

# Nigerian strongman dies of heart attack

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

LAGOS, Nigeria—The Nigerian dictator who for years defied the world, crushed internal uprisings and stalled ceding power to civilians in Africa's most populous nation, died Monday of a heart attack.

Gen. Sani Abacha was 54. Just who will lead this impoverished but oil-rich country is uncertain. Abacha's military regime gave no signs it was prepared to yield power, nor have Nigeria's many rival ethnic groups said they would cooperate in a peaceful change of government.

Crowds in the commercial capital, Lagos, broke into cheers at news of the Abacha's death, hoping his passing means a return to democracy.

Top officials from the military's Provisional Ruling Council were meeting late into the night, apparently to hash out the question of Abacha's successor.

Abacha, who came to power in a coup after canceling presidential elections in 1993, never indicated who would take his place as leader of Nigeria's 115 million people.

The West African nation is made up of numerous religious and ethnic groups that have often turned to violence to assert power over one another. Without a clear line of succession, the country's many opposition groups could seek to capitalize on the power void.

Word of Abacha's death came after heavily armed soldiers sealed off his home and office in Abuja. Only the country's top military brass were permitted to enter the compound.

In keeping with Muslim practice, Abacha was buried in his hometown of Kano, near the border with Niger, before sundown Monday, Radio Lagos reported. Martial music filled the airwaves.

Top Nigerian officials convened an emergency meeting hours after his death. Two likely successors include Nigeria's chief of defense, Staff Maj. Gen. Abdul Abubakar Salam, and Lt. Gen. Jeremiah Useni, the minister for the capital territory of Abuja.

Oil executives in the Niger Delta city of Port Harcourt said Abacha's death would have little affect on oil production.

Nigeria's oil industry—one of the largest in the world—was left to decay under Abacha's rule, but continues to be the country's largest source of export revenue.

In Washington, State Department spokesman James P. Rubin called for a "genuine democratic process" leading to a transfer of power from military to civilian rule in Nigeria.

Even by the standards of Nigerian military rule, Abacha stood out as ruthless and unforgiving, willing to flout world opinion in his quest for supreme power.

Critics faced arrest and, sometimes, execution if challenged Abacha and his military government—or challenged his handling of the nation's lucrative oil resources.

Born Sept. 20, 1943, in the northern state of Kano, Abacha was a career soldier, enrolling as an army infantryman at 18 and attending military training colleges in the United Kingdom and United States in addition to Nigeria.

When generals ousted Nigeria's last civilian government in 1983, it was Abacha who announced it on national television. Two years later, he went on state-run TV again to say that dictator Gen. Mohammed Buhari was being replaced by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida.

In 1993, Abacha himself seized power in a coup. He soon jailed Moshood Abiola, a businessman who had won nullified presidential elections that same year.

New elections that were to have given the country a civilian government in 1996 never materialized, and Abacha announced he was stretching his rule until the end of 1998.

Other arrests soon followed, among them former military ruler Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo and 50 others accused of plotting a coup and sentenced after a secret tribunal to terms ranging from 15 years to life.

But no act drew such public condemnation as the Nov. 10, 1995, hanging of environmentalist and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other political activists convicted in a closed military tribunal of murdering political opponents.

Critics said the charges were false—Abacha's revenge for Saro-Wiwa's constant challenges to the military government and his criticisms of the environmental damage wrought by the oil industry.

In London, the son of Saro-Wiwa said that Abacha was the worst in a long line of human rights abusers in Nigeria.

# U.S. pushes for democratic Nigeria

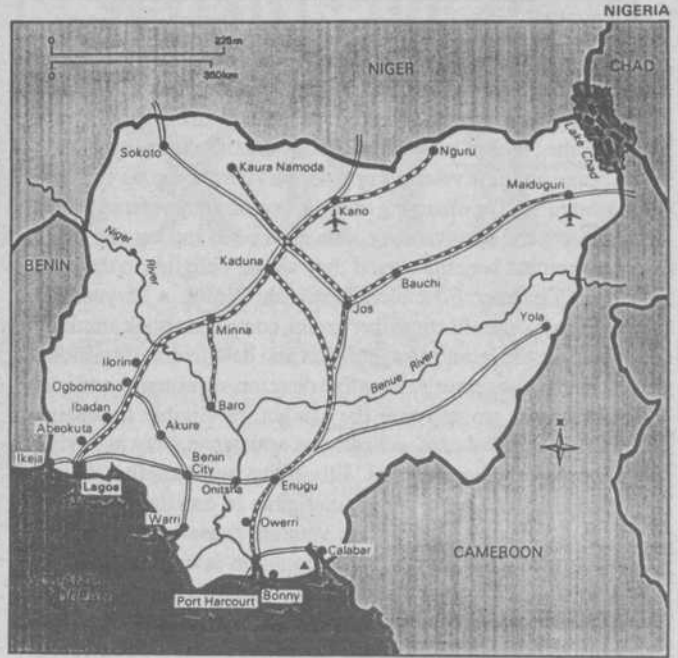
*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

