

Hazy prospects in Nigeria

NIGERIA continues to be in turmoil after the sudden death of the popular opposition leader, Moshood Abiola, on Tuesday. Sixty people have died in three days and peace evades Africa's most populous nation. The military government's failure to control the situation is indeed telling. Given their past record, the rulers lack credibility. Since Abiola's popularity was established and the circumstances of his death were out of the ordinary, it is not surprising that his Yoruba clansmen in the southwest suspect foul play. Not everyone is certain that the transition process will not be rolled back.

It is, however, plain that the autocratic forces in Abuja have to find a way out of the present crisis by restoring democracy. After having been treated as a pariah for the last several years, Nigeria was on way to re-enter the international fold in the wake of Sani Abacha's death in June. It is encouraging that in the last few weeks many distinguished foreign visitors have returned from Nigeria with a clear impression that the promised democratic transition will not be reversed.

General Abubakar's hesitation is not altogether surprising, however. The compromise agreement he had reached with Abiola has naturally been upset by the latter's death because he was expected to play a key role in assuring the army of a smooth transition. There is no other obvious figure to play that role now. Hence the delay in the announcement of the

transition process. The task force which has now been set up will recommend the measures to be taken to pave the way for democracy's return to Nigeria.

The problem Nigeria faces is two-fold. First there is the need to get the armed forces to relinquish office — and with that the perks and privileges they enjoy — and hand over power to an elected government. This is not easy in a country where the generals have held power for three decades. The second problem is to find a power-sharing arrangement which accommodates the pulls and pressures of a multi-ethnic society. Nigeria is a fragmented country of 250 ethnic groups where the Hausas from the north fought a deadly civil war with the Ibos and Yorubas in the south in the sixties. To get them to work together peacefully and harmoniously, especially when there is no tradition of political coexistence and power-sharing, is not easy. Matters have been complicated by the fact that the military is dominated by the northerners while Abiola was a Yoruba from Lagos.

The choice before General Abubakar is limited, however. He will have to find a democratic solution to his country's political predicament. The economy has been in a mess for quite some time now and the riots are going to affect economic life even further. The general must at least reassure his countrymen that the passing away of Abiola does not change his political agenda in any way.