

## INTERNATIONAL

## Nigerian woman seeks presidency

LAGOS, Nigeria (IPS)—Nigeria's first female presidential aspirant, Sarah Jubril, will challenge 29 men, including incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo, at the polls on April 1.

Jubril, a long-time politician, was unanimously adopted as her party's candidate during a convention held in Abuja, the administrative capital of Nigeria, last weekend.

Jubril, who has been aiming at the presidency since 1992, is sponsored by newly registered but less known Progressive Action Congress (PAC).

"The wind of change is in favor of the progressives. A government of the true progressives is the answer. Therefore, this is not the time to give up, but a time to think positive towards a better tomorrow," she said, while accepting her nomination.

"The nomination of Mrs. Jubril is a plus at least; it will inspire women to renew their hope. But, generally speaking, I do not see her as making any impact," says Toro Oladapo of Women in Nigeria (WIN), a non-governmental organization (NGO).

"Mrs. Jubril was a presidential aspirant of the disbanded National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and came fourth (in 1992). She knows she cannot achieve her ambition of standing as a presidential candidate in big parties. Hence, she went to a party she knows she can manipulate and get a ticket easily," Oladapo claims. "Nobody in the big parties, where men hold sway, would have given her the chance. It is all a joke, she knows she cannot win. It is still a man's game in Nigeria."

But Yetunde Gandonou, of the Lagos-based National Council of Women Societies, has pledged to mobilize

women to contribute "morally" and "financially" to make Jubril's bid at the April polls a success.

"We do not want the military to come back through the backdoor to politics. We have to do something to ensure they are not back, whether as civilians or military. We are going to mobilize our womenfolk to vote for Mrs. Jubril," Gandonou told IPS.

President Obasanjo and his main rival, Muhammadu Buhari, were both army generals and former military rulers.

Nigeria has 30 political parties, which are expected to submit their nomination lists to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), following last week's primaries in which presidential candidates were elected.

For two years, Nigeria's big political parties—the ruling Peoples' Democratic

Party (PDP), the All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD)—have promised female members a level playing field.

They also exempted female aspirants from paying nomination fees, which range from \$2,500 to \$100,000 depending on the position being contested.

However, when federal government primaries were taking place, the major parties shoved aside their female aspirants, prompting accusations of alleged marginalization of female politicians.

The ploy prompted 400 PDP female aspirants to invade Abuja on Jan. 9 to complain.

Chidima Ibe-Ejiogu, a parliamentary aspirant, alleges no primary was held in her constituency in eastern Nigeria, where, she claims, "doctored" lists of voters was presented.

## African reggae celeb: Peace in Ivory Coast

NEW YORK (GIN)—The renowned and outspoken star of African reggae, Alpha Blondy, is adding his voice to the many calls for a cease-fire in the embattled Ivory Coast, where rebels groups and government forces have been escalating their battle for control of this West African nation.

In a recent interview, Blondy made an impassioned appeal for cool tempers in Ivory Coast, where a rebellion that began Sept. 19 has now torn apart a nation formerly known for welcoming people of all nationalities to live and work there.

"If we don't find a quick solution now, tomorrow will be too late," Blondy said. "We won't be talking about an uprising of a few rebels—we'll be talking about a war that will last maybe 20 years or more."

A 50-year-old native of Ivory Coast, Blondy made his name and his following bringing reggae from the Caribbean to Africa—discovering reggae in 1970 at a U.S. concert by Jamaican legends Burning Spear. His latest reggae album, "Merci," was nominated for a Grammy.

In the decades since—most particularly the last—he has released numerous songs warning of the dangers of tribalism, racism, injustice and inequality.

All such evils, he says, have flourished in his home country, fostered by greedy politicians since the death of Ivory Coast's first president, Felix Houphouet-Boigny.

Blondy's works include a CD titled "SOS Tribal War" and a song called "Civil War," whose warnings of an uprising against an entrenched president ring today as an uncannily accurate prediction of the crisis in Ivory Coast.

Once a peaceful country earning foreign dividends with the world's largest cocoa producer, Ivory Coast began a downward slide in 1999 when soldiers overthrew the elected government, accusing it of corruption, ineffectiveness and discrimination against northerners. Coup forces announced their takeover on a station that played the songs of Blondy and others beloved by the opposition.

