning funds to Beninois investors.

"Me, I am a Protestant, I cannot take money from others," Yayi said.

ECONOMY

GHANA

Split decision on who wins Jubilee field

Were Ghana's disputes with big oil a boxing match it would be approaching round nine, with the fighters punch-drunk and the judges undecided?

The sparring began early last year as a result of bad chemistry between Texan wildcat company Kosmos and the newly formed government of President John Evans Atta Mills.

But the real blows only started to land when Kosmos announced a year ago that it was selling its stake in the huge offshore Jubilee field to ExxonMobil for \$4bn, before it had sought approval from the government.

At the time, Ghana was preparing its own bid via the state oil company, Ghana National Petroleum Corporation, which was less than happy to be caught unawares.

The dispute has evolved since into an acrimonious punch-up, with geostrategic implications for the US and China and a bearing on the future of Ghana's fledgling

democracy.

Other newcomers to the oil industry in Africa such as Uganda have had a somewhat easier time. But with local expectations of what oil could do for the country's development and international interest high, Ghana's experience reveals how fraught it can be for African countries to assert their interests as global competition for energy resources intensifies.

In theory, the country which emerged as a star reformer after a decade of coups and turmoil in the 1970s should be well placed to avoid the pitfalls that have made other African oil economies dependent on volatile world prices and prey to corrupt elites.

In practice, the speed with which Ghana is moving from discovery to production is testing the country's institutional and regulatory capacity.

A confluence of venomous local politics and hard-headed commercial considerations has made for a bumpy ride.

For the US private equity backers of Kosmos, Warburg Pincus and Blackstone, who stood to gain at least a fourfold profit on their investment, the ExxonMobil deal looked sweet.

Moreover, ExxonMobil is as qualified as any oil major to drill in deep water, and has ample resources to develop Ghana's potential.

But the Ghana government had a host of concerns. For much of the past year, it dug its heels in, declining approval.

This was partly because it wants to control who partners in a venture that could make or mar the country's fortunes, and partly because of the way in which the deal came about.

From the point of view of GNPC officials, the agreement appeared to "subordinate Ghanaian law governing a strategic national resource to a private contract made between two US companies."

The ensuing battle has only served to confirm the view among some state officials, that US oil major of ExxonMobil's size would ride roughshod over the country's concerns.

Ghana's reputation in the US has taken a battering from Washington lobbyists and negative publicity in parts of the media, which have presented Ghana as attempting to force a sale at below market value to the state oil company.

Senior Ghanaian official comments: "The thing for some of us in terms of the development of the country is that, if you have one behemoth out there, everything would be done according to its whims. And if you don't do it their way the whole American system comes down on you."

Last month, ExxonMobil walked away from its “exclusive and binding” agreement with Kosmos. But the fight is not over yet.

Some officials close to President Mills are wary of antagonising Washington and are still open to overtures from ExxonMobil.

An alternative under consideration is for the GNPC to put in its own bid, financed with Chinese money. It would then split the Kosmos 23.5 per cent stake in Jubilee between China’s CNOOC and other oil major with deep water expertise.

The Jubilee field, which may hold at least 1.2bn barrels of oil, has also attracted interest from Korean, French, British and Norwegian companies.

“Politically, I don’t think we can continue with a buffeting from left and right. We have to show some decisiveness and move on,” says an official close to President Mills.

While polemics around control of the oil have presented Ghana in a bad light, the news from offshore, where oil companies are preparing to begin production before the end of the year, has mostly been good.

A fresh discovery by Britain’s Tullow Oil, announced in July, could as much as double reserves discovered to date, reinforcing indications that Ghana is set to become a significant producer.

That the oil is a convenient boat ride across the Atlantic from one of the world’s largest consumers only serves to heighten the country’s allure.

But like other African countries, Ghana faces a delicate task meeting international expectations, as Washington seeks to consolidate its influence, European companies fight to maintain a grip, and China is banging at the door.

Another Major Oil Find off Ghana

British firm Tullow said Tuesday it has found what could be among the largest recent oil discoveries in Africa off the coast of Ghana, with the field holding a potential 550 million barrels.

The new find in Tullow's deepwater Tano license comes just three months before Ghana is expected to start pumping crude from the Jubilee field, discovered three years ago and one of the biggest finds in West Africa of the last decade. Owo field is estimated to hold between 70 million and 550 million barrels of light, sweet and high quality crude.

The Owo field "is potentially the largest light oil discovery in Africa since our own Jubilee oil field discovery three years ago," Tullow's head of investor relations Chris Perry told AFP.

The Jubilee field, discovered in 2007, is believed to hold some 1.8 billion barrels of

reserves.

Tullow has a 50 percent interest in Tano, where it operates alongside several other global oil giants and Ghana's state-run oil firm Ghana National Petroleum Corporation.

Cocoa and gold-rich Ghana is expected to start commercially producing oil by year's end.

Government officials have vowed to carefully manage the country's oil reserves and revenue, vowing to avoid the mismanagement that has plagued nearby Nigeria, among the world's largest producers.

Ghana's recent oil discovery has however sparked a row with Ivory Coast over the border, with Accra accusing Abidjan of claiming part of its maritime space.

Inflation to hit 10.2%

A STUDY conducted by the Research Department of Databank has revealed that inflation, the average change in the price of goods and services, could increase to 10.2 percent for August 2010.

The survey, expected to be released on Wednesday in Accra, was led by Sampson Akligoh, a Senior Economic Analyst at the investment bank.

It pointed out that it was likely inflation could rise to double digits as the effects of the base period factor diminish and inflation converge towards its medium to long-term path.

It however stated that an increase in inflation for August 2010 would not trigger any average price spiral since the economy would continue to post ultra-low inflation figures going forward.

Clearly, favorable food prices in 2010 as well as the relative stable exchange rate environment, remains a major buffer this year. This could anchor the year-end inflation to between 10 and 11.5 percent, the report added.

The study further noted that unless food prices decline significantly, inflation would surge beyond 10 percent.

“There have been distortions to food supply due to this year’s rainfall pattern and this is projected to mitigate the extent to which food prices decline by the end of the third quarter.

“Clearly, this adds to the certainty of the anticipated average price increases. Recent utility tariff increases, implementation of the Single Spine Salary Structure (SSSS), and global crude oil price dynamics among others will continue to serve as upside risks.”

Meanwhile, consumer inflation declined further by six basis points to 9.46 percent in

July. The food price increases were slower for June and July than for the same period in 2009, resulting in an inflation rate of 5.84 percent for the food.

The decline in food prices, according to the report, was in line with Ghana's seasonal pattern.

Nevertheless, non-food inflation increased to 11.96 percent in July from 11.89 percent recorded in June.

The increase in non-food inflation for July was led by alcoholic beverages, tobacco and other narcotics.

Inflation continued its downward trend for the 13th consecutive month after it recorded 9.46 percent in July as against 9.52 percent recorded in June 2010.

The general price levels for July (0.82 percent) were lower than that of June 2010 (1.57 percent) but prices of goods surged up marginally in July.

The months of August, September and October generally record low inflation rates, but the Food and Beverages Association (FABAG) has noted that food crisis was looming in emerging economies like Ghana.

The prices of wheat and other cereals have jumped by more than 50 percent since June and are likely to rise further due to expectations of tighter supplies.

Tema Oil Refinery Opens after 12-Day Closure

The Tema Oil Refinery, Ghana's lone crude processor, resumed production yesterday after a pumping error caused a 12-day shutdown, an official said

Salt water was mistakenly channeled into some parts of state-owned plant, Managing Director Ato Ampiah said in a phone interview today.

The refinery has been closed several times over the past year, including for most of 2009, for lengthy maintenance works and a shortage of crude supplies that led to lines at filling stations in the capital city, Accra, which is about 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) west of the Tema facility.

A plan to increase processing to 120,000 barrels a day, from the current 45,000 barrels, will be completed by "about 2013 or 2014," said Ampiah, who was named to head the plant in May.

Ghana is set to become Africa's newest crude oil exporter when production at the offshore Jubilee oil field begins by the end of this year, Ato Ahwoi, chairman of the Ghana National Petroleum Corp., said Aug. 25.

Government, Kosmos Move Closer To Deal

The desire and interest of the Government of Ghana to acquire shares being offloaded by KOSMOS energy in the Jubilee Oil Fields in the Western Region, received a boost yesterday when the President, Professor John Evans Atta Mills interacted with a high-powered delegation from the oil exploration and drilling company at the Castle, Osu in Accra.

The discussions also examined the role of KOSMOS in the emerging oil and gas industry in Ghana and what the oil concern could do to support the government's drive to develop the full potential of the oil fields.

It would be recalled that KOSMOS recently announced that it was offloading its shares in the Jubilee Oil Field, bringing to an end months of speculations which took centre-stage especially in the Ghanaian Media.

The meeting with President Atta Mills was the first official meeting of the oil concern weeks after its decision to formally offload its shares in the jubilee oil Fields.

Before the pronouncement, the GNPC, which is Ghanaian owned, had come out to express its interest in procuring the shares of KOSMOS if it finally decided to offload them.

When President Mills who had just arrived from his 10-day holiday to the United States of America, was asked to comment on the announcement of KOSMOS to offload its shares, he described the move as welcome news since it would afford the nation the opportunity to acquire the shares through its statutory bodies. The sales and purchase agreement of the shares according to a source, entails lots of legalities and security concerns which should be dealt with by experts who will be constituted by the two teams with the passage of time. Now that the two teams have met formally it would paved the way for the constituting of teams to work out the details of the offloading of the shares of KOSMOSD", it said.

In his opening remarks before the discussions, President Mills thanked KOSMOS for its pioneering role in the country's oil and gas industry, adding that the government was well pleased with its performance. He said the government recognized public-private partnership, since that alone would guarantee a sustained and smooth development of the country, as well as impact positively on the living standards of the people. President Mills said investors are welcomed to invest in the various sectors of the economy provided they also agree to work within the confines of the country's laws.

For his part, the President and co-founder of KOSMOS Energy, Mr. Brian Maxed, thanked President Mills for the warm reception accorded his team, adding that KOSMOS was ever committed to the development of Ghana's oil industry. Mr. Maxed said KOSMOS would be pleased if the government of Ghana continues to support its offshore operations in the country for their mutual benefit. Present at the meeting included the Minister of Energy, Dr. Joe Oteng-Agyei; the Chairman of the Ghana National Petroleum

Corporation (GNPC), Mr. Ato Ahwoi; Dr. Cadman Mills, a member of Economic Management Team; Dr. Christine Amoako-Nuamah, a presidential aide and Lt. Colone Gbevlo Lertey, National Security Co-ordinator.

LIBERIA

Paris Club Clears More Than U.S. \$1 Billion Debt Liberia Owes Its Creditors

The representatives of the Paris Club creditor countries met with the Republic of Liberia on 16 September 2010 and agreed on a reduction of the debt following the Republic of Liberia having reached its Completion Point under the enhanced initiative for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (enhanced HIPC Initiative) on 29 June 2010.

Paris Club creditors welcomed the Republic of Liberia's determination to implement a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy and an ambitious economic program providing the basis for sustainable economic growth.

In order to contribute to restore the debt sustainability of the Republic of Liberia, they decided to cancel U.S. \$1,260 million in nominal terms, which represents the Paris Club's share of the effort in the framework of the enhanced HIPC Initiative. In addition, creditors are also committed to a bilateral basis to cancel the remaining USD 107 million. As a result of this agreement and additional bilateral assistance, the Republic of Liberia's debt to Paris Club creditors will be entirely cancelled.

The Republic of Liberia committed to use the resources freed by this debt treatment to priority areas (health, education and basic infrastructures) identified in the country's poverty reduction strategy.

Creditors welcome and support the Government of the Republic of Liberia's commitment to seek comparable treatment from all their other external creditors (including other creditors' countries and commercial creditors).

Boakai Welcomes Danish Investments in Seaport

Liberia's Vice President Joseph N. Boakai says Liberians have had a long association with Danish companies and know the quality of work they are capable of doing. "We have confidence in you because we know that we cannot expect anything less than the best from you," Vice President Boakai told a group of Danish investors.

He was speaking Monday, September 13, when the Danish investors representing the FLSmidt & Co. and the E. PIHL & Son, accompanied by the Consul General of Liberia in Denmark, Mr. Carl Chr. Ostergaard paid a courtesy call on him at his Capitol Building office.

They came to brief the Vice President about their desire to invest in the country's port sector. Vice President Boakai observed that Liberia, emerging from a devastating civil conflict, is in dire need of investors who will put in place a system that will speed up Liberia's reconstruction program.

He intimated that Liberia has a lot of opportunities to move goods and services by sea and would therefore welcome investments in this sector. The Liberian Vice President observed that the country's ports were hard hit by the civil conflict and need to be rehabilitated and reconditioned, and welcomed the Danish investors' desire to invest in this sector.

"We want to see reliable businesses in the port area that will serve not only Liberia but our neighboring countries," he added. Briefing the Vice President earlier, Mr. Ostergaard said FLSmidth, the Danish Construction Engineering Company, aims to work with the Freeport of Monrovia to look at the port master planning in line with the Liberian Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy, while PIHL& Son A.S, a civil engineering construction company, is interested in the rehabilitation of the port infrastructure. He said the companies which are also operating in the West African countries of Togo, Sierra Leone and Ghana, were also interested in exploring the various opportunities in the mining and power generation sectors.

Mr. Ostergaard said the two companies are already operating in Togo, Ghana and Sierra Leone. He said the delegation which arrived in the country on Sunday, September 12, is expected to depart on Friday, September 17.

ENERGY

CAMEROON

AfDB Approves USD 47.70 Million for Electricity Supply to 423 localities in Cameroon

The Board of Directors of the African Development Fund (ADF), the concessional arm of the African Development Bank (AfDB) Group, approved UA* 31.64 million (equivalent to USD 47.70 million) for the strengthening and extension of electricity networks to 423 localities in Cameroon.

The total project cost is estimated at UA 58.99 million (USD 80.07 million).

The implementation of this project will enhance the existing network's technical performance and will extend electricity supply to 423 new localities which are not connected to the grid.

The extension of the high voltage line as well as the rehabilitation and extension of the medium voltage and low voltage network will make it possible to increase the supply capacity in order to ensure better countrywide coverage by the national grid, especially the country's southern regions where economic activity is expected to recover, driven by the development of agro-industrial and tourism sector projects.

Like in most African countries, Cameroon's energy sector is facing both structural and technical difficulties which have drawn the attention of the government and that of the country's development partners. Under Cameroon development vision which extends to 2035, the government has prepared a poverty reduction strategy aimed at transforming Cameroon into an emerging country.

Without adequate energy infrastructure, it will be difficult to achieve such an objective since the availability of energy is an essential condition for improved growth and economic competitiveness.

The country's current 22% electrification rate remains low and is a constraint on the production of goods and services. In rural areas, the rate is only 3.5%. The government's objective is to ramp up the country's electrification rate to over 48% and the rural electrification rate to over 20% by 2020. All the operations planned for the country's energy sector, including this project, are intended to support the government in achieving these objectives.

