

Commonwealth chief says African democracy growing.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, March 20 (Reuters) - Democracy has taken root in most African countries but needs nurturing, Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku said on Thursday.

He told Reuters an interview that, with serious strife persisting in such countries as Rwanda, Zaire and Sudan, the grouping of Britain and its former colonies and protectorates had a key role to play in mediation.

"In terms of democracy, a good many of African nations have transformed themselves from dictatorships and unstable governments to democratic governments. But the foundations still need to be nurtured and supported," he added.

He said Africa was making impressive economic progress.

"In Sub-Saharan Africa you have no less than 20 countries that have achieved record economic growth of over three percent and they expect between now and 2002 to achieve higher than four percent growth," he said.

"At least two countries, Botswana and Uganda, have maintained growth rates of over seven percent in the last four years."

The unrest rolling over parts of Africa could be traced back to a time when states were carved out under colonial rule, said Anyaoku, who is on a 12-day tour that will also take him to Bangladesh and Australia.

"A number of African states have been preoccupied with turning themselves into nations because they were arbitrarily created, ignoring natural lines of ethnicity and geography," he said.

"The ethnic dimensions of these problems in Rwanda, Burundi and eastern Zaire were sharpened by the arbitrariness of the creation of these states. In Sudan where you have had unending war between the Arabic north and the African-Christian south, you could say it is the result of arbitrary division."

Anyaoku said the Commonwealth, which groups Britain and its former colonies and protectorates, was currently active in mediating a solution to the violence in Sierra Leone, where a peace accord signed last November by the government with the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) has threatened to unravel.

On March 16 Sierra Leone President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah offered to work with a new leadership of the RUF after it announced the sacking of leader Foday Sankoh for blocking the peace process.

Anyaoku, who was Nigeria's foreign minister in its last civilian government in 1983, said he was hopeful democracy would be restored in the West African nation by its military rulers.

"I believe that in Nigeria the population wants democracy, the military rulers know that the country wants democracy and have committed themselves, and so I am hopeful," he said.

Earlier this week Nigeria's military government cited enthusiastic voting in local elections as proof of popular support for its disputed civil-rule plan.

Political analysts have cautioned that the future of democracy in the West African nation was far from clear with no sign of a constitution to serve as a blueprint for a new order.

In 1995 the Commonwealth suspended Nigeria from membership after the hanging of writer Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other minority activists after a special court convicted them of murder.

Anyaoku, who is in the middle of his second five-year term as Commonwealth Secretary-General, said more countries were queueing up to join the 53-nation grouping.

"Rwanda and Yemen (have asked to join) and we have had an indication from the Palestine state," he said.



The Commonwealth sent observers to key national elections in Bangladesh and Pakistan over the past year.

"I think the elections in Bangladesh and Pakistan were well organised. But democracy is more than just elections. Democracy requires a culture that sustains it," Anyaoku said.

"Let me say democracy has no common format that you can transpose to every country. What democracy requires are free elections, an independent judiciary, freedom of association and expression, and public accountability," he added.

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