

INTERNATIONAL

Nigerians await windfall from Pope's visit

By Paul Ejime

Special to Sentinel-Voice

LAGOS, Nigeria (PANA) — For different reasons, the Nigerian government and the opposition could claim victory over the outcome of the recent visit by the Catholic pontiff, Pope John Paul II.

But, for the citizens, what will be important is the government's response to the papal request for the release of 60 political detainees being held by the military regime.

Pro-democracy groups had stated before the Pope's March 21-23 visit to Nigeria, a country with 20 million Catholics, their intention to use the pontiff's presence to press for the release of political detainees in the country.

Leaders of the Civil Liberties Organization and the

Committee for the Defense of Human Rights had said they would approach the local Catholic secretariat to include on the papal tour agenda clemency for the estimated 120 people who the groups claim are being detained in the country.

Vatican spokesman Joachin Nevaldro-Valls announced on March 21 that the Holy See had submitted to the Nigerian government for clemency a list of 60 political detainees, based on information from the detainees' families, international organizations, the media and foreign governments.

An official of the Civil Liberties Organization told PANA in Lagos after the Pope's departure that pro-democracy groups were



During his African tour, Pope John Paul II, left, visited Nigeria where he gave a speech on ending human rights violations in the country and was entertained by Nigerian President Gen. Sani Abacha.

satisfied with the Pontiff's gesture. "It showed that the Pope is a listening and caring holy man, but whether the military government will heed his call,

as happened after his recent visit to Cuba, is another matter," said the official.

For the regime of Gen. Sani Abacha, under pressure and facing isolation from Western countries over democracy and human rights abuses, the Pope's visit could not have come at a better time, even if Abuja officials, including information minister Ikeobasi Mokuolu, refused to be drawn into any argument on the political benefits of the papal visit.

Political observers here believe that apart from helping to counteract, if momentarily, the impact of President Bill Clinton's African tour, the papal visit could have provided a welcome diversion from the charged domestic environment.

At the time, Nigeria grappled with fuel scarcity and a political atmosphere dominated by a national debate over whether Abacha should succeed himself at the end of his regime's political transition program in October.

The Pope's visit managed to keep Nigerians busy, although those who cared watched Clinton embark on his 12-day swing across six African countries.

The Sultan of Sokoto, the supreme head of Nigerian Muslims, perhaps, captured the national mood on the papal visit when he said that the Pope's coming at a time of hostile attitude towards Nigeria showed that he (the Pope) is a "holy man."

A delighted Nigerian (See Pope, Page 14)

Post apartheid era almost as bleak as pre-apartheid times

Special to Sentinel-Voice

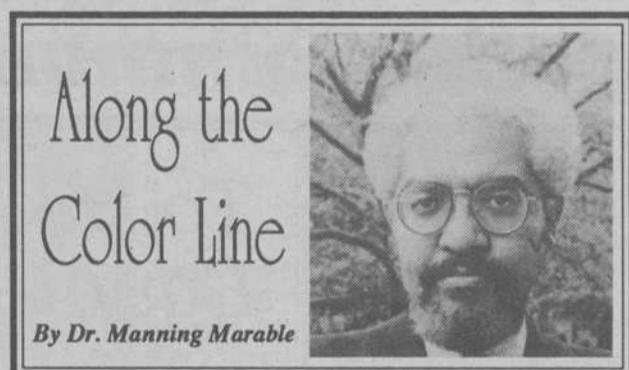
Part one of a three part series from Cape Town, South Africa

Since the election of Nelson Mandela and the end of apartheid's dictatorship, South Africa has been projected as a model of racial reconciliation and peaceful change.

President Mandela has become his nation's most effective and persuasive salesman, as even the most racist and reactionary Afrikaner former leaders praise his inclusive policies. Almost overnight, the country that once symbolized a citadel of white supremacy now relishes its new liberal image under the slogan, the "rainbow nation."

