

Abacha's family swaps \$1,2-billion for pardon
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THE family of Nigeria's late military ruler Sani Abacha is close to reaching a deal to return \$1,2-billion dollars stolen from public funds in return for "an official pardon", the newspaper This Day reported on Monday.

The out-of-court settlement between the family and the government is being worked out by Justice Minister Kanu Agabi and representatives of the Abacha family. It follows more than three years of government efforts to recover money transferred abroad under the 1993-1998 Abacha regime, the newspaper said.

The family was already reported to have returned \$750-million months after the death of Abacha in June 1998 and in January the government announced that a further \$168-million had been returned.

Government officials and Abacha family representatives were not immediately available on Monday to comment on the report in This Day.

If confirmed, the deal would have an impact in a number of European countries where money linked to the Abacha family is reported to be located.

In the past three years, banks in Britain, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg and Switzerland have frozen accounts linked to the family.

In total, the family is reported to have diverted between three and four billion dollars of public funds out of the country during Abacha's rule but how much of that money is now recoverable is unclear.

According to the report, the government pardon would put a halt to all prosecutions save on criminal matters.

Abacha's eldest son, Mohammed, is currently in detention on murder charges over a political killing linked to his father's regime. The trial is now into its third year.

And the family is known to be pressing for his release and that of other Abacha associates, also on trial for murder and attempted murder.

This Day said that the deal would leave the Abacha family far from poor -with known assets of \$300-million, a considerable sum in a country with the world's third largest number of people living in poverty, after India and China.

Abacha acquired most of his wealth while in senior military posts in the 1980s and 1990s and during his 1993-98 regime.

The government announced in January that the former finance minister under Abacha's regime, Anthony Ani, has also refunded some \$13,7-million to the Nigerian government. - Sapa-AFP