

Gbagbo appears in The Hague

THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS: Cote d'Ivoire's former president Laurent Gbagbo on Tuesday (19 February) faced International Criminal Court judges who will decide whether there is enough evidence to try him for masterminding a bloody election standoff two years ago.

Presiding judge Silvia Fernandez de Gurmendi opened the hearings at the Hague-based court's headquarters and prosecutors launched their case later in the afternoon.

Gbagbo, 67, the first-ever former head of state to appear before the ICC, faces four counts of crimes against humanity including murder and rape for fomenting a wave of violence which swept the west African nation after he refused to concede defeat in November 2010 presidential polls.

Four months of fighting followed, ravaging the world's largest cocoa producer and leaving some 3,000 people dead, according to the UN.

For just over a week, prosecutors and the defence will argue their cases before a three-judge bench, who will then decide if there are "substantial grounds to believe that Gbagbo committed the crimes" and should be charged.

The prosecution says Gbagbo spearheaded a plan to "stay in power by all means through carefully planned, sustained and deadly attacks" against supporters of election winner and current Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara.

Between 28 November, 2010 and 8 May, 2011 Gbagbo's forces killed between 706 and 1,059 people and raped more than 35 women, prosecutors say.

In one instance, about 80 people were massacred when perceived Ouattara supporters were attacked in the north-western Abidjan suburb of Yopougon a day after Gbagbo's arrest.

His supporters in turn have accused Ouattara's camp of practising "victor's justice" as many of the former president's backers are now behind bars, including his wife Simone Gbagbo, who is also wanted for prosecution by the ICC, while none of those close to the Ouattara regime has been arrested despite accusations of rights abuses.

Gbagbo, a former historian-turned-politician, was finally arrested on 11 April, 2011, when Ouattara's forces with French and UN backing over-ran his heavily fortified compound in the southern economic capital after days of heavy fighting.

He was taken to the northern Ivorian town of Korhogo, where he spent almost eight months under house arrest before being transferred to the ICC's detention unit in November 2011.

During his first and only public appearance before ICC judges a few days later on 5 December that year, Gbagbo accused France of orchestrating his arrest, while his supporters at the time branded his incarceration a "political kidnapping." He has denied the charges against him.

Since then, the scheduled hearing to confirm the charges has twice been delayed, once to give his lawyers more time to prepare and again to assess his health to see if he was fit to stand trial.

ICC judges ruled in November last year he could take part, but have instituted shorter court sessions and are allowing him, if need be, to appear via video link because of his health.

Tuesday's hearings are to last over a week, with Gbagbo expected to speak on the final day, 28 February.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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