From the vantage point of downtown Cape Town, South Africa does look like a modern economic miracle. The business center looks like Baltimore, Seattle, or any other major metropolitan area. The new waterfront mall development has hundreds of exclusive shops and restaurants attracting more than 200,000 tourists each year. A new black African professional class has rapidly begun to emerge in both governmental and corporate circles.

Yet for all the glitter and hype, there remain two vastly different South Africas, separated by an enormous chasm of



racial and income inequality. At the top of the society are the white upper and middle class, who for centuries benefited directly from the enslavement and exploitation of the black masses. Whites comprise only 12 percent of South Africa's population, yet they still own the vast majority of the wealth — factories, banks, land, gold mines, and other resources. Six percent of the population earns more than 40 percent of the total income. The typical white managing director

of a company earns a salary that is one hundred times that of the lowest paid workers, who are almost always black.

The "other" Cape Town is rarely shown on the tourist maps or guided tours. Outside the city, behind the magnificent Table Mountain, is Cape Flats, a barren, sandy plain that is home to more than one million black and brown people. In segregated, impoverished neighborhoods called Guguletu and Crossroads, Africans live in conditions of unbelievable poverty, hunger, and disease. I saw tens of thousands of shacks constructed largely with cardboard, plastic sheets and wooden boards, without toilets, running water, or electricity.

Poverty's greatest casualties are always children. According to a recent study by South Africa's Human Rights and Gender Equality Commission, about 87 percent of all African children are undernourished, with 38 percent of all poor children suffering from stunted growth. An estimated 200,000 children between the ages of ten and fourteen are employed in the labor force.

Like Jim Crow schools in the U.S. southern states a generation ago, the South African school system has been a major factor in perpetuating racial inequality.

(See Apartheid, Page 14)

Zambian women brace for local elections

By Isabel Mwenya

Special to Sentinel-Voice

LUSAKA, Zambia (PANA) — Zambian women, marginalized for years by their male counterparts in almost all areas of national life, are bracing themselves for local government elections.

Various women's organizations, led by the Women's Lobby Group, have started charting strategies intended to identify and support fellow women candidates.

A total of 1,250 seats will be contested in the 72 local authorities, all of which are presently dominated by male councilors, most of whom come from President Frederick Chiluba's ruling Movement for Multiparty Democracy.

The government has not yet announced the date for the polls but reports from around the country say that candidates from the more than 20 registered parties have already

kicked off their unofficial campaigns.

Leaders in the Women's Lobby Group, the country's largest women's organization, have said a handful of women have been identified to run as councilors. Group officials said they are determined to prevent a repeat of the previous two general elections which were marked by low voter turnout among women.

Women hold less than 20 positions of the 1,379 councilor positions and only one senior local council political post: in Lusaka where a woman is deputy mayor. The status quo is similar in the central government where there is only one female cabinet minister out of 23. Of the 40 deputy minister positions, women hold four.

Of the 158 members of parliament, only 14 are women. The gender imbalance similarly affects other levels including the judiciary where

there are only two female supreme court justices and the civil service sector; women hold eight permanent secretaries positions, there are 40.

The low representation of women at various decision-making levels in the country has been attributed to a variety of reasons, including alleged deliberate action by male-dominated government leadership to keep them out.

Kabunda Kayongo, a former cabinet minister appointed to Chiluba's first government in 1991, has lumped the blame on the women. "Women simply do not support their own gender," she said.

Agriculture, food and fisheries minister, Edith Nawakwi, the sole female cabinet minister in the current cabinet, blames a lack of adequate material and financial resources enabling women to

compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts.

A female independent member of parliament, Charity Mwansa thinks the selection procedure of most political parties, including the appointing of authorities, deliberately favor men.

Mwansa, a lawyer, cited Chiluba's nomination of seven members, all males, to the current parliament. Under the law, the president is empowered to nominate up to 10 members.

"In my view, the president could have tried to tilt the gender imbalance in parliament," said Mwansa, who stood as an independent in the 1996 polls after Chiluba's party turned down her application for nomination in favor of a male candidate whom she eventually defeated.

Another member of parliament of the ruling party, (See Zambia, Page 16)

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