Some called it Ivory Coast's "reggae revolution"—marked by junta soldiers cruising the streets in vehicles whose stereos blasted the words of Jah. Rather than ending corrupt rule, however, the coup has ushered in chaos and ethnic, regional and political bloodletting.

Today, the rebellion that began with a new Sept. 19 coup attempt has divided the country, killed hundreds, caused thousands to flee their homes and threatened the country's very survival. Ivory Coast, Blondy fears, is teetering on the brink of genocide.

"Machine guns sing louder than me. My little voice cannot overcome the deadly music of machine guns and rockets," said Ivory Coast's most-famous artist. The only winners in Ivory Coast will be the world's arms merchants, he warned, who are supplying both the government forces and the rebel groups with weapons.

## Caribbean feels backlash from Venezuela crisis

PORT OF SPAIN, Trinidad (IPS)—When Trinidad and Tobago shipped 300,000 barrels of oil to neighboring Venezuela on Dec. 31, the opposition in Caracas said the action was tantamount to political interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state.

Trinidad's Foreign Minister Knowlson Gift dismissed the accusation, insisting it was helping a "legitimately, democratically elected government."

"It is not as though we are sending soldiers to Caracas or arms and ammunition," he added.

While Caribbean nations have largely stayed at arms-length from the political turmoil created by the opposition strike in Venezuela, they have been hurt by the drop in imports of cheap petroleum from the South American nation.

The English-speaking Caribbean, schooled in the Westminster system of government, finds it extremely difficult to support any move to overthrow any democratically elected government, says Anthony Gonsalves, head of the Institute of International Relations at the University of the West Indies (UWI).

"We are very constitution minded. This is where the Caribbean governments are coming from: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez

heads an elected government; they have difficulty in going against a government that was elected," Gonsalves told IPS.

Even attempts by Venezuela's opposition to get the region's trade unions on its side have been rebuffed. The powerful Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU) in Trinidad and Tobago labeled the street demonstrations in Caracas as a "big business, CIA strike against the democratically elected government."

Venezuela opposition spokeswoman Francia Galea says the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) countries are being duped by Chavez and "a good international propaganda machinery."

Galea also had a warning for the nations.

"The fact is that Chavez is leading this country down the road of Communism and dictatorship, and once that happens in Venezuela it would happen in the Caribbean islands, including Trinidad and Tobago."

But warning signs are being raised in the economic rather than the political sphere, with one economist recommending regional leaders approach international lenders as a bloc "to use whatever leverage they can muster in the international community to gain concessionary financing from the large economies" to deal with the fallout from Venezuela.

"The Venezuela crisis could not have come at a worst time for the island economies of the Caribbean. It adds another handicap to the difficulties they have to deal with," said Dhanyshar Mahabir, a lecturer at University of the West Indies.

"The Venezuela situation is going to increase the cost of running the economies of these islands, including their balance of payment problems," he added.

Last week Cuba said it lost more than \$200 million in 2002 due to interruptions of oil deliveries from Caracas. Under an agreement signed between President Fidel Castro and Chavez in October 2000, Caracas promised to sell the Communist state 53,000 barrels of crude a day for five years.

Other CARICOM and Latin American countries that purchase oil from Venezuela at preferential rates are also suffering.

The Jamaican government, worried not only about the situation in Caracas but also about a possible attack on Iraq by the United States, has been encouraging energy conservation.

Commerce, Science and Technology Minister Phillip Paulwell said that the Petroleum Corporation of Jamaica (PCJ) would be mandated to get back into the business of selling solar panels for solar

water heaters".

In order to meet the shortfall in the Venezuelan supply, Jamaica has started purchasing more crude oil from Ecuador and Mexico and bought finished products such as gas oil, diesel oil and liquid petroleum gas from Trinidad, he added.

Prices of petroleum products have jumped between 53 percent and 97 per cent in Haiti, where commuters have also started paying higher bus fares and petroleum dealers are asking for increased subsidies from the government.



### USA AXIS OF EVIL

Indonesian Muslim protesters hold posters during a demonstration outside the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta on Wednesday. Dozens of Muslims staged a protest against possible U.S. military strike on Iraq.