The project is in keeping with the Bank Group's assistance strategy for Cameroon that aims at contributing to efforts at achieving growth objectives and poverty reduction. This intervention strategy is underpinned by two pillars: strengthening governance with a view to improving strategic management in central government; and developing infrastructure to reinforce basic infrastructure, including that of the energy sector, which is necessary to ensure private sector development and improve the country's economic and social development framework.

** 1 UA (United of Account) = USD 1.50891 as at 15/09/2010*

Hydromine mulling \$2.8 bln Cameroon smelter project

U.S. firm Hydromine Inc. said it is studying a \$2.8 billion aluminium smelter project in Cameroon that would include construction of two hydroelectric plants to power the 500,000 tonne per year plant.

The company is in talks with a "major aluminium producer" to own and operate the smelter and has invited Brazilian state power company Eletrobras to invest, Hydromine CEO Peter Briger told Reuters in an interview late on Thursday.

"The projected capital cost is about \$2.8 billion," Briger said. Hydromine "has also contracted (Italian firm) Impregilo and another Brazilian construction company with extensive experience in hydroelectric projects to undertake the feasibility studies and construction of these facilities."

Tight power supply has been an obstacle to the mining industry in Cameroon and has interfered with the central African state's efforts to diversify its economy away from oil. "In the event the feasibility studies for the hydroelectric plants prove positive, Hydromine has identified and is in discussion with a major aluminium producer which has expressed interest to become owner operator of the proposed aluminium smelter," he said.

Hydromine already holds a 10 percent stake in the Cameroon Alumina Limited joint venture with Dubai Aluminium Company Ltd and India's Hindalco Industries, which is planning to spend \$5.5 billion on a bauxite mine in Ngaoundal, an alumina refinery, and a rail link to the port of Kribi.

Briger said Hydromine began work on the smelter project after Cameroon's government said it would support efforts to add value to the Ngaoundal bauxite.

Hydromine has identified two sites for the hydroelectric plants which together could produce 1,400 megawatts -- one at Mbakaou in the Adamawa region near the proposed Ngaoundal mine and another at Kahn just north of Pouma.

Rio Tinto's partnership with the Cameroon government, Alucam, is also seeking to build an aluminium smelter with a 1 million tonne per year capacity, along with a 1,000 megawatt hydro dam, near the port of Kribi.

An existing 300,000 tonne per year Alucam smelter at Edea has had to slash output since last year due to a power crunch.

Cameroon has said it hopes to triple electricity output to 3,000 MW by 2020 through a series of hydro and thermal projects, which analysts see as key to raising mining investment and diversifying the economy.

SIERRA LEONE

Koroma's Three Years in Office - Energy and Infrastructure!

On assumption of office in September 2007, President Ernest Bai Koroma promised a progressive turn around for Sierra Leone in 36 months through his 'Agenda for Change', highlighting five prioritized key areas - Agriculture, Energy, Infrastructure, Health and Social Services - which he hopes to focus on within his three years stated time. Mr. Koroma also promised to run his government as effectively as a business.

Having previously looked at Agriculture, and Social Services, my next focus is on Energy and Infrastructure. With Energy, the shift from perennial darkness to light came with an increase on electricity projects from a meager Le483 million in 2007 to Le80 billion in 2010. Soon after assuming the reins of power, President Koroma, as a short-term emergency measure to provide electricity to the capital Freetown until the completion of Bumbuna, engaged the services of an independent power provider.

In this bid, government vigorously pursued the completion of the Bumbuna hydro electric project, which generates 50 megawatts of electricity with the ongoing extension of Bumbuna electricity supply to Makeni, Lunsar and Bumbuna town. Government installed a 16.5 thermal plant at the Blackhall Road sub-station to further increase the supply of electricity to Freetown.

Government spokesperson, who doubles as the minister of Information and Communication, Alhaji Ibrahim Ben Kargbo, said the Bo-Kenema Power Station (BKPS) in the south-east is also being expanded to provide affordable electricity to more communities, noting that power generation has been doubled from 2 to 4 megawatts.

"We have plans to expand the Dodo Dam to ensure all year round supply of electricity is ongoing, and the moribund thermal plant has been refurbished and now produces 1.5 megawatts. By April 2011, power generation will increase to 6 megawatts; a program for the electrification of provincial towns and cities has commenced. This project will cover Kabala, Bo, Makeni, Bonthe, Pujehun, Port Loko, Moyamba, Kambia, Lungi, Kailahun, Magburaka, Koidu and Kenema," Kargbo said.

Meanwhile, plans are underway to increase the generating capacity of Bumbuna from 50 megawatts to 500 megawatts through the construction of a second dam, the minister added.

Government has embarked on the provision of solar energy to light the city streets and homes in the rural communities, and some homes have been solar electrified in several villages, including Mamusa, Blama Massaquoi, Kissy Koya, Makandeh and Mambioma villages. Government is also providing funds for the construction of the bare foot solar engineers training center at Konta Line village, the first ever in the continent of Africa.

On Infrastructure, the government has completed the 164 Masiaka-Bo highway in March 2010, a project jointly funded by the European Union and the Sierra Leone government. The 35km Matotoka highway commenced in March 2008 and completed in October 2009, funded by the World Bank and the government.

Information minister I.B. Kargbo said the 65 kilometer Bo-Kenema highway was started in March 2008 and completed in February 2010.

"The 21.2km Tokeh-Lumley road is ongoing; the original contractor Burhan was changed and the contract awarded to CSE. The first 9km stretch of the road from Lumley to Tokeh will now be four lanes. The 86km second phase of the Freetown-Conakry road is ongoing. The services of the first contractor CEC was terminated and contract awarded to CSE. The highway will be completed by the end of 2011," Kargbo said.

"The construction of the 87km Kenema-Pendembu section of the Kenema-Kailahun highway has commenced. The construction will be completed in 2013. Compensation is being paid to project affected persons. The construction of the 4.2 hillside: Pademba Road/Blackhall Road has commenced. Structures are being demolished by the contractors and compensation paid to the project affected persons.

The project will be completed by the end of 2011. The contract for the widening of the 5km Wilkinson Road to a four-lane road has been awarded. The contractor is mobilizing; campsite is being built. The project will be completed by June 2011. The rehabilitation of 30km of roads in Freetown was commenced by the contractor CSE in March 2010 and will be completed by the middle of 2011."

According to the minister, government is also rehabilitating roads in all provincial cities, headquarter towns and a number of other provincial towns. Work has already commenced on the roads in Bo, Kenema, Makeni and Magburaka by the contractor Salcost. These, the minister stated, will be completed before the end of 2011. Contracts have also been awarded for the rehabilitation of roads in Port Loko and Kambia. Design and tendering for the rehabilitation of roads in Koidu, Kailahun, Moyamba, Kabala, Bonthe and Pujehun are commencing.

"Bids for the reconstruction of the 62km Port Loko-Lungi road have been evaluated and the award of the contract will soon be made. Feasibility studies and detailed engineering

design have been completed for the construction of the 97km Bandajuma-Mano River Bridge highway," Kargbo revealed.

Feeder Roads: Construction works on feeder roads in Kambia, Port Loko, Kenema and Pujehun that commenced in September 2008 are now over 70% completed. The construction of 555km of feeder roads in Bombali, Tonkolili, Kailahun, and Kono that commenced in February 2008 has been completed. Procurement process is in its final stage for the rehabilitation of feeder roads under the Agricultural Sector Rehabilitation Project. The project, which commences by the end of 2010, involves 410km of feeder roads in Kenema, Pujehun, Moyamba, Port Loko and Kambia.

Over 780 kilometers of feeder roads all over the country are being rehabilitated through the Rural and Private Sector Development Project and the Rehabilitation & Community-Based Poverty Reduction Project.

A further 1,305 kilometers of feeder roads are being constructed in Port Loko, Kambia, Pujehun, Kenema, Bonthe, Kailahun, Kono, and Koinadugu districts through the Rural Roads Project.

BURKINA FASO

AfDB and Burkina Faso Sign CFAF 19.63 Billion Power Projects Agreement

The African Development Bank (AfDB) and Burkina Faso have signed a CFAF 19.63-billion (UA 25.15 million) grant agreement to finance basic energy infrastructure projects in the country, including improving the provision of electricity. The grant was approved by the African Development Fund (ADF) Board on 7 July 2010.

The agreement was signed on Tuesday 14 September 2010 in Tunis by Burkina Faso's Ambassador to Tunisia, Pauline Hien Winkoun and the Bank's Energy, Environment and Climate Change Director, Hela Cheikhrouhou.

The project falls within the framework of Burkina Faso's socio-economic development policy which focuses on improving people's living conditions by providing better basic infrastructure, including electricity.

Referring to this concern in a speech after the signing ceremony, Mrs. Cheikhrouhou said the project would undoubtedly enable the government to attain its objective of raising electricity access from 18% in 2007 to 60% upon completion of the project in 2014.

The project will also involve the rehabilitation and extension of 1,800 km of medium and high tension lines, the realization of 20,000 connections and electrification of 750 public buildings in 150 communes and localities, all of which translate to providing electricity access to some 800,000 people.

"It also includes two important studies which will enable us to better design our future interventions in the sector," Mrs. Cheikhrouhou explained.

She emphasized the need to set up compensation mechanisms for people affected by the project which is the government's responsibility.

HEALTH

GHANA

Ghana snubs Russia Trained Doctors

AVAILABLE STATISTICS indicate that the doctor-patient ratio in Ghana is about 1:12,000 – a figure which is far below that of the World Health Organization (WHO) global standard of 1: 5,000.

This can be attributed largely to the exodus of medical practitioners from Ghana to seek greener pastures abroad, thus, the country is in dire need of medical practitioners to make up for the large deficit, especially in rural areas for an improvement in health service delivery throughout the country.

It is in view of this that some medical students who studied abroad and have returned to the country say they do not understand why the Ghana Medical and Dental Council (MDC) seem to be slowing down the process of their absorption into the health service, to help provide for the health needs of Ghanaians.

According to the returnees, who pleaded anonymity for fear of victimization, most of them who write the Council's registration examinations, which are written three times in a year (February, June and October), are failed, for unexplained reasons. Some of them are therefore made to re-sit the exams for as many as four times. Absorption into system According to the young doctors, after their parents and families have sponsored them to study medicine in countries like Ukraine, China, Cuba, Czech Republic and Russia, with high hopes and enthusiasm to serve their nation after their medical course, they are now faced with the hurdle of "absorption into the system through the Medical and Dental Council, which is very frustrating." Already, the first two batches of Ukraine-trained doctors have returned to the country.

These young doctors are facing serious challenges because their frustration stem from the fact that the failure rate of the examinations conducted by the MDC is so high and it would potentially deter those currently training outside, including some 118 in Ukraine alone.

They emphasized that "this high failure rate is because of how the programme is organized by the MDC", such that there were no materials, syllabus or lectures to prepare them for the examinations.

According to one of the frustrated doctors, "in other jurisdictions like the United States and the United Kingdom, they are given Compact Discs (CDs) with questions and other related materials, but here in Ghana, we have no past questions to guide us, virtually nothing!"

He also said "though the exam questions were not too difficult, medicine is a very broad

subject, which includes surgery, general medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics and public health, as well as English language, and without any clue on what to expect in all the areas in which they are to be examined, it poses a problem for them.

Additionally, the graduate doctors do not seem to understand why they have to write English language as part of their examinations. “You know one surprising thing; we are made to take English language which is meant for foreigners who do not speak English as their first language. We schooled here and we still have to write English,” one of them fumed.

Open & Liberal policy The obviously irritated doctors said, now that Ghana needs many medical practitioners to improve the poor doctor to patient ratio, the deliberate policy to discourage them is bad for the country and, therefore, advised the government to run an open and liberal policy to attract many foreign-trained Ghanaian medical practitioners.

Among other things, they averred that it was difficult to get letters for attachment from the MDC, due to delays in verifying certificates from their schools, and even when they eventually obtain the letters, they are not given guidelines to follow for the attachment.

One of the doctors who said he had already written the exams twice, and was waiting to write again this October, was of the view that there should be designated hospitals where foreign-trained doctors would have their attachment, and be properly coached towards the exam.

According to them, they would prefer that the current system of attachment, which is optional, is made compulsory for about four months whilst the Ministry of Health prepares to absorb them into the system.

They also alleged that the MDC did not have enough sources of funding, thus the registration fee of GH¢460.00 per student, provides the Council with considerable revenue, saying “huge sums of monies are paid as exam fees, which the applicant continues to pay until he or she passes the exam.”

Frustrations of Doctors The frustrated doctors were also of the view that the treatment they receive in the country is unfair, since the Ghana embassies and consular services in the countries they studied had to virtually come and beg them when they were in their final year, to convince them to return to Ghana to practice after graduation, which was the reason why their plane fares to Ghana were catered for by the government.

“I did not want to come back but my father insisted I return to Ghana to practice, and now see what I have to go through”, cried one of the doctors.

Some parents, who are also worried about the trend, suggested that the MDC should organize a short fee-paying orientation of about three months duration for these overseas trained doctors, instead of subjecting them to rigorous examinations.

In the same vein, the graduates believe a housemanship programme like the one for Ghanaian trained doctors would be better preferred to the examination they were currently writing.

The parents argued that the quality of training that these doctors receive was of equal quality to that in Ghana, thus “it is unfair to subject these young doctors to the ordeal they go through.”

They are, therefore, seeking to bring the issue to the notice of the Minister of Health, who they claim to have made many attempts to meet, but have not been successful, noting that “the early intervention by the President will go a long way to lend a hand in the reform process for their early completion.” Registrar reacts to allegations responding to these issues, the Registrar of the MDC, Dr. Eli Kwasi Atikpui said the Council was not just failing candidates, but “when they pass, they pass, and when they fail, they fail.”

According to him, the examination was instituted in 1972, when the MDC was established, but had to be stopped after two examinations, because some specific individuals thought that the examination was targeted at preventing them from practicing in the country.

He said in the year 2000, when exams was reintroduced, the Council realized that there were certain limitations because these people trained in different environment, and the processes of training were quite different to that of Ghana.

Particularly, Council recognized issues of language barrier, exposure to patients and certain materials, as well as issues of specific disease entities, which were peculiar to specific environments such as communicable diseases in under-developed countries.

Dr. Atikpui explained that because the doctors trained in developed countries, where usually there were no endemic diseases as pertains here, it becomes difficult for people to handle them well, because they may just have read about it but not have had specific experience or exposure to them.

He said in view of this, the Council introduced a programme where prospective candidates were to do some clinical attachment in identified facilities, saying “Council went ahead and paid consultants to take prospective candidates through the programme, but the report we had was that they did not show interest, so council realized that it was a waste of money and time to have continued the exercise.”

He added that the attachment has never been compulsory, but there were plans to make it so by developing programmes to be carried out at the Tamale Teaching Hospital for candidates, prior to the exams.

He indicated that some fourteen candidates who were unsuccessful in this year’s February exams were sent to the Tamale Hospital in preparation for the June exams, thus “currently, we have a system in place to provide them with enough orientation even

though not as comprehensive as we would have wished.”

