

TOP NEWS

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Nigeria wants secret trial for al Qaeda suspect



ABUJA (Reuters) - Nigerian government prosecutors want a man accused of plotting attacks on Americans in Nigeria with help from al Qaeda to be tried in secret for security reasons, Nigerian newspapers reported on Friday.

But a Federal High Court in Abuja refused on Thursday to hear the government's application for a secret trial because the accused, Mohammed Ashafa, had not been provided with a lawyer, the newspapers said. The court would consider the government request when the trial resumes, reports said.

Judge Binta Murtala Nyako adjourned the case to April 3 and instructed government prosecutors to ensure Ashafa was properly represented. She also complained that he looked unkempt and ordered that he should be well treated in custody.

Ashafa has pleaded not guilty to five charges of terrorism, according to the newspaper reports. His alleged crimes were committed in 2003 and 2004.

He stands accused of receiving \$1,500 from al Qaeda members in Pakistan with the intention of organizing attacks on the homes of Americans in Nigeria.

He is charged with receiving and decoding messages from an al Qaeda cell in Pakistan and passing them to the self-styled Nigerian Taliban, also with a view to attacking Americans.

The Nigerian Taliban, which has no known connection to the Taliban in Afghanistan, is a group of radical Islamists who launched a brief spate of attacks in late 2003 and early 2004 on police stations and government offices in northeastern Nigeria.

This prompted a fierce military crackdown in which at least 20 people were killed and several others captured. The Nigerian Taliban has hardly been heard of since then.

Ashafa is accused of sponsoring 21 members of the Nigerian Taliban to receive combat training and indoctrination at a camp in Niger run by the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat.

In another case related to the Nigerian Taliban's activities in 2003-2004, a media company director is on trial for allegedly receiving \$300,000 from al Qaeda to organize training for Taliban members in Mauritania.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is split about evenly between Muslims and Christians. They coexist peacefully most of the time although inter-religious violence sometimes breaks out. These conflicts are often intertwined with land, ethnic and political disputes.

In 2003, al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden included Nigeria in a list of six countries he said he wanted to see liberated from enslavement to Washington. Nigeria is the world's sixth largest oil exporter and fifth largest supplier to the United States.

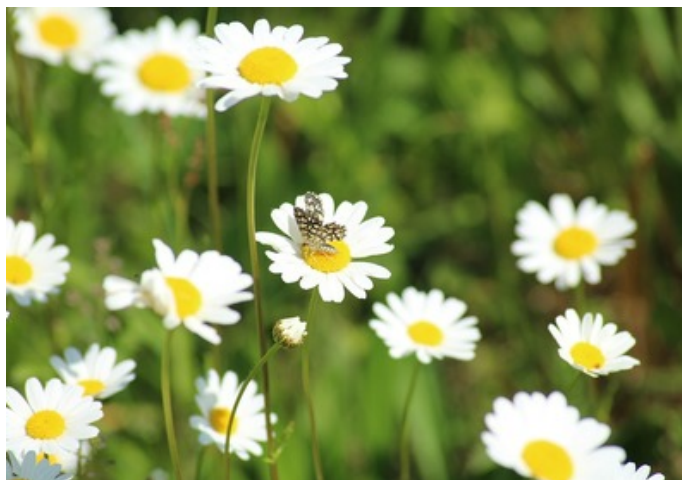
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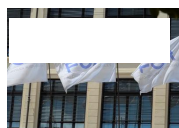
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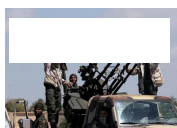
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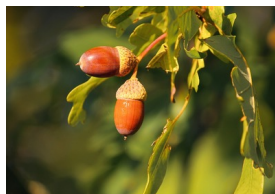
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