

Kenya launches inquiry into £400m export scam
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Kenya's new government took a stride towards fulfilling its people's dearest hope yesterday by launching a special commission to investigate the theft of £400m of public funds in the country's biggest ever corruption scandal.

Leading figures in former president Daniel arap Moi's ruinous 24-year regime have long been implicated in the so-called Goldenberg scandal which involved the payout of vast sums in compensation for fictitious exports of gold and diamonds.

The compensation scheme was ostensibly designed to promote exports of the two precious minerals; though Kenya has negligible reserves of either.

Since the scandal broke in 1992, none of the alleged thieves has been found guilty - and only a handful were charged.

"With this commission, finally the Kenyan people will be able to close one of the most ignominious chapters in the nation's economic history," said a representative for President Mwai Kibaki, who swept to power in December's election.

"This decision was informed by a realisation that these cases have been dragging through the courts for years without any apparent increase in the possibility that justice shall be done for the Kenyan people."

The new inquiry was prompted by a recent statement from several of Kenya's most senior judges, castigating the former government for charging only two officials in connection with the scandal, as well as the acknowledged fall-guy, Kamlesh Pattni, a director of the Goldenberg International gemstone company.

Kenya's long-serving intelligence boss, James Kanyotu, another director of the company, was among the alleged miscreants who have never been charged. Eric Kotut -- at the time governor of Kenya's central bank -- was another. Yet the investigation will be judged on the rigour with which it examines the alleged role of Kibaki's new education minister in the scandal.

George Saitoti, Kenya's finance minister at the time and a long-serving former vice-president, has been dogged by allegations of complicity in the scandal, which he denies.

Yesterday's announcement was by far the most significant stage in an extensive clean-up of Moi's regime by the new government. The gathering pace of the clean-up has astonished the most optimistic analysts.

Other landmarks include the resignation yesterday of Kenya's most senior judge, following his suspension last week pending investigation on charges including corruption, intimidation and instituting torture.

"President Mwai Kibaki has today accepted the resignation of Honourable Bernard Chunga as chief justice," the president's representative said.

The investigation into Chunga was preceded by the opening of the Moi government's torture chambers to the public earlier this month. Day after day, sombre Kenyans filed silently through three cells in the basement of Nyayo House, a government building in central Nairobi.

Chunga is accused of "planning, condoning and executing a programme of torture" in his former job as one of Moi's most dependable state prosecutors.

Several of Kibaki's new members of parliament felt its effects, including one who was flung from the third storey of Nyayo House.

- President Kibaki, who has pledged to abolish capital punishment, ordered the release of 28 death row prisoners from jail yesterday. He also commuted the death sentences of 195 prisoners to life imprisonment.