He further stated that the Acting Director of the Ministry of Health has also promised funds for the programme.

He observed that there were currently over six hundred Ghanaians training outside the country in Russia, Ukraine and China, and hinted the MDC was planning to allow students to come home in the course of their training to do clinical attachment before they complete to acclimatize themselves with the practice in the country as a measure to the problem.

Dr. Atikpui refuted the claim that candidates were failing on a high margin and provided figures, which indicated that in October last year, the pass percentage was 66% for nine general duty doctors who took the exam, 50% for dental, written by two people, and 66% for specialist doctors, written by six people.

In February 2010, twenty seven general doctors wrote and only 47% passed, which he said was about the lowest pass so far, one dental doctor wrote and passed (100%), and all the four specialists who wrote passed (100%). In June 2010, twenty six general doctors wrote the exam and pass rate was 65.4%, one person wrote the dental and passed (100%), and four specialists wrote and pass was 75%.

‘Deficit budget’

He therefore disputed claims that it was to derive revenue that the Council was failing people since the cost of conducting the exams such as paying examiners among others was more than the fee collected, saying, “I always have to justify for council to use money to support the examination. We continue to run a completely deficit budget as far as the examinations is concerned.”

“It gives us a lot pressure to organize this examination and I would have wished that I had fewer people writing the examination at a time”, he intimated.

Giving possible reasons for failure by some students, he said some candidates registered only about a week or few days to the examination, indicating unpreparedness, and the kind of qualification they took to medical schools outside Ghana.

He stated categorically that “these are not qualifications that could earn them qualification into schools here,” and though they may sometimes meet the standards of those countries, if one wanted to come back home to practice, then “they must meet our standard.”

“So people who think that they are interested in doing medicine or dentistry should sit up and learn, and get the requisite qualification and if they know that they cannot meet the minimum standard, they should not go and start it.”

Dr. Atikpui pointed out that though these countries have assured us of using their minimum requirements, but at times, certain situations were compromised because – “some people wish to run the training as a business”, therefore, “people should not say because Ghana needs doctors, they will take any qualification to go and do whatever training.”

He was, however, quick to add that this did not mean that all those who traveled outside to study medicine and dentistry did not have the requisite qualification.

Again, he refuted claims that there were no past questions available for candidates and said that there were Council approved questions that were provided to candidates upon registration, and also said he personally provided past questions through the consultant at the Tamale Teaching Hospital for those who undertook the programme. ‘We run the best exams’ On the matter of English language, he noted there was no basis for Ghanaians to be exempted when foreigners were writing it, especially when there has been evidence to the effect that some Ghanaians do fail in that paper, while the foreigners pass it, stressing “you do not have the justification per empirical evidence that Ghanaians who were trained here would pass. “

This, he noted, was worsened by the fact that some of the countries where Ghanaians trained in non-English speaking countries and were not obliged to study the native language of the people, thus such Ghanaians became handicapped in communicating with the patients.

Furthermore, he indicated that the exam was the best and only way to examine people who the council did not have a hand in their training.

He explained that the guiding principles of Council is to guide the profession and protect the public, thus Council has the mandate to accredit facilities for training in medical and dental schools in Ghana.

It also has the mandate to continuously visit any major examination conducted by any medical or dental school in Ghana, so that at the end of the day, Council knows that whatever product comes from any such school in Ghana meets its requirement.

“We do not have the right to go and supervise any institution in Ukraine, Russia or China. The only way we can say or justify that they meet our minimum requirement is for us to conduct an examination, and this examination, apparently, is conducted in various countries in Africa, like Nigeria and South Africa”, he said.

Finally, the MDC registrar said allowing those who studied with government scholarship to write and rewrite the registration examination when they failed, did not constitute a waste of government resources, because “the fact that you are on government scholarship does not mean we should just accept anything.”

“The fact is you need to meet a certain qualification, so if the government spent money

on you, sit and learn, come back, revise and pass the exam. We need the doctors so we do not wish to send them away, but we should also not say that because we need the doctors, we are going to compromise with standards, no!" he stressed.

HUMAN RIGHTS/ GENDER/ SOCIAL ISSUES

GHANA

Government to sign STX housing project next Monday

Mr. Jee Hyung Hak, Korean Ambassador to Ghana on Thursday commended the Government of Ghana for its decision to engage Korean companies in the provision of 2,000 Housing Units Ghana under the STX housing Project.

The Project, he said, would not only provide adequate accommodation to Ghanaian workers, but would also create jobs for a number of artisans in the country.

Mr. Hak gave this commendation when he led a five-member delegation from Samsung Company Limited of Korea to express their interest in building a deep-sea port at the Cape Three Points oil-rich areas of the Western Region.

He said although the bill went through stages of debate in Parliament, "We are all happy that the project will be officially signed on Monday, September 20 for work to commence."

The Deal which would be signed by Mr. Alban Kingsford Sumana Bagbin, Minister of Water Resources, Works and Housing on behalf of Government, would ease the acute accommodation shortage among Ghanaian workers, particularly among the security services.

The Ambassador expressed delight that Korean government was partnering the Government of Ghana to provide adequate accommodation to Ghanaians and promised the project would be speedily discharged with sufficient quality to meet deadlines.

LIBERIA

"There's Power in Women Literacy"

Liberian Ambassador to the European Union and the Benelux Countries, Conmany B. Wesseh, has outlined the adverse effects of illiteracy on postwar Liberia and the

advantage of women education and called for sustained fight against mediocrity and academic fraud.

The former political activist, who has emphasized the advantage of women education, hailed the Sirleaf Administration for making education a major part of the concessionaire agreements and recommended that it must be a national policy and action.

The Liberian European ambassador expressed the views last Wednesday when he addressed the 44th Anniversary of the International Literacy Day organized by the National Adult Education Association of Liberia (NAEAL) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education of Liberia.

Addressing the program attended by an array of government officials and representatives of UN organizations on the theme, *The Power of Women's Literacy In Liberia*, Amb Wesseh noted that the day was significant to him for two reasons.

The first reason, he said, was that it gave him the opportunity to pay tribute to the forerunners of Liberia's Adult Literacy Program such as Roye B. Bloh, Jr., and Stanley Bedell, and second, because there was much to explore in this year's theme.

He said even though many define literacy in the simple concept of having the ability to read and write some 780 million people around the world today were unable to read or write. Of this number, he said, quoting UN statistics, two-thirds were women while 94 - 115 million children lack access to education.

He said Liberia embraced the concept of providing education opportunity for adults since the founding of the International Literacy Day on November 17, 1965 and since celebrating the day for first time two years later in 1967 in addition to government acceleration program for education. He however regretted that the nation has very little to show today for those many years of engagement and programming.

Today, he said, the nation's literacy ranking stood at 45% - considering the calculations of Adult Education Division of the Ministry of Education based on the final results of the 2008 National Housing and Population Census - or 30%, considering conservative international statistics.

A further look at the statistics, the Liberian envoy said, revealed that between 10 and 15% or two-thirds of literate Liberians were women.

The statistics, he said, would mean one thing: "we are faced with the grim truth that the literacy statistics, unreliable or confusing as they may be, expose the gap between what we say and what we do for the enlightenment of society."

Mr. Wesseh expressed little wonder then that Liberia was ranked amongst the poorest countries in Sub-Saharan Africa because, according to him, world reports have shown

clear connections between illiteracy and countries in severe poverty and between illiteracy and prejudice against women.

"In our recent history, we can say that our low literate population impacted our country very negatively in many ways," he observed. He said not only was illiteracy a threat to democracy but that it also undermines the making of wise choices in the selection of leaders and development priorities.

Mr. Wesseh came short of saying in what way illiteracy affected Liberia's presidential and parliamentary elections in 2005 and how it is likely to affect next years elections, but proceeded to list the adverse effects of illiteracy on a postwar society like Liberia.

"Illiteracy makes Liberians vulnerable to charlatans and demagogues who exploit the legitimate grievances of the people to create chaos and even violent conflicts to pursue their personal and, too often, criminal agendas.

Illiteracy contributed to a large measure to the level of destruction and prolongation of the 14 years war; and, illiteracy contributes to poverty generally, undermines manpower development, and promotes unemployment," he said.

He said because of what illiteracy does to developing societies, it was necessary for Liberia to make the conscious effort to build a "highly literate society in which entire families must be targeted".

In order to achieve this level of enlightenment in light of the "very critical role" he said women play in the family and society, the government needed to take additional steps to accelerate the education of women and girls. He said it was only by doing this that the power inherent in women literary would be realized and tapped to the benefit of the nation.

"An educated and literate woman accelerates a family's cohesion and reduces its poverty; a literate women increases the chances for employment by self or by others," he said.

Besides, he said, a literate woman improves her own or family income generation and management thereby reducing poverty, or creating wealth while adding quality to the life of the family. "An educated woman helps rear good children and good citizens."

Meanwhile Amb Wesseh has emphasized the need to fight deprivation in the Liberian school system, especially academic fraud, as part of efforts to eradicate poverty, illiteracy, and corruption.

Ambassador Wesseh, who blamed the poor performance in WAEC exams to reported pervasiveness of academic fraud and generally low integrity in the school system, and equated "integrity deficiency" to chronic corruption, has called for the prosecution of individuals found bribing or receiving bribes for grades.

"I believe that it is now time to prosecute academic fraud as a crime. It is time to withdraw degrees granted individuals found to have defrauded an institution. I believe that teachers should be protected from corrupting students. Defrauding students should be strongly subjected to stiff disciplinary measures," he said.

He did not say how the offenders would be identified in a crime of mutual benefit, but he warned, "Failing to act against these two - the corrupting students and the corrupt teacher - we will be nourishing the seeds of corruption that is so pervasive in society."

He challenged the authorities of the University of Liberia and other higher institutions of learning in the country to take "take drastic measure to deal with these chronic diseases".

"The University must help fight mediocrity and be part of a national movement for literacy where we properly educate the whole family, provide literacy lessons to families in need, especially women and girls, our daughters, our mothers and our sisters with the values of integrity. This would prepare our society to be a better place," he said.

He said if the school system played its part at the time the government of Liberia has made education agreement part of its concessionaire agreements, the nation would be well on the way to defeating illiteracy, mainly women illiteracy.

CAMEROON

Belgian ship attacked off Cameroon, 2 crews seized

An armed gang attacked a dredger offshore from the Central African country of Cameroon late on Sunday and kidnapped two crew members, the Belgian ship owners said on Monday.

In a brief statement, Belgian shipping group Jan De Nul Group said the abducted men were from Croatia and the Philippines.

A Jan De Nul spokesman said he had no news regarding the demands of the gang, such as whether it was seeking a ransom.

The attack on the Amerigo Vespucci took place outside the Atlantic port of Douala, where the dredger has been maintaining and deepening the access channel since June 2009.

Jan De Nul said it was reassessing the safety of working off Cameroon for the crew, which would normally number 20.

Croatia's foreign ministry confirmed a Croatian had been kidnapped.

"We are in contact with the man's family here," a ministry spokesman said. "The Belgian shipper is a respectable company and we believe this affair will end with a positive outcome."

Cameroonians parliamentarians Mobilised to Eradicate Corruption

The people's representatives acquired skills in Yaounde on ways of reinforcing the legislative system in the integrated strategy in fighting against corruption.

Cameroon's members of parliament and senior officials of the National Assembly are expected to fully participate in putting place of the National Strategy for the Fight Against Corruption in the country whenever it will adopted. They were mobilised and effectively participated in identifying the means and mechanisms the legislative system can contribute in ensuring the fight against corruption within itself and the synergy with all society stakeholders in eradicating the corruption scourge.

The parliamentarians and senior officials of the National Assembly, yesterday, September 16 ended a two-day workshop in Yaounde organised by the National Anti-corruption Commission (NACC) to reinforce the legislative pillar of integrity in the ongoing process to draw up a National Strategy to fight against Corruption. The Vice Chairman of NACC, Dieudonné Massi Gams said in his keynote opening speech last Wednesday said the institution which is the leading independent agency in the fight against corruption in Cameroon, has the task of coordinating the process to elaborate and implement the National Strategy to Fight against Corruption. The workshop to reinforce the legislative system was the 15th in a series of workshops organised by NACC to ensure the complete mobilisation of all stakeholders; effective participation of all segments of the Cameroonian society in the elaboration process the national strategy and the individual and collective commitment of all Cameroonians in putting in place of the strategy.

The recommendations of the workshop were intended to enable government be informed on the level and extent of corruption in the legislative system, identify the bulk of work on corruption that has to be done concerning the legislative system, identify and elaborate the mechanism of implementation of actions to improve the integrity of members of the legislative system. The workshop equally permit the government to identify the means and mechanisms of collaboration between members of the legislative system pillar of integrity and between the members and those of other pillars, put in place a network of positive actors in the legislative system , identify and design actions to strengthen the independence of the legislative system.

GUINEA

Police patrol Guinea capital after street battles

Police deployed extra forces around Guinea's capital Conakry on Monday after street fighting between supporters of rivals for its presidential election left one dead and 50 injured over the weekend.

The violence prompted authorities to suspend all campaigning and rallies ahead of Sunday's decisive second-round vote but so far there has been no move to delay the poll, aimed at restoring civilian rule to the world's top bauxite exporter.

A police official said security forces were watching the large Conakry market of Madina where witnesses said stallholders had shut their shops and some had gathered stones for possible use if more fighting broke out.

"We have deployed men down there because tensions remain very high. For the moment we have no reports of any incident today, though," said the official, who requested anonymity.

Madina market is seen as a potential flashpoint as it houses large groups of Guinea's two main ethnicities -- Peuls who largely backed former prime minister Cellou Dalein Diallo in the first round, and Malinke who mainly back his rival Alpha Conde.

Both Diallo and Conde were due to meet caretaker prime minister Jean-Marie Dore on Monday for a possible decision on restarting their campaigns.

"We do not want the situation to degenerate because we want the date for the run-off to be maintained," said Ibrahima Diallo, a spokesman for Diallo's UFDG party.

This weekend's violence flared after a court last week jailed the head of the national election commission CENI and the body's planning director for meddling with the results of the first round in June.

They were convicted after a complaint was filed by Conde's RPG party, which argued Conde's first-round score of 18 percent would have been much higher had it not been for such tampering. Diallo came out well ahead with 43 percent.

The RPG has called for an overhaul in arrangements to stage the run-off, including a greater role for the interior ministry, a demand which the UFDG sees as an attempt to stall the vote.

It is not clear who now controls the CENI or whether the election can go ahead until a new head is appointed.

Police used tear gas on Sunday to disperse crowds in several areas of Conakry. Conde's RPG said one of its supporters had been killed by UFDG backers, but Diallo's party denied any of its supporters had fired a weapon.

Guinea is seeking to return to civilian rule after a coup ushered in a military government following the death of long-time leader Lansana Conte in December 2008.

