

21.03.06

ICC/CONGO - ICC ARRESTS ITS FIRST WAR CRIMES SUSPECT

Arusha, March 20th, 2006 (FH)-A Congolese warlord wanted by the International Criminal Court was Friday arrested in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and handed over to the court.

As statement from the ICC said that "Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, leader of the Union des Patriotes Congolais/Forces Patriotique pour la liberation du Congo (UPC/FPLC) is accused of conscripting into the FPLC or using to participate actively in hostilities children under the age of 15" which constitutes a war crime.

The alleged crimes were committed between July 2002 and December 2003.

Lubanga's group had been very active in the eastern DRC during the interethnic violence that pitted the Hema against the Lendu tribes that rocked Ituri province in 1999.

The UPC was among the 13 armed groups that proliferated in the Ituri region which borders Uganda and the Sudan.

Lubanga and four other warlords were arrested in March 2005 following the assassination of nine Bangladeshi soldiers of the UN peace keeping forces, MONUC.

His arrest and transfer to the seat of the court in The Hague was facilitated by France and MONUC. France contributed a military plane to transfer the warlord.

A judicial calendar published by the international court had set March 20 as the date for the preliminary hearings.

The International Criminal Court was set up on July 17, 2001 under the Rome statutes with the aim of promoting the rule of law and ensuring that the gravest international crimes do not go unpunished.

The Statute came into force on July 1, 2002 and anyone who commits crimes covered by the statutes after this date is liable to be prosecuted by the court.

Although Thomas Lubanga is the first person to be apprehended by the international court, the prosecutor of the ICC has put out arrest warrants for other suspects.

Top on the list of those sought by the court is Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a military-religious sect-like armed group that has been causing havoc in northern Uganda for the last 20 years.

Other members of the LRA on the same wanted list as Kony are his deputy Vincent Otti, Raska Lukwiya, Okot Othiambo and Dominic Onguen.

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