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...May seek asylum abroad, Nigeria risks diplomatic sanctions

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Indication emerged on Friday that the former chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, may have either slipped out of the country or gone underground in order to save his life. In fact, a United States-based Nigerian news agency, Empowered Newswire, reports that unconfirmed speculations indicated that anti corruption Czar may have sought asylum in an unnamed western nation. Checks in the Adamawa State capital, Yola, where he was said to have gone to on Thursday, indicated that his family members were not sure of his whereabouts.

His latest move follows growing global perception that Ribadu's personal security may be under threat, especially after he revealed to an international watchdog, Human Rights Watch, that his life was being threatened. Already, there are plans by human rights and pro-democracy groups in the US to challenge Ribadu's persecution by the Federal Government. Besides, HRW officials are said to be planning an advocacy war against the Federal Government and its agencies regarding Ribadu's fate, who was recently prevented from graduating with other members of his class at the National Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, Jos.

Besides, another pro-democracy group of Nigerians based in the US, Citizens for Nigeria, has warned that the country can no longer tolerate the harassment of the former anti-corruption czar. The group, which campaigned successfully abroad against former military president, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida's bid to return to power in 2007, will also open an international diplomatic fight against the Nigerian government over Ribadu's matter.

A source warned that the image of President Umaru Yar'Adua's government would suffer terribly once respected human rights groups such as the HRW and US-based Nigerians commenced the campaign. This is especially so as Nigeria is currently holding the chairmanship slot of the United Human Rights Council and is also seeking membership of the Security Council, both at the non-permanent and permanent levels.

In fact, at the UN, it is believed that Nigeria's anti-corruption fight, which was a source of global pride some years ago, may have become a laughing stock given deep-seated concerns about Ribadu. Confirming plans by the HRW to embark on an international advocacy campaign on the Ribadu matter, the group's Senior Researcher on West Africa, Corinne Dufka, said, "We're doing quite a bit of advocacy with the US, United Kingdom, ECOWAS, UN (through UNOWA) and AU."

Also, in a statement by the CFN's Chris Odediran in New Jersey, USA, the group accused the Yar'Adua administration of leading the world to believe it respected the rule of law and focused on the war against corruption, "but has in its actions demonstrated an unmistakable disdain for the symbol of the war, Mr. Nuhu Ribadu."

Meanwhile, some British lawmakers on a fact-finding tour to Nigeria have expressed concerns over Nigeria's war against corruption. Briefing journalists in Abuja on Friday, the parliamentarians, under the auspices of the British All Parliamentary Group on Nigeria, warned that there was a sense from their visit that Nigeria was waiting at a crossroads.

They also said the Nigerian government and the people needed to demonstrate leadership, if the path to greater prosperity and justice would be achieved. Although they did not make any specific reference to recent development at the EFCC, the lawmakers said their findings revealed that corruption was still ravaging the country.

Speaking on behalf of the team, MP Michael Connarty, said, "Lastly, but perhaps most fundamentally to all of these things, we heard how corruption continues to eat away at progress and prosperity across all walks of life in Nigeria."

He noted that visiting parliamentarians were saddened by the violence in Jos, Plateau State and had urged all communities to realise their common interest in supporting themselves as Nigerians and resist those who sought to divide them.

Connarty, however, said the delegation was impressed by the determination of Nigerians to build on the important reforms of recent years, adding that there was a central need to improve power supply in order to lift the people from poverty. The APPG was formed in April 2006 from what had originally been the Niger Delta All Party Parliamentary Group.

Also, at a media luncheon on Friday, the European Delegation to Nigeria said the fight against corruption in Nigeria would continue to receive its support in the year 2009. The Acting Head of Mission, Mr. Denis Thieulin, said the commission recognised Ribadu's efforts. He said, "Ribadu did very well at the EFCC, he gave direction and strength to the fight against corruption, but we will still continue to support the fight against corruption."

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