Business and Politics in the Muslim World

West African News Monitoring

Weekly Report 137

11, Sept 2010-18, Sept 2010

By Mustapha Shafi

Presented on 22, September 2010

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Details of the News

1 China-African Relations:

Nigeria-China body seeks check on influx of sub-standard products

THE Nigeria-China Friendship Association (NICAF) has called on Federal Government to curb influx of sub-standard products into the nation's market.

NICAF Chairman, Victor Chibundu, in a statement made available to The Guardian, also blamed importation of the sub-standard goods on some Nigerian businessmen who exploit loopholes in the current Acts, and called on the government to establish stringent laws to check the trend.

Speaking at the 18th yearly general meeting of NICAF in Lagos recently, Chibundu condemned the attitude of Nigerian businessmen who request for inferior goods to meet their selfish ends.

According to him, "it is not that China is not manufacturing standard products, but these products are rather sold to European countries, ostracising African countries because they bend to the will of Nigerian importers, who believe sub-standard products are sold faster in Nigerian market."

Chibundu said that the association would continue to foster good relationship between China and Nigeria as, "our objectives have been pursued through meetings with the director, Asia and Pacific Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the inter-ministerial meeting where issues on commerce, petroleum, power and steel, culture, organised private sector Nigeria railway project and interbank relationship were discussed."

He added that during the fifth session of Nigeria-China Joint commission in Beijing in 2009, issues on bi-lateral trade, investment, and banking corporation between China and Nigeria were agreed upon for implementation.

Representative of NICAFA to the Professional Programme for Leadership of the Friendship to China this year, Mrs. Dorothy Akunna Johnson, noted that Nigeria could be the bride to many nations if appropriate measures are taken by the government.

“During the leadership programme at China, solutions were proffered to strengthen the current bilateral ties that exist between China and African countries and government at people-to-people level and also to enhance socio-economic relationship.

“Some of the issues discussed are the promotion and facilitation of trade fairs and exhibition, cultural exchange and also to encourage quality goods and service imported to African countries,” she said.

China grows trade with Africa as Europe loses out

African trade with China is growing at the expense of that with other major global markets which is either declining or stagnating, says the African Development Bank (AfDB) in a new report released on Monday.

Oil and minerals dominate Africa’s exports to China, the report says.

Africa-China trade represents more than 10 per cent of the continent’s trade.

In value terms, it represents \$114 billion — \$52 billion in exports and \$62 billion in imports.

Africa has a trade deficit with China of about \$10 billion, according to the report titled Chinese Trade and Investment Activities in Africa.

The report says Europe remains Africa’s largest export market, but its share has slumped from more than 50 per cent in the early 1990s to just over 30 percent now.

In addition, China is aggressively investing in Africa’s infrastructure.

Chinese investments have increased yearly by an average of 46 per cent over the last decade, mainly targeted at water, transport, electricity and information and communication technologies.

The report says the increase in trade stems from China’s global economic strategy shaped by its political objectives and its demand for energy, minerals and other resources.

African exports to China almost doubled in the last decade, from five per cent in 2000 of total exports to 10 per cent in 2007.

This increase has been the most significant among the major trade blocs that Africa trades with – Europe, Asia (excluding China), the United States and Japan.

Some 70 per cent of Chinese imports originate from four African countries: Angola 34 per cent, South Africa 20 per cent, Sudan 11 per cent, and the Republic of Congo eight per cent.

The high concentration of China-Africa trade manifests itself not just by country, but also by sector.

Approximately 70 per cent of African exports to China consist of crude oil, in particular from Angola and Sudan, and 15 per cent of raw materials. Agricultural products from other African countries have only a modest share.

“The strong demand from China has been a boom for Africa’s exporters,” says Léonce Ndikumana, the Director of Research at the AfDB, “but it also led to a further concentration in the export basket of countries on the continent and, hence, exposes them to volatility in world commodity markets.”

Chinese exports are destined for relatively few countries.

Some 60 per cent go to six countries: South Africa 21 per cent, Egypt 12 per cent, Nigeria 10 per cent, Algeria seven per cent, Morocco six per cent, and Benin five per cent.

China trade in US\$ billions

	Exports	Imports
2000	5.1	5
2002	5.1	5.3
2004	15	12.5
2006	28.8	26.7
2008	56	50.8
2010	52	62

70%
Percentage of Chinese imports that originate from four African countries

Transport equipment

Of China exports to Africa, machinery and transport equipment account for 38 per cent, manufactured goods 30 per cent, and handicraft 22 per cent.

Chemicals and food products account for less than 10 per cent of the total.

Machinery and transport equipment imports are linked to the strong presence of Chinese firms in the infrastructure sector, specifically in telecommunications, construction of roads and public buildings.

“In general, Chinese export products are well suited to African demand,” said Mthuli Ncube, AfDB’s chief economist.

Africa can learn from China’s growth

Until my recent trip, a mere mention of China painted a country devoid of counterfeit goods and services. But this changed when I arrived at Pudong International Airport, Shanghai. Throughout the ride to my hotel in mainstream Shanghai city, it was clear that my perception was not based on facts.

Unfortunately, I may not be alone because according to experts, most people’s perceptions of China are at least some 20 to 30 years obsolete. To experts, China is an extremely dynamic country - a very dynamic economy, which is increasingly innovative, highly complex, and a very competitive market. But this is often misunderstood.

However, it was easier for me to quickly convert after I remembered a presentation by Dr. Martyn Davis, which I attended in Johannesburg last year.

Davis, a South African-based Chinese scholar, highlighted the economic push in China since the more than two decades of economic reforms that opened up the communist country to the outside world and how the Chinese were now the number one investors in Africa.

He explained that Beijing regarded criticism of its growing commercial engagement of the African continent as misplaced and hypocritical, but that China will need to respond to criticism and situations in Africa that it did not foresee.

But the question is, what are the developmental lessons that African economies can learn from China?

The lessons are many, experts insist. First, they add, it is based on very pragmatic policies and good and functioning institutions to implement those policies.

“It’s a significant investment and management of an education system in the country. It’s the leadership of a country at corporate political level which is extremely focused on growth and development. They also have a very stable political background,” one analyst argued.

“All these factors combined result in China being very creative in terms of how it manages its economic growth policies or growth processes, resulting in a growth model that may question traditional thinking of how emerging markets in developing economies should plan for growth,” he added.

“China is rewriting the textbooks. Several business schools across the globe take their MBA students on a learning journey as part of the course to China and Asia to better

understands the economy – what’s driving growth - what are the forces of competitiveness coming out of China.”

Last month, the International Energy Agency announced China as the world’s biggest consumer of energy (and burns about half of the world’s total coal production).

The surge is fuelled by China’s increased imports of African oil and minerals, while Africa is buying more Chinese-made goods.

A recent report in China’s 21st Century Business Herald newspaper said China’s direct investment in Africa has increased more than 10-fold, jumping from \$80m in 2003 to \$1.36b in 2009.

At the 2009 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Egypt, Beijing committed \$10b in low-cost loans and an additional \$1b in loans to support the growth of small-and-medium African enterprises.

Chinese companies have encountered upsets in several African countries where they have invested to gain valuable assets - being accused of turning a blind eye to corruption and violating local laws.

All this has fuelled a climate of suspicion in China that the West is waging a war to frustrate China’s expansion in Africa.

But Chinese commentators argue that China’s behaviour in Africa plays by the rules set by western powers themselves.

They also claim while no western government can speak out publicly against China’s investment in the continent, they (West), have mobilised the media and various non-governmental organisations to find faults with China.

The Chinese approach of helping impoverished governments through public services investments in Africa has also not gone well with the 1880s Western colonialists who came and took everything away from the indigenous people.

But this approach seems to have failed as Western investors can no longer ignore the insatiable demand for goods and services by the world’s populous nation.

With well over 1.3 billion people, no shrewd investor can ignore the power of turnover, and the lowest cost per unit of production. That is why many western multinationals have set production units across China, either through partnerships, buyouts or new establishments.

However, the Chinese competitors have not yet stopped trying to use the discrediting approach. Much as the Chinese are not yet good at public relations like their western counterparts, they have decided to let actions talk.

For example, their global representative company, Huawei Technologies, has become a leader in providing next generation telecommunications networks, serving 45 of the world's top 50 operators, along with over one billion users worldwide. The firm is grabbing almost all the telecom software deals, including those from major telecom operators in Uganda.

A leading telecom solutions provider, Huawei has established end-to-end advantages in telecom network infrastructure, application and software, professional services and devices since its inception in 1988. The company is also grabbing e-government projects, using its largely successful model in China's Chengdu Province, including a multibillion shilling deal it is constructing in Uganda.

To meet international quality standards and to silence doubters, Huawei, which was established by a retrenched army officer as sales agent for a Hong Kong-based company producing exchange switches, works with leading consultancies like IBM, the Hay Group, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and FhG to carry out management transformation to keep abreast with international industrial benchmarks.

While the West scrambled for Africa for colonialism, the Chinese are sparking off another scramble for Africa for raw materials and investment opportunities. Recent news that China had overtaken Japan as the largest world economy was not surprising to any who follow the rapid growth trends taking place in China.

Who will stop China? Your guess is as good as mine.

China-Liberia Relations Breaks Colonial Norms

Liberia's astute politician, Dr. Togba-Nah Tipoteh, said despite diplomatic propaganda that the People's Republic of China (PRC) was engaged with Africa to exploit its natural resources; the Asian nation was making strides in Liberia because it understood the needs of the Liberian people.

Essentially, according to him, the PRC has broken the colonial norms of engagement in which European powers used Africa as reservoirs for raw materials, the market prices of which they determined at the expense of the livelihoods of the citizens of countries involved.

The assertion was contained in a commentary Dr. Tipoteh released to coincide with the 63rd Independence Anniversary of Liberia on July 26 this year.

Unlike the industrialized world, which manipulated Third World economies into producing that which the citizens cannot consume in exchange for finished goods, which the nations cannot produce, the PRC was working with its African partners to tailor production to the needs of the people.

“It is the honesty in the China-Liberia marriage that has broken the bad precedence of dancing to the piper’s tune and has introduced the good precedence of dancing to the people’s tune,” he said, quoting the Chinese Ambassador to Liberia as expressing the need for Liberia to turn some of its raw exports into finished goods.

China needs Sudan to vote peacefully

China has more to lose than most if things fall apart in Sudan this winter, where a potentially explosive national referendum on southern independence is due in January.

Beijing is the country's biggest investor while for its part; Sudan is a significant oil supplier. Renewed instability could also adversely affect China's expanding interests in neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, Chad, Libya and Egypt.

Mindful perhaps that the stakes are high, Liu Guijin, China's special representative for Africa and Beijing's point man on Darfur, is pushing hard to ensure the vote happens peacefully and on time.

Speaking in London at the end of a European tour, Liu said Sudan was fast approaching an important crossroads and urged the international community to do all it could to avoid a pile-up. "If the situation in southern Sudan gets out of control, it will affect the peace and stability of the whole region," he warned.

Liu said the referendum, widely expected to result in southern secession and the creation of a new sovereign state, and was crucial to full implementation of the 2005 comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) that ended decades of north-south conflict. While China would be happy to see the country's unity maintained, it would respect the outcome of a "transparent and credible" vote. But like the UN and some western powers, he said Beijing was worried that key agreements were not yet in place.

"Time is the pressing issue," he said. "The international community must make an effort on two tracks. One is to ensure the referendum takes place on time, that there is the needed infrastructure, for instance there are enough ballot papers printed.

It also needs to push the two sides [the ruling parties in Khartoum and Juba] to resolve their differences." Outstanding issues included demarcation of the north-south border, wealth sharing, and the status of each other's nationals should the south secede. Western officials have also expressed concern at the slow pace of preparations for the referendum, amid suspicions that the ruling National Congress party of President Omar al-Bashir is deliberately dragging its feet.

In a report published this week, the independent International Crisis Group urged a swift settlement of the boundary issue "to avoid future complications, including a return to conflict ... As the country's oil resources are concentrated in these areas, the political and economic implications of border demarcation have been amplified, and some border areas remain dangerously militarized".

China's political and commercial embrace of Bashir's national unity government has been much criticized in the west. Khartoum is accused by American pressure groups and Christian organizations of causing tens of thousands of deaths in Darfur, where rebel groups and tribal militias have fought government forces and their janjaweed proxies since 2003 – though the figures are much disputed. External pressure has increased since the international criminal court (ICC) charged Bashir with genocide and war crimes.

Liu rejected such criticism, saying China had contributed millions of dollars to alleviate suffering in Darfur and fully supported the UN and African Union-sponsored peace talks. The importance of the talks has been underscored in recent days by an upsurge in fighting in west Darfur state's Hamidiya camp.

But Liu said their potential to bring peace to Darfur was undermined by the continuing boycott exercised by two of the main rebel factions, which he said should end immediately.

More controversially, Liu argued the referendum and Darfur must take precedence over attempts by the ICC and its supporters to arrest Bashir. "The international community has to be pragmatic ... We understand the importance of the immunity issue ... It is not ignored. But the priority is a holistic solution of Darfur and the CPA.

Bashir's arrest would make solving these problems "more difficult" and on that, he said, there was "a kind of consensus" between China and the US (both non-ICC signatories) and countries that backed the court, such as Britain and France.

Liu said China supported statements by the African Union and the Arab League urging members not to co-operate with ICC attempts to arrest Bashir. ICC signatory Kenya was reported to the UN Security Council for hosting Bashir in Nairobi last month, a move the EU decried as "totally unacceptable".

But Liu said he agreed with African leaders who accuse the court of operating "double standards" when it comes to Africa, compared to its approach to western actions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

China strongly supported the sovereign right of all African nations to run their affairs without outside interference, he said – a principal reason why overall China-Africa trade plus bilateral investment and resource-backed development loans in numerous countries in addition to Sudan were booming.

It was not a case of China propping up dictators, Liu said. It was a case of helping Africans to make their own way. As for Bashir, he added, his fate was primarily a matter for the Sudanese themselves: "No one has the right to take away the immunity of a head of state, not even the UN Security Council."

China-Africa Trade Hits \$61.2Bln in H1

Trade volume between China and Africa hit 61.2 billion U.S. dollars in the first six months this year, marking a year-on-year increase of 65 percent.

Trade between China and Africa began to pick up after the global recession, continuing the trend of recent years' booming trade flows; Xinhua reported citing a top official.

Trade volume between China and Africa hit 61.2 billion U.S. dollars in the first six months this year, marking a year-on-year increase of 65 percent, Wang Chao, Deputy Director of the Ministry of Commerce told an economic seminar in Xiamen yesterday.

For the whole year of 2010, the figure is expected to reach 100 billion U.S. dollars again after 2008, he said. During the 2000 ~ 2008 period, trade between the two parties registered an annual growth of 33.6 percent and China become the largest trade partner of Africa in 2009.

China and Africa are highly complementary in business co-operations, according to Wang Chao, who noted Africa's great potential with a large population and China's assistance in funds and technologies as well as vast domestic market.

Chinese companies are enthusiastic about investing in Africa, he said. Currently, there are as much as 1,600 companies in Africa with funds flowing from China, covering 49 countries in the continent.

