

WORLD BRIEFS

6,000 LIBERIAN REFUGEES ARE RETURNING HOME

LAGOS, Nigeria (PANA) - Some 6,000 Liberian refugees in Nigeria will begin returning home this month under a voluntary mass repatriation scheme organized jointly by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and its Nigerian counterpart. The displaced persons, who fled their country at the height of the bitter seven-year civil war, are expected on their return to join their compatriots in the rehabilitation process, the Nigerian Commission of Refugees said. At the peak of the civil war (1989-1997), in which some 150,000 people died, another 800,000 Liberians of its total 2.5 million people fled and were scattered as refugees across West Africa, from Senegal to Nigeria.

PARTNERSHIP SOUGHT ON AFRICA'S AGRICULTURAL GROWTH

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (PANA) - African governments are being urged to create "a new partnership of shared responsibilities" for the improvement of food security. The new partnership calls for concerted actions by governments, the private sector, farmers and non-governmental organizations "to achieve broad-based gender-sensitive agricultural growth and development in Africa, while preserving the natural resource base and improving its long-term productive capacity." This was one of a series of recommendations adopted at the end of a two-day conference last month, of African agriculture ministers, which deliberated on the continent's pressing problems of food security. The 20th session of the Food and Agriculture Organization regional conference for Africa had considered the broad range of the problems related to Africa's food insecurity and sought solutions for them. The conference noted that the current high rate of natural resources degradation which hampers food security on the continent, was due to lack of proper policies. "Policymakers encounter serious difficulties in designing and implementing policies that could promote a widespread gender-sensitive adoption of agricultural technologies and practices that are not only productive but also environmentally sustainable," a member of the conference concluded.

ETHIOPIA SHUTTING DOOR ON FOREIGN JOURNALISTS

NAIROBI, Ethiopia (IPS) - Foreign journalists based in Kenya have sent a letter of protest to the Ethiopian government against new guidelines which, they say, will make it harder for them to cover the country's news. Journalists must now apply for visas for Ethiopia 15 days before the date of their intended visit, specify in advance the purpose and itinerary of their visits and state which government authorities and officials they hope to meet. The new guidelines were communicated to the Nairobi-based journalists, who provide the overwhelming majority of foreign news coverage about Ethiopia, in a letter from the Ethiopia Embassy in Kenya dated Jan. 22. In its protest letter to Ethiopia's Minister of Information and Tourism, Wolde Michael Chamo, of the Foreign Correspondents Association of East Africa said the decision would prevent journalists from visiting Ethiopia freely to cover news events in that country. "Coverage of the activities of the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, which have their headquarters in Addis Ababa, will also be badly affected by this measure," said FCA chairman, Nicholas Kotch.

INTERNATIONAL

IMF: loan to reduce poverty, not pad political coffers

By Melvis Dzisah
Special to Sentinel-Voice

ABIDJAN, (IPS) - The Ivorian government will receive one billion dollars in financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund after 10 months of tough negotiations between the two parties.

But while the administration of Prime Minister Daniel Kablan Duncan has welcomed the credit facility, aimed at supporting economic recovery for the next three years, its detractors fear that much of the money might be squandered by public officials.

According to Amor Tahari, the IMF's deputy director in Abidjan, the facility is also meant "to enable (Cote d'Ivoire's government) to reduce poverty and improve substantially the living conditions of the population."

The government has promised to implement a series of actions, including tightening up on public finance and paying sustained attention to the social sector, especially education and health.

"We are also going to work towards improving the economic environment and

judicial systems to encourage private and foreign investment," promised Niamien N'Goran, Finance and Economic Planning minister.

The "reduction of our foreign debt towards a situation of sustainable debt is also an essential component of the present program," he added. But many here wonder how much of this will materialize.

Journalist Franck Lade is among the skeptics. "We have signed it and we are going to waste it again," he wrote in reference in a recent edition of the independent daily, *Le Populaire*.

He cautioned that, this time around, the authorities should not mistake their pockets for the national treasury unless they want trouble.

"The very fact that the amount was not mentioned during the official ceremony and the press learned of it afterwards is an indication of our seriousness," he said.

Corruption and mismanagement have taken many forms in this West African nation which gained independence from France in 1960. For example, under its first president, the late Felix Houphouet Boigny, the government created

unnecessary portfolios and offices, which it stuffed with loyalists.

When the national coffers ran dry in the early 1980s as a result of waste and a severe downturn in the global prices of the country's main exports, cocoa and coffee, Cote d'Ivoire borrowed heavily. The foreign debt is now estimated at about \$14.8 billion.

Since he assumed office in December 1993, following Houphouet Boigny's death, President Henri Konan Bedie has been trying in vain to address the problem of mismanagement and corruption.

The latest negotiations with the IMF took 10 months to conclude because the financial institution was dissatisfied with the way previous funds were used.

An IMF monitoring team that was in the country recently, openly criticized the way money meant for the social sector, including poverty alleviation, was diverted to other sectors.

Niamien N'Goran has promised to do his best to reduce corruption in the next three years so as to ensure that the credit facility benefits the majority of the population.

Pro-Sudan govt. group appeals to OAU

Special to Sentinel-Voice
HARARE, Zimbabwe -

The leader of the United Democratic Salvation Front in Sudan (UDSF), Riek Machar, has appealed to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) member states to assist in bringing peace to his country.

In a statement to the 66th ordinary session of the OAU council of ministers meeting in Harare last year, Machar said the recent signing of the Sudan peace agreement, made it imperative for the OAU and neighboring states to ensure stability in Sudan.

In April, Machar's organization, along with five other southern Sudanese political groups, came together to form the UDSF, with a joint military wing known as the South Sudan Defense Force, and signed a peace agreement with the government. The agreement which excludes the main opposition party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) led by John

Garang, includes a plan to have a referendum in southern Sudan in four years, and time to allow the south to decide whether or not to remain part of Sudan.

"This peace agreement grants the people of south Sudan the right to self-determination which shall be exercised through an internationally observed referendum before the end of a four-year interim period.

"The options in the referendum shall be unity and secession as we have realized that the unity of the Sudan cannot be based on force or coercion, but rather (the) free

will of the people. The parties to this agreement are committed to abide with the decision of the people of south Sudan whatever it will be," said Machar.

The peace agreement has been presented to the chairman of Inter-Government Authority on Development and Drought (IGADD) peace mediation committee on the Sudan conflict, Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi. However, at a press conference, Machar denied the SPLM had been excluded from the peace agreement, adding the door for negotiations with him was still open.

"The responsibility of peace in Sudan lies with the Sudanese people. He (Garang) has not been excluded, we want to include him in the peace plan," he said. "If you can achieve a political objective through peaceful settlement, why do you want to sacrifice people's lives. If the military option was the best means, we would not have spent 42 years fighting," said Machar. Sudanese foreign affairs minister Ali Osman Taha told the same press conference that the political charter that brought about the agreement had view-points of all parties in Sudan, including Garang's SPLM.



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