WASHINGTON - Seizing on the death of President Sani Abacha, the State Department on Monday urged Nigeria's new leadership to speed the transition to democratic rule.

Spokesman James P. Rubin said in a statement Monday that the United States grieved with Nigerian people during the "difficult time" after Abacha's death. The statement offered sympathy to the Abacha family.

The U.S. government "acknowledges the death" of Abacha, White House spokesman Mike McCurry said, and is interested in seeing his successor embark upon democratic rule—even if that successor comes out of the Nigerian military, as Abacha did.

"There have been freely and democratically elected figures throughout Africa that were formerly involved in the military," McCurry said. "Our hope, among others, would be, at this moment of transition, that an accountable civilian government ... will emerge from what has been a very horrific episode in which basic fundamental rights have been



suspended."

McCurry was speaking in New York, where President Clinton had traveled to deliver a speech at the United Nations and attend a Democratic fundraiser.

Abacha, an Army general, had expressed interest in a transition to civilian rule in Nigeria, but the Clinton administration objected after it became apparent that he wanted to perpetuate his own

rule by running unopposed as a civilian after retiring from the military.

A high-level State Department mission had intended to issue a personal appeal to Abacha last week that he reassess his plan for remaining in power. But the mission was canceled after Nigeria imposed conditions on the visit that the State Department considered unacceptable.

# Cosby trial judge bans cameras

*Special to Sentinel-Voice*

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — The judge who will preside over the Ennis Cosby murder trial banned cameras from his courtroom.

"Criminal cases which involve the children of celebrities are the types of cases which should not be televised or publicized in any fashion directly from the courtroom," Superior Court Judge David Perez said in an opinion released Monday.

Mikhail Markhasev, 19, a Ukrainian immigrant who has a history of gang affiliations, has been charged with shooting Bill Cosby's son to death on Jan. 16, 1997. Ennis Cosby was 27.

During preliminary

"Permitting cameras would turn the trial into a TV episode or a segment for a tabloid newspaper, magazine or show rather than a search for the truth."

— Superior Court Judge David Perez

hearings, defense attorneys had urged Perez to prevent the trial from becoming an O.J. Simpson-style spectacle while members of the media have petitioned him for an open proceeding.

"Allowing this trial to be televised or still photographs

to be taken during the trial will, in my opinion, distract the jurors," Perez wrote.

Permitting cameras would turn the trial into "a TV episode or a segment for a tabloid newspaper, magazine or show rather than a search for the truth," he said.

He said the requirements of a public trial will be met by giving 40 of 80 seats in the courtroom to news reporters.

Perez said most prospective jurors who filled out jury questionnaires last week expressed concerns about media attention.

"It is my responsibility to prevent the jurors in this trial from being distracted in the exercise of their responsibility," he said.

# Murder

(Continued from Page 1)

Byrd's body was discovered Sunday morning.

Tuesday, there were 75 red spray-painted circles along the road to mark where police had found either Byrd's belongings—his keys and dentures—or body parts.

The chain believed to be used to drag him was found behind a house.

Police said they have a witness who saw Byrd in Berry's truck. Authorities also said they discovered a wrench engraved with Berry's name near the body that resembles similar tools from Berry's truck.

The three men initially were

picked up for possession of stolen property, authorities said. Officers investigating a break-in at a restaurant allegedly caught them with a large quantity of frozen meat.

FBI agents met with the sheriff on Tuesday, and federal

civil rights charges may be filed, authorities said.

Byrd, a former vacuum salesman and father of three, didn't have a car and lived on disability checks because of an arm injury, said his sister, Clara Taylor.

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