2 Pan-African issues:

AFRICA: "Encouraging" drop in maternal deaths

The proportion of women in sub-Saharan Africa who died because of pregnancy fell by more than a quarter between 1990 and 2008, according to estimates released on 15 September.

In 1990, the maternal mortality ratio (MMR - expressed in deaths per 100,000 live births) was 870 in sub-Saharan Africa, the worst rate of any region in the world. In 2008, it was 640, according to data published jointly by the World Health Organization (WHO), UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Bank.

Globally, the ratio fell by 34 percent, from 400 to 260, states the report, Trends in Maternal Mortality, noting that this represented an annual decline of 2.3 percent. This is less than half the reduction needed to achieve the fifth Millennium Development Goal (MDG), which concerns maternal health.

"There was a 26 percent reduction in maternal death rates in sub-Saharan Africa and this data is encouraging," Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, executive director of UNFPA, told IRIN.

"We welcome and are thrilled by the decline, which shows that interventions are working. There are increasing efforts in countries to train more midwives, provide family planning, and strengthen hospitals and health centres to provide care to pregnant women.

But we need to do more and increase community engagement. There are still 1,000 women [across the world] who die every day in childbirth, and more than 200 million women with an unmet need for family planning," Obaid said.

Data were collected in 172 countries, but only 63 provided complete information from civil registration systems and good attribution of causes of death for the estimates.

"Maternal deaths are more often misclassified than other [deaths], not only because they are easily confused with deaths due to other causes, but also because health institutions may prefer to attribute them to other causes, due to the stigma of inadequate treatment associated with maternal death," Lale Say, monitoring and evaluation officer with the Department of Reproductive Health and Research at the WHO, told IRIN.

"Even in the best civil registration systems in the world, it has been found that maternal death can be substantially under-reported," Say added.

Famine threat in Africa's Sahel eases -- for now

Abundant rains in Chad have raised hopes for an end to severe food shortages but the effects will linger and lead to new difficulties across Africa's Sahel region in 2011, aid workers predict.

With signs that neighbouring Niger has also got over the worst of a food crisis triggered by last year's drought, the threat of all-out famine in the semi-arid Sahel zone just south of the Sahara appears to be subsiding.

"The worst has been averted and, with the prospect of a good harvest (this year), we think we should be out of an emergency situation soon," Jean-Luc Siblot, the head of the U.N. World Food Programme (WFP) in Chad, said in a phone interview.

Ten million people across the Sahel have been facing the threat of severe malnutrition until the new harvest in a few weeks time, with aid groups urging donors to plug shortfalls in emergency food supplies.

The WFP has estimated that Chad needs around 100,000 metric tonnes of food aid, of which it has so far received only 70,000 due to scant donor funds. More specific help is also needed to tackle child malnutrition.

The food shortfalls meant farmers had to use depleted reserve cereal stocks to feed their livestock and will now need more than just one good harvest to replenish these stocks, said Jean Francois Caremel of the Action Against Hunger charity in Chad.

Caremel added that many poor families had borrowed heavily to survive the drought. A rich cereal harvest will now lead to lower cereal prices, meaning they will need to sell more crops to make enough money to repay the debts.

"At the end of the day they would be short of food again, although the harvest could be good," Caremel said by telephone from the Chadian capital N'Djamena.

In Niger, the food crisis this year was considered more severe than the last emergency in 2005 -- which killed thousands -- but the United Nations said Niger was better prepared to face it in part due to better government cooperation.

In 2005, President Mamadou Tandja played down the hunger threat until media reporting on the scale of the crisis made his position untenable.

The military junta that ousted Tandja in a coup in February was quick to reverse this position and has acknowledged the threat of famine.

Go local on African debt, Insparo says

Local currency rather than dollar-denominated African debt should be on the menu for yield-seeking investors, especially in oil-rich countries where the currency risk is minimal, Insparo Asset Management says.

Sub-Saharan domestic debt has attracted huge outside interest over the last year, pushing down yields across the curve from the sophisticated markets of South Africa to more exotic sovereign issuers such as Zambia and Uganda.

In Kenya 3-year government debt is yielding 4 percent and in Uganda, where the absence of a liquid secondary market means many foreigners prefer to hold three-month paper to maturity, such debt is offering annualised returns of just 5 percent.

However, Ghana stands out due to double-digit interest rates still in place after an election-related fiscal blow-out in late 2008 sparked a surge in inflation.

Its one-year domestic treasury bills are now yielding around 12.5 percent compared to 6.0 percent on the West African state's 10-year Eurobond, launched in late 2007.

Foreign interest since the financial crisis in a Eurobond issued by oil-producing Gabon around the same time has also compressed that yield to a low of 5.74 percent compared to an initial coupon of 8.2 percent.

Ghana's bond had a coupon at issue of 8.5 percent.

"The local currency yield story in Ghana would be a top pick," said Insparo chief strategist Graham Stock, the latest in a string of new recruits at the London-based frontier investment house.

Furthermore, with the start of oil production at Ghana's Jubilee offshore field less than three months away, the cedi looks unlikely to suffer a repeat its 30 percent year-long slide from October 2008, Stock said.

"The dollar debt looks very expensive in Ghana and Gabon. We see much better value in Ivory Coast for dollar debt," said Stock, previously head of frontier Africa research at JPMorgan.

Ivory Coast, the world's top cocoa producer, issued a \$2.33 billion bond this year to replace six defaulted bonds that is now yielding 11.2 percent.

The successful passage of a much-delayed presidential election on October 31 to end years of political crisis since a 2002-2003 civil war is only likely to push that yield lower as investors bet on greater stability and firmer growth.

Apart from South Africa, other sub-Saharan countries with dollar-denominated debt include Congo Republic, whose 22-year, 2007 issue is now yielding 11.2 percent, and Senegal, which launched a maiden 5-year, \$200 million bond in December with a 9.25 percent coupon.

The West African state's issue is now yielding 8.05 percent, although is less attractive to outsiders, as the size of the issue is too small to be included in the global bond indices tracked by major funds, making it less liquid.

Apart from debt in sub-Saharan Africa, where economic growth rates have bounced back surprisingly well after last year's global slowdown, Stock said he liked firms tapping into African commodities, especially copper, the mainstay of Zambia.

Insparo has \$185 million under management in a mixed debt and equity Africa and Middle East fund. Its cash holding has dropped to 10.8 percent in the last few months, reflecting greater confidence in the regional growth prospects, Stock said.

Sub-Sahara Africa leads global decline in new HIV cases

Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are leading a global decline in new HIV infections, the UN has said.

UNAids said 22 countries in the world's worst affected region had seen a drop in new cases of more than 25%.

The fall was because of greater awareness and better use of preventative measures, it said.

But UNAids also noted that cases of HIV were increasing in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and among gay men in developed countries.

Michel Sidibe, UNAids executive director, said the world was making "real progress" towards achieving the sixth Millennium Development Goal (MDG6) of halting and reversing the spread of HIV/Aids by 2015.

"For the first time change is happening at the heart of the epidemic. In places where HIV was stealing away dreams, we now have hope," he said.

UNAids says there are now 5.2 million people worldwide receiving treatment for HIV/Aids, which has helped to ensure that 200,000 fewer people died from the virus in 2008 than in 2004.

The agency said young people "are leading the prevention revolution by choosing to have sex later, having fewer multiple partners and using condoms, resulting in significantly fewer new HIV infections in many countries highly affected by Aids".

The use of male condoms has also doubled in the past five years, while the report notes that "tradition is giving space to pragmatism" in many communities as they embrace male circumcision, which research shows has the potential to reduce HIV infections among men by nearly 60%.

'Challenges remain'

China, where cases are largely concentrated within high-risk groups, was praised for its efforts to increase preventative measures for drug users.

UNAids said South Africa had also rapidly increased "efforts to achieve universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support".

But there was a warning that "challenges remain" in the global fight against HIV/Aids, including expanding epidemics in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and resurgence in new infections in wealthier nations among men who have sex with men.

The UN also called for greater investment in HIV/Aids prevention, warning that there was a \$10bn (£6.4bn) shortfall in 2009.

It said those countries most severely affected by HIV/Aids could not handle the crisis with their own resources alone.

"At this turning point flat-lining or reductions in investments will set-back the Aids response and threaten the world's ability to reach MDG 6," said Mr Sidibe.

"Investing for Aids is a shared responsibility - between development partners and national governments."

Nigeria:

1. Political News:

2011: Group Calls for Generational Shift

If Nigeria is to realize its full potentials as the ‘Giant of Africa’, the country needs a major generational shift that would ensure that its younger generation of politicians is entrusted with political power at all levels.

A grassroots mobilization group, the Jonathan/Sambo Grassroots Mobilization Team (JOSA), made this declaration in Kano yesterday at the formal inauguration of the Kano Branch of the group.

In a statement made available to THISDAY, the group noted that many countries of the world now entrust younger generation of politicians with political power, stressing that such generational shifts have been beneficial as countries that have tried it now wield enormous economic and political power in the world.

Though the statement noted that older generation of Nigerian politicians still has roles to play in nation building, it insisted that the socio-political challenges of present day Nigeria require the dynamism and creativity of young politicians.

This is why, according to the group, it decided to mobilise support for the “unique Jonathan/Sambo ticket which brings creativity and dynamism to politics, nation building and governance.”

The Financial Secretary of Kano Branch of JOSA, Sir Don Effiom , said the need for a generational shift in the governance of the country is inevitable if the country is to make any meaningful progress.

“After 50 years of independence and in tune with global trends, Nigeria needs a new crop of leaders; young, dynamic and multi-task managers in their forties and fifties to take over from our fathers and grandfathers”, he said.

He said because such young leaders understand the problems of the present generation better, they would provide better solutions, stressing that it is the reason why many nations of the world now rely on young leaders to solve their complex socio-economic problems.

Effiom therefore declared that the emergence of President Goodluck Jonathan on the Nigerian scene was “Godsent”. He urged Nigerians “from across the political divide to embrace his candidacy as he represents the envisaged generation shift that would take the nation to the next level.”

Jonathan Tasks New Service Chiefs on Internal Security

President Goodluck Jonathan yesterday charged the new service chiefs to work hand in hand with the police to tackle the internal security challenges currently facing the country.

Speaking during the decoration of the new Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Air Chief Marshal Oluseyi Petirin; Chief of Army Staff, Lt-Gen Azubuike Ihejirika; Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Ola Ibrahim; and Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Mohammed Dikko Umar; at the Presidential Villa yesterday, Jonathan reminded them that they are taking office at a very critical moment in the nation's history.

“For one, Nigeria is facing the worst internal security challenges”, he told the new military chiefs. “Every day, we hear of kidnapping, and some militia terrorizing one part of the country or the other.”

He then charged them to “work effectively with the police to ensure that we put this ugly part of Nigeria's history behind us as soon as possible”, assuring them that “government will do everything to support you to make sure that these rampant cases of kidnapping and militia harassing, maiming, destroying and killing people in parts of this country is a thing of the past”.

Jonathan also reminded the military chiefs that they were coming at a point the country is celebrating its 50 years of independence, recalling that “over the last 50 years and even beyond, Nigeria has played a key role in leadership qualities especially in peace keeping worldwide” and urged them to maintain that standard and “project the armed forces to the international appreciation of all”.

“We also encourage you to maintain your spirit of esprit de corps, so that officers and men will not have divided loyalties and parochial interests,” he said further.

The president commended the officers and men of the Nigerian Armed Forces for their “unflinching loyalty” to the country, saying, “In spite of our several political challenges as a nation, the Nigerian Armed Forces have in the last one decade remained resolute in defence of democracy in our country.”

He noted that “the armed forces' complete submission to civil authority in compliance with the provisions of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria has helped to sustain our collective efforts to develop a true democratic culture in the country.”

He also thanked the immediate past Chief of Defence Staff, Air Marshal Paul Dike; Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Ibrahim Danbazu; Chief of Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Ishaya Ibrahim; and Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Petirin, who is now the CDS, “for the sterling leadership they provided to the armed forces in the last two years of their service”.

Congratulating the new service chiefs, the president urged them to see their appointment “as another opportunity for higher service to your fatherland”, adding, “You must

therefore remain committed, dedicated and loyal to the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.”

He advised them to strategize effectively and efficiently in the course of their duty to provide the necessary leadership to officers and men for the defence of the nation and constitution against internal and external aggression.

“I urge you to evolve measures to reposition the defence intelligence system both at home and abroad, with a view to meeting the dynamics of Nigerian foreign and security policies,” he said.

Nigeria's ruling party sets presidential primary dates.

Nigeria's ruling party has set its presidential primaries for next month, a spokesman said Thursday.

The primaries will be held between October 18 and 20, said Rufai Alkali, a spokesman for the People's Democratic Party.

A single candidate will be ratified on October 23, Alkali said.

On Wednesday, President Goodluck Jonathan said he intends to run, and will make a formal declaration on Saturday.

"In presenting myself for service, I make no pretense that I have a magic wand that will solve all of Nigeria's problems or that I am the most intelligent Nigerian," Jonathan wrote on his Facebook page.

"Far from it. What I do promise is this -- if I am elected president in 2011, I will make a covenant with you, the Nigerian people, to always do right by you, to tell you the truth at all times, to carry you along and most importantly to listen to you, fellow citizens in our communities, and also those of you on this page."

Jonathan's eligibility was in question until last month, when the Peoples Democratic Party said he could run in an open race with other candidates next year.

Under Nigerian "zoning" rules, power must shift to different regions and ethnic groups every eight years.

Jonathan -- who is from the Niger Delta, in the south -- was part of the joint ticket of the late President Umaru Yar'Adua, who was from the north.

Yar'Adua's death in May, after a long illness, upset the order of the zoning. Yar'Adua was elected in 2007 and his southern replacement threatened to halt the north's turn at holding power.

Nigerian leader front-runner as election battle begins

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan showed the power of incumbency on Saturday, mustering the support of more than two thirds of powerful state governors for the launch of his re-election campaign.

Thousands of supporters gathered in Abuja's central Eagle Square to hear Jonathan proclaim his candidacy for the January election, shaping up to be the most fiercely contested since the end of military rule.

"This is more than a crowd, it is almost like a revolution," Jonathan said as he addressed his supporters.

The election bid by Jonathan, from the oil-producing Niger Delta in the south, faces resistance from some parts of the north as it breaks an unwritten agreement that power should rotate between the country's main regions every two terms.

But analysts predicted Jonathan would only announce his candidacy if he was sure of winning enough support from within the ruling party. Saturday's rally seemed to demonstrate he had built up that confidence over recent weeks.

"The northeast zone will rally round you and we assure you that we will deliver you the highest number of votes come 2011," Isa Yuguda, governor of northeastern Bauchi state and once seen as a potential presidential contender, told the rally.

Jonathan inherited the presidency when president Umaru Yar'Adua, a northerner, died this year during his first term, and some powerbrokers in the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) have said the next leader must be a northerner.

Key to Jonathan's fortunes at the mid-October primaries will be the state governors, who form a powerful caucus within the PDP. Twenty-six of the country's 36 governors, including several northerners, spoke at Jonathan's rally in support of his bid.

