

ICC appeals for funds to aid sexual violence victims

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By Aaron Gray-Block

THE HAGUE, Sept 10 (Reuters) - The International Criminal Court launched an appeal for 10 million euros (\$14.16 million) on Wednesday to fund rehabilitation programmes for 1.7 million victims of sexual violence during Africa's wars.

Previous war crimes tribunals have faced criticism for staging costly trials while not doing enough to compensate victims, but the ICC, set up as the world's first permanent war crimes court in 2002, offers a "Trust Fund for Victims" partly in answer to such criticism.

Denmark responded to the appeal with a donation of 500,000 euros -- the largest government contribution to the fund, which began operating in 2007.

Additional donations are expected when the assembly of 108 countries that have ratified the statute which established the court meets in The Hague in December.

The ICC is investigating conflicts in northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and the Sudanese region of Darfur for possible war crimes.

The fund is intended to help victims in these areas, independently of any trials, although the ICC also has the power to ask it to make reparations to individual victims.

"When we look at sexual violence and abuse through the DRC or Darfur, we understand the horrific magnitude of the problem and the urgent need to address it," South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of the trust fund's five board members, told a news conference in The Hague.

He added he hoped it would help "the anonymous ones, the ones victimised by rape used as a tactic of war".

The fund will pay for rehabilitation and counselling, help reduce the discrimination faced by victims of sexual violence and improve their economic opportunities.

It will use donations to expand its work in the Congo and Uganda and to enter the Central African Republic in 2009. It aims to enter Sudan within three years, but Sudan has not yet granted the ICC the necessary conditions in order to work there.

The court has four suspects in its custody in The Hague, all from Congo, but has yet to start its first trial.

In July the court's chief prosecutor requested an arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir on charges of genocide in Darfur. (Additional reporting by Alexandra Hudson)



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