

Sudan's Bashir arrives in Nigeria to anger of rights groups

By Reuters

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ABUJA (Reuters) - Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir arrived in Nigeria on Sunday for an African Union summit on HIV/AIDS as his hosts chose to ignore an International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant against him.

Bashir, accused of masterminding genocide and other atrocities during Sudan's Darfur conflict, which has left some 200,000 people dead, in theory risks arrest if he travels to one of the more than 120 states including Nigeria that have signed up to the ICC.

He has been refused trips to Uganda, South Africa, Malawi and Zambia in the past because of his indictment. This is his first trip to West Africa since the warrant was issued.

The African Union (AU) voted in 2009 not to cooperate with the ICC indictments, saying they would hamper efforts to end Sudan's multiple conflicts. Bashir rejects the ICC charges.

"The Sudanese president came for an AU event and the AU has taken a position on the ICC arrest order, so Nigeria has not taken action different from the AU stand," presidential spokesman Reuben Abati said.

Human Rights Watch

International Justice Program director Elise Keppler said Nigeria had "the shameful distinction of being the first West African country to welcome ICC fugitive Sudanese President Sudan al-Bashir".

"Al-Bashir is sought on the gravest crimes ... and Nigeria's hosting is an affront to victims - he belongs in custody," she said.

The main African Union summit this month had to be moved to Ethiopia, which has not signed the ICC statute, after Malawi, heavily dependent on Western aid, refused to host Bashir.

Though initially welcomed by African leaders, the ICC has been accused of exclusively targeting African war criminals and failing to indict anyone from other continents, a charge the ICC and its backers says is unfair.

(Reporting by Tim Cocks, Camillus Eboh and Felix Obuah; Editing by Kevin Liffey)

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Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir stands for the national anthem on arrival at Bole International airport for the 21st Ordinary Session of the African Union in Addis Ababa (Stringer . Reuters, REUTERS / May 24, 2013)