But three of them were also at the Eagle Square parade ground on Wednesday when former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida launched his rival election campaign.

"Nigerian politics has a Byzantine quality that makes it hard entirely to be sure it's over until it's over," said Antony Goldman, Nigeria expert and head of London-based PM Consulting.

"Jonathan is the front-runner. Northern rivals might hope to deny him more than 50 percent of delegates and take the primary to a run-off, but as things stand that would be quite an achievement," he said.

LOBBYING AHEAD

The PDP nominee has won all three presidential races since the end of military rule in 1999, making the outcome of past elections a foregone conclusion and bringing Africa's most populous nation close to being a one-party state.

But the presidential race this time is more contentious, with no consensus PDP candidate and no obvious "godfather" -- the powerful background figures who have in the past hand-picked the nominee -- holding sway over the party.

"In the next month the lobbying by all sides of hesitating governors and others of influence is likely to be intense," PM Consulting's Goldman said.

Babangida, a northerner who seized power in the OPEC member in August 1985 and ruled for nearly eight years, also wants the PDP ticket and is hoping northerners opposed to Jonathan will rally behind him. He has vowed he would serve only one term.

But Babangida too is a divisive figure. He was forced from power after cancelling an election that was generally regarded as fair, and this colours his political reputation.

He faces other northern challengers within the PDP including former vice president Atiku Abubakar, who switched to the ruling party after running unsuccessfully for president as the opposition Action Congress candidate in the last vote in 2007.

Kwara state governor Bukola Saraki and national security adviser Aliyu Gusau could also win northern backing if they decide to seek the PDP nomination, analysts say.

The threat to Jonathan from the northern factions depends on their ability to unite behind a single candidate. Should Babangida, Abubakar, Saraki and Gusau all push their campaigns to the finish line, they may fail to do so.

Ribadu, Tofa Declare, Atiku Writes All PDP Delegates.

Former Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Mallam Nuhu Ribabu, has finally confirmed his intention to contest in the 2011 presidential election, saying he wants to "remake" Nigeria.

He also dismissed the long-held belief that the EFCC investigated the First Lady, Dame Patience Jonathan, for money laundering.

Today, the presidential candidate of the defunct National Republican Convention (NRC) in the June 12, 1993 election, Alhaji Bashir Tofa, will launch his presidential bid on the platform of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP),

And in a novel gesture to woo support for his aspiration, former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar yesterday wrote letters to over 3,400 statutory delegates of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), including President Goodluck Jonathan, urging them to give him their votes in the party's primary election.

Ribadu promised that Nigeria would become a new country within two years if he is elected. Although, Ribadu said he was yet to decide on which platform he would run, he passionately said he had a dream for a new Nigeria. He said he wants to see a "new thing, a fresh thing" and build a nation out of the country.

The former anti-corruption Czar made these known when he met with journalists in Abuja yesterday, promising a formal declaration later.

"I have a dream of a new Nigeria, a changed Nigeria; I want to see if there is a possibility of opening a new chapter and those who are in charge somehow certainly need to give chance for the country to move forward," he said.

His areas of priority, he said, would be security, fighting corruption, providing electricity, improving education, building hospitals and helping Nigeria become an industrialised nation.

Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, former Chairman of the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission.

Giving reasons why he is running at the federal level in spite of his little or no experience in politics, Ribadu said: "I have experience in public service. I put 25 years of my life into service to the Federal Government of Nigeria in the executive capacity. After that, of course, I served outside Nigeria, I worked and have acquired international experience.

"I had the chance to set up an agency and ran it for five years and I was in the economic team as well as a federal prosecutor, probably more than any other person in that capacity. I was a police officer, a public worker, I put all my life to service in the federal level and it is really natural for you to put all of that into where the experience best fits, yes I will contest for the presidency."

Asked how he intends to fund his campaign, he explained that contributions from ordinary Nigerians would be used by his team.

Ribadu also denied allegations that he mishandled a corruption case against Dame Patience, when her husband, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, was governor of Bayelsa State.

He said that it was propaganda to taint his image and that of Jonathan during the 2007 polls.

Ribadu explained that the EFCC never handled any case against Patience. "The case had to do with a lady and a man who lodged huge sums of money in the bank. The EFCC was alerted by the bank and an investigation was carried out," he said.

According to him, it was found that they legitimately earned the money through contracts executed in the state. All the reports in the media were lies, he insisted.

"For instance, it was initially reported that N70 million was lodged into the bank. Later, it was reported that the money ran into millions of dollars. Such was the extent of the lies," he said, maintaining: "We never handled a case against Patience Jonathan."

Meanwhile, Tofa is set to declare his presidential ambition on the platform of ANPP today in Abuja.

The declaration which is billed to take place at Chelsea Hotel is expected to hold in the evening

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) yesterday nullified the positions of the two factions of the ANPP who have been fighting over the control of the party.

INEC, in a letter dated 15th September, 2010 and addressed to the Chairman of the convention committee, said the resolutions of the two factions of the party which took place on the 27th August and 2nd September, 2010 respectively were not supported by any provision in the constitution of the ANPP nor the Electoral Act as amended in 2010.

The commission said the two transition committees set up by both factions remained null and void, maintaining that it would deal strictly with the National Convention Planning Committee "until a new National Executive Committee is validly constituted".

At a press conference to harmonise the positions of the two factions, Chairman of the convention committee and Governor of Yobe State, Ibrahim Gaidam, stated that both warring factions have all agreed to work together for the interest of the party.

He added that the suspension of the Sen. Muhammed Muhammed-led faction taken by the former National Chairman of the party, Chief Edwin Ume-Ezeoke, has been set aside, saying that they are now welcome back as bona fide members of the party.

Though INEC's letter did not state categorically which of the convention committees it would recognise, the governor while presenting the position of the commission adopted the convention committee set by the Ume-Ezeoke's faction with Chris Amah as the Secretary.

Meanwhile, Gaidam's committee tentatively shifted the day of the convention by one day.

THISDAY checks revealed that the shift in the date from September 17-18 to 18-19 may not be unconnected with the decision of President Jonathan to declare tomorrow at the Eagle Square, the same venue ANPP intended to use for its national convention.

The meeting was attended by Borno State Governor, Senator Ali Modu Sheriff, Senator Kabir Gaya, Alhaji Gambo Maigaji, former Governors, John Odigie Oyegun, Audu Abubakar and Ahmed Yerima.

Also in attendance was Prince Ebuta Ayuk, former Deputy Governor of Jigawa State, Hassan Hadeja, former Minister of State, Defence, Alhaji Abdulrahman Adamu among others. Presidential candidate of the party and Governor of Kano State, Alhaji Ibrahim Shekarau, was absent at the meeting.

In the meantime, among those expected to receive Atiku's letters are Vice-President Namadi Sambo, Senate President David Mark and Speaker of the House of Representatives Dimeji Bankole.

Other recipients of the letter include governors, deputy governors, senators, members of the House of Representatives, state Houses of Assembly, local government council chairmen, PDP chairmen in the Local government councils and PDP state executive officers.

This is in line with the statutory delegate list published by THISDAY newspaper in the last four weeks, which was confirmed by the guidelines released by the PDP on Wednesday.

THISDAY calculates that there would be 3,400 delegates but the PDP is yet to come up with the official list which is not expected to be significantly different.

In the letter, Atiku said that delegates hold the key to the realisation of his vision of a prosperous, secure, peaceful, democratic, caring and confident Nigeria.

"I am seeking the presidency of our great country to chart a new course for our beloved country and lead our people to their manifest destiny," Atiku wrote.

"We need to create millions of jobs to keep our youth gainfully employed and help to tackle the high level of insecurity in the country. We must invest in education, research and modern technology, and infrastructure so that our productivity can increase significantly. We have to improve on our healthcare delivery so that our people will no longer die needlessly.

"With your support, we will put in place attractive incentives for people to invest in our economy and create well-paying jobs. We will fix our crumbling schools, roads, and hospitals. We will fix the electricity problem by taking advantage of the varying energy resources and needs in different parts of the country.

"We will address desertification, gully erosion and other lingering environmental challenges. We will wage a genuine war on corruption by instituting a better reward and punishment system, ensuring true independence of the anti-corruption agencies and the speedy trial of corruption cases.

"This is the time for an experienced, committed and visionary leader to rescue our country from imminent collapse. I am ready to lead. Together, we can make good things happen for our people and our country," he said.

2011 - EFCC Will Advise Parties on Candidates, Says Farida

The chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) Mrs Farida Waziri said the commission will work together with the INEC, the SSS, Police and political parties and advise parties on the candidates they are presenting.

"We will advise the party leaders that based on the overwhelming evidence on the candidate you are presenting, why don't you field another candidate? We can advise, we have other ways too that we can take," she said yesterday while receiving officials of Women in the New Nigeria (WINN) who visited the commission in Abuja.

Farida vowed that no measure of threat will deter the commission from forging ahead in the investigation and prosecution of all graft charges being handled.

Speaking against the backdrop of rising threats and un-provoked violence against officials of the commission, the EFCC boss said, "Because I made a comment that people who care for Nigerians should be elected, not those who have corruption cases pending in court, I have been vilified, attacked with all manner of allegation that I am meddling in politics. We in this Commission have to work within the rule of law."

Farida also condemned what she described as 'sponsored protest' against the works of the EFCC in Rivers State, saying that Governor Rotimi Amaechi has a penchant for making reckless statements.

She faulted the governor for insisting that none of his officials had a corruption case to be investigated. "How can he vouch for all his officials?"

She assured Nigerians that no antics of anyone would stop the EFCC from doing its job while insisting that the Commission was not under any pressure by anyone.

Farida also dismissed allegations that President Goodluck Jonathan is interfering in the works of the anti-graft commission. "I challenge anyone or any state we are investigating over fraud allegations to come out and say we don't confront them with such allegations during interrogation. We can't arrest anyone for interrogation if there is no basis for that," she said.

Earlier, Dr. Esther Mangzha, chairman, National Planning Committee WINN, and leader of the six-member delegation, commended Waziri and the EFCC for their relentless efforts in moving the anti-graft war forward.

'No Plan to Drop Sambo as Jonathan's Running Mate'

President Goodluck Jonathan has no plan to drop Vice President Mohammed Namadi Sambo as a running mate in the forthcoming presidential election in which Jonathan is candidate, Sambo's political adviser, Hussaini Jallo, told Daily Trust yesterday.

He was reacting to a report Monday which revealed that some supporters of the Vice President from his Kaduna home state were allegedly putting pressure on Jonathan to find a replacement as running mate due to what they referred to as his 'lack of requisite political values.'

Jonathan has already indicated his intention to run for president on his Facebook profile Wednesday and is billed to make public pronouncement of his presidential ambition Saturday in Abuja.

Jallo said there was no vacancy for the position of the Vice President in the coming polls as far as the presidential ambition of Jonathan is concerned, noting that Sambo has been unanimously endorsed by all stakeholders and the presidential campaign to be the running mate.

Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, former Chairman of the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission.

He described the Jonathan/Sambo ticket as divine combinations that will take Nigeria to the next level and warned those behind the anti-Sambo campaign to abstain from it.

He urged Nigerians to disregard the speculation, which he said, "Can only exist within the imagination of its blind proponents who are desperately seeking for relevance in the ongoing political scheming.

"It is not lost to us as to who are doing all these things. Their intention is to overheat the polity by creating confusion and causing disaffection among our people. Whoever thinks he can instigate friction between Jonathan and Sambo, such a person is just wasting his time."

2. Economy:

The Economy is going Down, Soludo Warns

Former governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Professor Chukwuma Soludo, has warned that if pre-emptive measures are not taken now, Nigeria's economy is "doomed" to a worse form of structural adjustment programme (SAP) and "something will have to give".

In an exclusive essay published in **THISDAY** today, Soludo, who also ran for governorship election in Anambra State in March, challenged presidential aspirants to debate economic issues before the general election.

Soludo expressed concern that the government had been piling up domestic and foreign debts with no improvement in the economy.

He wrote: “In spite of the heavy external debt of \$34 billion and oil prices ranging between \$25- \$50 during the (ex-President Olusegun) Obasanjo’s second term, we managed to grow the economy at about 6-7 per cent per annum (from average of 2.8 per cent in the 1990s). We started saving for the rainy day when oil prices reached \$35 and by 2007, despite paying \$12 billion to write off the Paris Club debt in 2006, we had saved about \$22 billion as ‘Excess Crude’.

“In the last few years, oil prices have averaged \$70 to \$85 per barrel. What has happened? We have spent the \$22 billion saved under Obasanjo, and now massively borrowing at an alarming rate (domestically and externally) during a period of unprecedented oil price boom, and yet the economy remains static at 6-7% growth rate. Recurrent expenditure of the public sector has more than doubled since 2004, leaving very little for investment.”

The excess crude savings are now a little above \$350 million, with the three tiers of government drawing down to the tune of over \$21 billion in the last two years to augment expenditure.

Soludo said with the cessation of hostilities in the Niger Delta, and oil price rising to about \$79, “external reserves ought to be growing”.

He is worried that rather, external reserves are depleting “precariously” to about \$36 billion currently, “with weekly sales at the WDAS running into hundreds of millions of dollars. Private capital inflows have largely ceased. The capital market is comatose and capital flight is back with vengeance! With private saving rate of below 20 per cent, public sector dis-saving (borrowing), and huge net capital flight, the numbers on the macro economy do not simply add up. Add to this the surfeit of liquidity and misalignment of basic prices and the conclusion is self evident: sooner or later, something will have to give!”

He said if not for the devaluation of the naira in the heat of the global economic crisis two years ago, states would have been in serious fiscal crisis today.

“Recall that during the global financial crisis, we took a deliberate decision to allow the naira to depreciate as part of the strategies to mitigate the effects of the global crisis. Today, that effectively means that governments at all levels receive (in naira terms) about 27 per cent more revenue from oil receipts than would otherwise. Indeed, but for this exchange rate change under this circumstance, there would not be more than 11 state governments that can still pay salaries on a consistent basis,” he wrote.

The Professor of Economics said as elections draw near, the next four years are “very critical” to the next phase of national life as the nation celebrates 50 years of existence and begins another journey of 50 years.

“It appears that the future is foggy and serious discussions about that future – the new Nigeria in the next 50 years – have not begun. The debate so far is about who would be

President or so, and not about what they will offer. I am afraid that we may again conduct elections without any serious issues being canvassed and 'winners' will emerge.

"There are no alternative visions, no ideologies and no programmes that offer the voters clear choices about their future," he said, warning that at current GDP and population growth rates, "Nigeria would still be a developing country in 2060 (below \$11,000 per capita income).

At current rates, it will only be in 30 years time (2040) that Nigeria will attain South Africa's current per capita income. The tragedy is that the country has no implementable plan to steer a different outcome," he wrote.

For Nigeria to take a shot at its 2020 targets, he said: "The economy needs to be growing at about 14-15 per cent per annum (more than twice the current rates of 6-7 per cent). Even with improved efficiency, this requires annual investment rates of more than 40 per cent of GDP (higher than total earnings from oil)".

But he said it is not all bad news for the country, explaining: "With economy-wide capacity underutilization at about 60 per cent and oil prices at unprecedented levels, broadly shared growth rate of about 15 per cent is possible. This is where the debate needs to begin. Candidates and political parties need to outline their visions of Nigeria in the next 50 years and HOW they intend to rapidly create a broadly shared and sustainable prosperity."

He listed issues he expects presidential aspirants to discuss, the first being how they hope to reconstruct public finance "and put it back on the path of sustainability".

Soludo asked: "How can they rein in the obtuse and rapacious federal bureaucracy in particular and the state bureaucracies, balance our budget during this period of oil boom, and yet spend at least 40 per cent of the budget on capital expenditure as required by the Fiscal Responsibility Act?"

Where do candidates stand on political restructuring in the face of agitation for more states such that every village wants to become a state in so far as allocations continue to come from Abuja to pay salaries?"

He also asked: who has the strategy to achieve uninterrupted power supply over the 2011-2015 period? Where is the strategy to ensure accurate population census with biometric data of every citizen?

What is the magic wand to ensure that we have a free, fair and transparent electoral system where only votes count and all votes are counted? What is the new strategy to fight corruption? Where is the sustainable plan for the Niger Delta and the long term strategy for environmental sustainability of locations amenable to natural resource extraction?

Nigeria Has Made Big Leap Forward, Says Lynda Chalker

Chairperson of the Honourary International Investor Council (HIIC) charged with the responsibility of helping to build investor confidence in Nigeria, Baroness Lynda Chalker, said yesterday in Abuja that Nigeria had made giant leap forward of recent.

She spoke at the 10th meeting of the Council at the Banquet Hall of the State House, Abuja, where Vice President Mohammed Namadi Sambo decried the discriminatory attitude where European Union countries do not guarantee companies that are doing business in the country whereas they do so to others.

Citing the United Kingdom as an example, the vice president lamented the situation where Britain gives guarantees to companies in Ghana and other countries but not to those in Nigeria.

Chalker, a Minister of State for Overseas Development at the Foreign Office, further said that the Council had noticed a very significant change in Nigeria, which is for the better, adding that they have seen a big leap forward.

She used the occasion to assure of their commitment to improving investor confidence in Nigeria. Urging the members to support and partner with government to build investor confidence in the country, Sambo stated that there are huge opportunities for investment in all sectors in Nigeria, adding that the Central Bank of Nigeria has made available N500 billion at one digit interest rate.

He restated government's commitment to ensuring an enabling environment for businesses to thrive in Nigeria, adding that government had made deliberate policies to ensure that these objectives are met.

In this light, he said government had put in place a new gas pricing policy to further bolster investor interest in the oil and gas sector and adding that to ensure adequate security, machinery had been put in place to reform the Nigeria police.

“To meet the huge financial requirements for infrastructural development, government is looking at various ways to organise and stratify funding for projects in its quest to achieve the laudable goals contained in the Vision 20:2020 programme,” the Vice President said.

He said such ways include concessional funds from the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), the African Development Bank (ADB), the Yen Credit facility, among several others. He said other ways include through Public Private Partnerships and bilateral funding.

Sambo stated that government needs the cooperation and support of the private sector to meet the developmental challenges of the country.

According to him, areas that need urgent intervention include power, such as the hydro-power projects in Zungeru and Mambilla, and development of coal power plants, transportation, housing and urban development, construction of multipurpose dams, agriculture, port expansion, road and railways construction, water ways and access to financing for the private sector.

The meeting saw presentations from the Minister of Agriculture, Prof. Sheik Ahmed Abdullahi, on driving investments into agriculture; the Chairman, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof. Attahiru Jega on the Challenges and Prospects of Electoral Reform Process in Nigeria and; the Government of Borno State, on driving investment to Nigerian States.

Federal Gov't Blames Soludo for Economic Recession.

The Federal Government yesterday blamed former Central Bank Governor Professor Charles Soludo for the present problems facing the nation's banking and financial sectors.

Briefing State House Correspondents after the weekly Federal Executive Council (FEC) meeting yesterday, the Minister of State for Information and Communications, Labaran Maku, said Professor Soludo caused a lot of havoc to the sector before he left about two years ago.

"We hold Soludo, who was CBN governor until about two years ago, accountable for all that is happening in the banking and financial sectors," Maku remarked, adding that in the last one year, Nigeria has been contending with the issues in the financial sector following the very difficult circumstances it inherited as a result of the misdirection and sometimes misapplication of the reforms in the banking sector.

Former Central Bank chief Chukwuma Soludo.

"The government has struggled with some of these banks and as of today, we want to assure you that the establishment of the Assets Management Company of Nigeria (AMCON) is to address some of the crises that we inherited.

Maku said that the report which the government got from the present CBN governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, on the state of the economy showed that the economy is due to grow by 7 per cent and that this projected growth will increase from year to year as the nation proceeded with the implementation of the programme.

Soludo had warned that if pre-emptive measures are not taken now, Nigeria's economy is "doomed" to a worse form of structural adjustment programme (SAP).

In an essay published in a national daily, Soludo, who ran for governorship election in Anambra State in March, expressed concern that the government had been piling up domestic and foreign debts with no improvement in the economy.

Nigeria: West Africa's economic powerhouse

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and the political and economic powerhouse of West Africa.

Home to 150 million people, this is a land of extremes: it is the world's seventh largest exporter of oil, yet the oil wealth has not filtered down to the vast majority of the population, with 70 percent living below the poverty line, according to the CIA World Factbook.

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office praise Nigeria's "active civil society and free and vibrant press", yet statistics for the health of its population make grim reading.

The CIA World Factbook estimates that 170,000 Nigerians a year die from HIV/AIDS, the world's third highest number behind India and South Africa; life expectancy is the world's ninth lowest at less than 47 years; and infant mortality is 11th highest in the world, at 9.4 percent of all live births.

As a country, Nigeria is a British colonial creation; formed in January 1914 by the amalgamation of three separate colonial territories.

It gained independence from Britain 50 years ago on October 1, 1960. Since then the country has veered between civilian and military rule, with several coups, counter coups and one civil war (1967-1970).

Nigeria has now had civilian rule since 1999, its longest period so far, although the most recent elections in April 2007 were heavily criticized by foreign and domestic observers for poor organization and large-scale rigging, according to the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The election was won by Umaru Yar'Adua with 70 percent of the vote. He died in May 2010 after a long illness and was succeeded by his vice president Goodluck Jonathan. Elections are due to take place early next year.

The largest state in the south is Lagos with some 18 million people, according to the Lagos State government website. It was previously Nigeria's capital before it was moved to Abuja in the center of the country. Lagos, however, is widely regarded as the country's economic capital.

Half Nigeria's population is Muslim, 40 percent is Christian and 10 percent have indigenous beliefs, according to CIA World Factbook. Although other sources such as the Pew Forum on Religion, put the number at 50.5 percent Muslim and 48.2 percent Christian.

The north of the country is largely Muslim, and the Christian population is centered in the south. Nigeria has more than 250 ethnic groups.

Twelve largely Muslim states in the north of the country introduced Sharia law in 1999, sparking tensions between Muslims and Christians and outbreaks of violence that left thousands dead, according to the FCO. It said punishments, including amputations, carried out by Sharia courts have caused international disquiet.

Nigeria has a tropical climate, a 900km coastline along the Atlantic Ocean and boundaries with Cameroon, Niger, Benin and Chad.

It has seven National Parks and two UNESCO World Heritage sites: Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove and Sukur Cultural Landscape both listed for their cultural importance.

Osun Sacred Grove is one of the last remaining primary high forests in southern Nigeria, regarded as the home of Osun, the goddess of fertility, to the Yoruba people. The area is dotted with sanctuaries, shrines, sculptures and art works dedicated to Osun and other gods.

The Sukur Cultural Landscape has the palace of a Hidi, or chief, terraced fields and the remains of a former flourishing iron industry, according to UNESCO.

Despite its scenic and historical attractions, beaches and abundant wildlife, Nigeria has remained largely off the tourist map.

The World Travel Guide, which describes itself as the "bible" of the travel industry, writes: "Nigeria is blessed with hundreds of miles of coastline, national parks and fascinating ancient sites. However, it is a shame that the country is not currently able to entice visitors other than those seeking a slice of the oil dollar."

The Lonely Planet travel guide said: "We shouldn't beat about the bush: Nigeria has an image problem. It dominates West Africa economically and politically, and has produced music and literature whose influence spreads far beyond the continent. But for all this clout, mention the country's name to the person on the street and they're more likely to come up with a litany of woe: corruption, ethnic violence and email scams. As a travel destination, Nigeria seems more a place to avoid than to book a flight to."

The government is trying to give its tourist industry a push. The Nigerian Sunday Observer reported this September that the tourism minister Alhaji Abubakar Mohammed had stressed the need to develop tourism to improve the economy and was in the process of drawing up a master plan for attracting foreign visitors.

This could help wean the country off its reliance on oil to its economy.

The CIA World Factbook said: "The government continues to face the daunting task of reforming a petroleum-based economy, whose revenues have been squandered through corruption and mismanagement, and institutionalizing democracy."

Some Nigerians who have made their mark on the world stage include Wole Soyinka, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, Ben Okri, winner of the 1991 Booker Prize, Chinua Achebe, nominated for the 1987 Booker Prize, musicians King Sunny Ade, the late Fela Kuti and NBA basketball player Hakeem Olajuwon.

3. Energy:

NIGCOMSAT is now special technology centre

WITH nearly 150 young engineers well trained and equipped to fit into any global engineering field, Nigerian Communication Satellite (NIGCOMSAT) Limited is ready to take on the world, its Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Mr. Ahmed Rufai, has said.

Rufai said: “We went to work immediately to go beyond the satellite bandwidth backbone for multimedia industry by sending our engineers abroad to acquire knowledge not only for satellite communications engineering and its applications but also other areas of ancillary and foundation technology.”

“These include software and hardware engineering such as algorithms for various micro-electronic based products such as Printed Circuit Board (PCB) laptop and desktop computers, cameras, decoders, industrial control boards, GSM phone manufacturing, e-voting solution, staff attendance smart card for time theft and ghost workers control and management among others”, he added.

According to him, “May 13, 2007 became for us a watershed when we launched NigComSat-1 at the cost of \$256 million, of which China Export Import Bank gave a seed loan of \$200 million, and offer to control and manage it for two years. But unfortunately, due to solar array power assembly problems, the satellite was de-orbited on November 10, 2008, 18 months after the launch.”

Rufai said that did not in any way discourage the noble objective to take Nigeria to the next level in space.

The Chinese authorities quickly commenced replacement of the satellite at no cost to Nigeria.

Presently, NIGCOMSAT is urging the government to address the issue of back-up satellite (NigComSat -2 and 3) respectively to guarantee smooth business operation as soon as NigComSat-1R is launched.

Nigeria Absent at First Africa-EU Energy Summit

Nigeria was notably absent at the first High Level Meeting of the African-EU Energy Partnership (AEEP) where the African and European Union (EU) Energy Ministers took

a joint action on a shared commitment to bring access to modern and sustainable energy services to an additional 100 million people in Africa by 2020.

AEEP was declared open yesterday in Vienna, Austria as a follow up to the EU-Africa Joint Strategy, which in its first Action Plan (2008-2010) adopted on the occasion of the Lisbon Summit of December 8-9, 2007, and the joint Statement of the African Union Commission (AUC) and European Commission (EC) signed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on September 8, 2008; where both parties agreed to launch preparatory work to set up an Electricity Master-Plan for Africa that aimed at improving regional interconnections between all regions of the African continent, and to define the Capacity Building Programme to support the African Power Pools and AFUR1 to be covered by the Energy Facility of the EU.

The meeting was well attended by Commissioners from the AU and EU together with over 21 Energy and Development Ministers from both continents.

The Minister of State for Power, Mr. Nuhu Somo Way, who was initially billed to be part of the meeting, was not in attendance.

They made commitment to set targets for the Partnership's future and endorsed the Africa-EU Renewable Energy Cooperation Programme (RECP) to build 10,000 Megawatts (MW) of new hydropower facilities, at least 5,000MW of wind power capacity; and tripling the capacity of other renewable such as geothermal, and modern biomass taking into social and environmental standards.

In his welcome address, the Austrian Minister for European and International Affairs, Dr. Michael Spindelegger, noted that policies that are both sustainable and progressive are required to meet current energy challenges, which is at the heart of development and a pre-requisite for reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of "halving the number of the world's hungry and Poor by 2015".

Spindelegger said "energy access, energy security as well as renewable energy and energy efficiency are matters that concern us all".

"It is the basic of economic growth and indispensable for modern schools and universities, for communal services and health centres, for cooling and cooking facilities- as well for political participation through modern communication and information technologies", he said.

Similarly, the AU Commissioner for Infrastructure and Energy, Dr. Elham Ibrahim , said lack of sustainable and poor access to modern energy is very devastating to African economy including issues associated with the use of biomass.

Ibrahim noted that this partnership is a strategic way forward to a sustainable energy solution to African continent and at the heart of global development and called for synergy among the AU and EU countries to achieve the set targets.

Several Ministers who spoke however, noted that the target is far below the potentials, and as well as the energy needs of the African continent and that efforts must be made to scale up the target of access to sustainable energy services by 50 per cent of Africans by 2020 in order to achieve the global target of 100 per cent by 2030.

They noted: “Over 60 per cent of Africans lack access to modern energy services, especially in rural areas. Sub-Saharan Africa, with a population of 800 million produces about same amount of electricity as Spain, with a population of 45 million. At same time, Africa’s energy riches lie idle: only seven per cent of its hydropower potential is currently used.

The East African Rift Valley alone might produce more than 10,000 MW of electricity from geothermal sources, if properly exploited. Approximately 50 billion cubic meters per year of African natural gas are literally going up in smokes, flared because infrastructure is lacking to capture the gas”.

They also called for regional integration and greater political commitments among African leaders towards sustainable access to energy services.

Notable among them are Energy Ministers from South Africa, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and especially the Togolese Minister of Mines and Energy, Mr. Dammipi Noupokou , who said “it is a matter of political issue with proper political response”.

Noupokou, on his part, noted that developing a regional market for energy is the major way to ensure these targets and singled out Nigeria as the champion of regional integration through for its energy commitment to West African countries such as Benin, Togo and Ghana.

4. Environment:

5. Immigration/Refugee/Idps:

MAN Calls for Stiffer Law on Smuggling

The Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN) has called on the National Assembly to enact an Act with stiffer penalties that will deal with criminal acts of smuggling and dumping of toxic products in the country.

President of MAN, Chief Kola Jamodu, said this in Abuja at the stakeholder's forum on fake, counterfeit, smuggling and other illicit trades.

He was represented by the Director General of the association, Mr Jide Mike.

He said the new act should specifically target products like used batteries of all types that are imported and sold in local markets as well as other harmful acid products and electrical/electronic products that are killing innocent citizens.

"We pray and plead with our legislators to expedite action in passing the bill of an act to repeal and re-enact the counterfeit, fake drugs and unwholesome processed foods (miscellaneous provisions) bill 2010, the soonest possible in order to save more Nigerians' lives," he said.

He said that the manufacturing sector has remained under siege despite the good efforts of NAFDAC and SON in fighting fakes, counterfeits, cloning, adulteration, smuggling and dumping in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, the international business society has devised several legal methods to combat illegal businesses. Chinese government had recently investigated and accepted that their manufacturers in collaboration with some Nigerian traders connived to cheat Nigeria and other African countries.

Chairman of MAN, Brand Protection Group, Tunde Oyelola said illicit trade is a major disaster that has grown more than 10,000 percent over the past decades and will continue to grow if joint drastic measures are not put in place to checkmate it.

He was represented by Romeo Barberopoulos.

He said based on the growing concern of members, MAN has decided to establish a National Coalition Group (NCG) against counterfeit/fake/adulterated and smuggled products together with all relevant government agencies, NGOs and the organised private sector.

Earlier, the Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, Ms Josephine Tapgun, who was represented by her Special Assistant on Media, Yakubu Dati, and said government, was concerned about the issue of fake products which explains the setting up of a committee from SON to work out the details for the signing of MOU with China to address the menace.

6. Health:

Poor surveillance helps spread cholera

Poor diagnostics and weak surveillance are hampering government efforts to stem cholera in Nigeria says a government health worker.

The disease is most severe in the north; as of 8 September 781 people have died and 13,000 cases were reported. Onyebuchi Chukwu, Nigeria's health minister, said Katsina State in northern Nigeria had the highest number of cases - 3,310 infections and 175 deaths.

Isa Sadiq Abubakar, a consultant epidemiologist at Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital in the northern city of Kano, noted that northern Nigeria had good cholera surveillance systems but they were not being used properly.

Nigeria uses an Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response [IDSR] system, set up a decade ago to more effectively combat communicable diseases - such as yellow fever, meningitis and cholera - by training and equipping health staff to improve disease detection and response. "But staff training has been slow to deliver, and most health centres still lack the necessary equipment to accurately diagnose cholera," Abubakar noted.

Despite the high prevalence of cholera, many health workers still do not think of cholera when patients come with diarrhoea and dehydration, as they "don't have a high index of cholera suspicion", he said.

"Health workers do not know that mere diarrhoea calls for cholera investigation; cholera is an epidemic-prone disease, and Disease Surveillance and Notification Officers [DSMO] from local government primary healthcare level have been trained, but the training has not permeated down to the health workers."

Undiagnosed

Cholera recurs regularly in Nigeria – 13,000 cases were reported in 2009 – but in 2010 the disease has been spreading much more quickly, said Claire Lise Chaignat, coordinator of the World Health Organization's cholera response group.

Despite its prevalence, only a few private clinics and six teaching hospitals in northern cities – Zaria, Jos, Kano, Maiduguri, Sokoto, and Ilorin – have the microscopes that can diagnose cholera. Laboratory technicians identify cholera by examining stool samples under a microscope.

Abubakar said that health centres are supposed to send stool samples to these hospitals for diagnosis but much lack the biological cultures required to preserve them properly, and so they do not send them at all.

As a result, most health workers diagnosed cholera on clinical observation of symptoms, rather than laboratory evidence, or did not diagnose it at all. Sometimes the problem was very simple: they had run out of reporting forms. "Health workers have to use their [own] money to photocopy reporting forms, so they get fed up and abandon the process," Abubakar commented.

The lack of information from these healthcare units meant "outbreaks worsen and get out of control before health authorities get to know what is happening" Chukwu told IRIN.

A quick response was vital to stemming a cholera outbreak, said WHO's Chaignat. "With cholera, you have to react very quickly. By the time health workers have diagnosed the disease, it could be too late already."

Most cholera surveillance is supported WHO, which provides health centres with equipment for diagnostics, and diarrhoeal disease kits that include intravenous fluids and iodine tablets.

Denial

"Another setback to surveillance is official denial," said Abubakar. "When an international event is taking place in the country - say, a soccer tournament - the government will deny an outbreak for fear that acknowledging it will deprive it of hosting rights."

Health minister Chukwu said people should take more responsibility for improving their hygiene practices. "The disease is spreading rapidly despite measures taken to control it because people have refused to take personal hygiene seriously," he told IRIN.

"A lot needs to be done," Abubakar said. "There has to be improvement in sanitation, food and personal hygiene; refuse, sewage and drainage systems; as well as vigorous health promotion activities in terms of continuous public enlightenment on cholera."

The trouble is to know where to start. "Health systems need to be strengthened; adequate manpower, equipment, drugs and consumables should be provided. Surveillance systems, communication and transport should be improved ... Mechanisms for quick intervention should be put in place ... and messages to prevent cholera should spread through health education."

7. Human rights/Gender/social issues:

Police Arrest 10 Boko Haram Suspects

Ten people suspected of belonging to the radical Islamist sect Boko Haram have been arrested in northern Nigeria in recent days, a regional police chief said Tuesday.

Seven of them are suspected to be behind a spate of murders targeting policemen and three are among the hundreds of inmates that escaped when suspected Islamists attacked a jail last week.

"We arrested seven suspected members of Boko Haram that we think were involved in hit-and-run killings of policemen in the city in the last few weeks," Ibrahim Abdu told AFP in a telephone interview from Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state.

"Similarly our men were able to arrest three members of Boko Haram that escaped from Bauchi prison last week following an attack by their comrades," he said.

More than 700 prisoners, including around 100 alleged sect members, were freed in a daring attack staged on September 7 by suspected Boko Haram on Bauchi state prison in northern Nigeria.

The Islamist sect last year launched an uprising in and around Borno's capital Maiduguri before it was put down by a brutal military and police assault.

At least 15 people including security personnel have been slain in Nigeria's north in recent weeks with six of them killed in two days this week.

Previous nine murders had been staged by motorcycle-riding gunmen mostly in Maiduguri in recent weeks.

Abdu said the seven were suspected members of the sect arrested after last year's assault but later freed in the absence of tangible evidence.

"We believe the seven suspects were among members of the sect that were discharged and acquitted by the courts for lack of evidence to link them with last year's riots," he said.

The sect, also known as the Nigerian Taliban, had fought for the creation of an Islamic state in Nigeria, whose 150 million populations is divided roughly in half between Christians and Muslims.

8. Geo-Strategic issues:

Other West African States

Cape Verde:

Chad:

UN Agency Offers Assistance after Floods Strike Southeast...H7

The United Nations refugee agency sounded the alarm today about the situation facing thousands of residents of southern and south-eastern Chad, where the heaviest rains in 40 years have destroyed homes and infrastructure, wiped out cropland and cut off access to towns and communities.

About 70,000 Chadians are homeless because of the floods, which follow torrential rains over the past two months, according to Andrej Mahecic, a spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

As many as 150,000 people are classified as affected by the floods, including thousands of refugees living in the region, Mr. Mahecic told journalists in Geneva.

Two refugee camps in the southeast, Yarounga and Moula, have been particularly hard hit, with recently cultivated crops and fields wiped out. Many shelters and latrines have also collapsed.

Mr. Mahecic said the start of the school year, scheduled for 1 October, may have to be delayed because the refugees have temporarily occupied the schools until they can find new shelter.

UNHCR has identified two sites to relocate about 4,000 refugees in the camps, but distributing food and other relief items is proving difficult because the roads are in such poor condition.

The agency has provided about 15,000 people across the region with basic survival kits that comprise blankets, plastic sheeting, mosquito nets and bed mats.

It is also raising awareness about the importance of basic hygiene practices in the wake of the floods. The collapse of so many latrines means waste may resurface, raising the risk of disease outbreaks.

At least 41 Chadians have died in a nationwide cholera outbreak, and malaria is also seen as a potential threat in the region.

Gambia:

Guinea- Bissau:

Mali:

Kidnap threat throws spotlight on local aid staff...H7

A kidnap threat blocking Western aid workers from travelling to parts of Mali is hampering aid operations and underscoring the importance of local NGOs, humanitarian experts say.

Several international aid agencies have stopped all travel by Western aid workers to Mali's northeastern Gao region since early 2010, aid workers told IRIN. To lower their profile, some international NGOs still working in the area are using local, unmarked vehicles.

Gao is the zone currently of most concern but there have been alerts regarding other regions of Mali as well.

The 16 September kidnapping of seven people working for a French company in neighbouring Niger is the latest in a long history of attacks on Western entities across the Sahel, many carried out by the North African branch of al-Qaeda. In recent months several Western governments have warned their nationals not to travel to northeastern Mali because of threats by the group.

The UN office for West Africa said in a June report the security situation in the Sahel had deteriorated in the previous year, with a surge of kidnappings of foreigners and attacks on national security forces.

While the security constraints are not having a direct impact on beneficiaries, they have curbed monitoring and quality control missions, aid workers in the region told IRIN. The insecurity has also upped costs, as at least one agency is using military escorts when moving around Gao.

A number of international aid agencies have operations in the area, where people face severe water scarcity, food and fodder shortages.

"The latest threats limit us in our ability to send needs assessment teams to the Gao area, at a time when the population is affected by drought," said an international aid worker in Mali who preferred anonymity.

He had just cancelled a monitoring mission to Gao, holding meetings in another location on the recommendation of Malian colleagues and Western diplomats. "We are adapting our operations by handing more responsibility to local staff and relying on Malian NGOs more insofar as they are currently less at risk."

Donor officials and international aid workers said they are already able to rely on a large pool of local staff with significant humanitarian experience, but said access remained critical as not all operations were currently in the hands of local workers. Aid workers in Mali told IRIN it is also difficult to have a good overall picture of the situation and needs if project managers cannot regularly visit the zone.

Cyprien Fabre, head of the European Commission's humanitarian aid department (ECHO) in West Africa, said: "This is an issue for ECHO, as our strength is our presence, and the ability to see for ourselves and to monitor the quality and impact of a project the European Union is funding."

ECHO-backed work in the Sahel includes projects to address the causes of malnutrition and to assist pastoralists.

Bolstering local NGOs

For Hervé Ludovic de Lys, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for West and Central Africa, the access situation means greater efforts should be made to strengthen the capacity of local aid workers to carry out humanitarian assistance in accordance with international principles and accountability.

"It seems it's time for international NGOs to take their local counterparts more as partners with a broader mandate. The performance of international NGOs should perhaps be measured not only by their contribution to the beneficiaries but also by their ability to build capacity in local partners."

He said "local NGOs are just about indispensable" in some areas of the world all but inaccessible to Westerners.

Most local NGOs in West Africa are development-oriented, and this could be a good time to add humanitarian response to their expertise, de Lys said.

Fabre said ECHO has been supporting the training of local NGOs. "Some of our partners have already been present in Mali or elsewhere for decades in development projects.[When they are properly trained] this facilitates the upscaling of operations into emergency mode and we use this tool a lot; we take that into consideration for funding."

Guilty by association?

For now, aid workers from Mali or other sub-Saharan African countries have not been targeted for associating with international NGOs. "Our teams are able to work on the ground," Sidy Diallo with Médecins du Monde Belgique in Mali told IRIN. "They are from the area and integrated into the communities. For the moment they are not being targeted."

But aid agencies are closely monitoring this, Philippe Conraud, Oxfam-UK's humanitarian coordinator for West Africa, told IRIN. "It cannot be ruled out." He noted that local workers are still subject to carjacking and other crime common in the area.

OCHA's de Lys said national aid staffs are on the front line worldwide and often the first victims of violence.

Mauritania :

France suspects al-Qaeda behind Niger kidnappings...H7

French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner says he suspects a group linked to al-Qaeda was behind the kidnapping of seven people in Niger.

The group, five of whom were French, was seized overnight on Wednesday in the town of Arlit in the Sahara desert.

Mr Kouchner said he believes Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an offshoot of the Islamist militant group, was responsible.

AQIM has kidnapped French and other Europeans nationals in the past.

The hostages are employees of French construction company Vinci and nuclear energy firm Areva, which operates a uranium mine near Arlit.

The two other people kidnapped were from Madagascar and Togo.

"We suspect it's the same groups... linked to the mainstream of AQIM," Mr Kouchner told Europe 1 radio on Friday.

"Unfortunately, we have dealt with them before," he added.

However, Mr Kouchner said that there has been no claim of responsibility by any group so far.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb emerged in early 2007, after an Algerian militant group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), aligned itself with Osama Bin Laden's international terror network.

It has waged a campaign of suicide bomb attacks and ambushes in Algeria, and in recent years has become more active in the Sahara, where governments struggle to impose their authority and gangs of smugglers, bandits and rebels operate alongside the militants.

In July, the group said it had killed Michel Germaneau, a 78-year-old French hostage being held in Mali, after a cross-border raid involving French and Mauritanian troops failed to free him.

AQIM also killed the British hostage, Edwin Dyer, last year after the UK government refused to give in to its demands.

Mauritania says 12 Qaeda members killed in clash...H7

Mauritanian military forces killed 12 members of al Qaeda's North African wing and suffered two fatalities in fighting in the desert along the border with Mali, a Mauritanian security source said on Saturday.

The clash is the latest sign of an escalation in the battle between Saharan countries and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the chief suspect in the kidnapping of seven foreigners, including five French citizens, in Niger on Thursday.

The fighting continued on Saturday as Mauritanian forces encircled around 20 AQIM vehicles in the border area, the Mauritanian source told Reuters. In addition to those killed, four Mauritanian troops were also wounded in the fighting.

"The operation was launched because the opportunity presented itself. It was not planned long in advance," said a second security source in the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott who knew the background to the mission.

The French Foreign Ministry said there was no connection to Thursday's kidnappings, in which a French employee of nuclear firm Areva and his wife were seized.

"This action is independent of the kidnapping of Areva employees. There are no French forces on the ground," a ministry spokesman said in Paris.

The seven hostages are believed to have been taken to Mali, a source in the Nigerien military told Reuters after an army search operation on Friday.

Security experts say al Qaeda allies are building a base in the desert region that straddles the porous and thinly policed borders of Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania after being squeezed out of traditional patches along Algeria's coast.

MINING DOUBTS

French President Nicolas Sarkozy vowed in July to to punish AQIM for executing a 78-year-old French hostage after a joint Franco-Mauritanian commando raid failed to free him. AQIM in turn has said it would avenge its fighters killed in the raid.

The group has not claimed responsibility for Thursday's brazen kidnapping of foreigners in Niger's northern uranium mining zone, which has raised fresh doubts about the security of Western mining operations in the region.

Neither France nor the mining firms gave details of how the workers were seized but a local businessman and a source in the mining industry in Niger told Reuters the foreigners were taken while they slept in their houses in the town of Arlit.

Among the hostages were five employees of Vinci, whose subsidiary Sogea-Satom is a contractor in the region.

The French Foreign Ministry urged its nationals on Friday to quit danger zones in Niger and an Areva executive said the company had called some of its staff back from Arlit.

Areva employs 2,500, the bulk of them locals, at three mine sites in Niger. Niger hopes to become the world's No. 2 uranium producer when the Imouraren mine comes on line in 2013 or 2014.

Niger:

Sénégal: