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ANNEX 7

Congo protesters demand release of arrested ex-VP

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By Joc Bavier

KINSHASA, May 27 (Reuters) - More than 1,500 supporters of Congo's former vice-president, Jean-Pierre Bemba, marched through the capital Kinshasa singing and chanting on Tuesday to protest against his arrest in Belgium on war crimes charges.

Shouting "Free Bemba!" and carrying posters of the portly former rebel chief, the protesters walked under police escort to Democratic Republic of Congo's parliament, where their leaders met the heads of the national assembly and the Senate.

They then dispersed peacefully, for the moment easing fears of confrontation in the city where armed Bemba loyalists battled members of President Joseph Kabila's guard last year, and several hundred people were killed.

Bemba, a senator and defeated contender in Congo's 2006 presidential election, was arrested in Brussels on Saturday on an International Criminal Court warrant for war crimes committed in the Central African Republic.

The ICC alleges that rebels Bemba sent into Central African Republic in 2002 to back the then-ruler Ange Felix Patasse raped hundreds of women, some of them girls and grandmothers. He denies the accusations.

"He should be freed. He's not a bandit on the run," Francois Muamba, Secretary-General of Bemba's Congo Liberation Movement (MLC) said at Tuesday's march. Witnesses estimated between 1,500 and 2,000 people took part.

'FOR CONGOLESE'

Bemba's supporters accuse the ICC of political bias.

"It looks as though the ICC is just for Congolese. (U.S. President George W.) Bush has killed so many people in Iraq and nothing happens," said one of the protesters, Momene, 33, who is unemployed.

Bemba, whose 2006 election defeat by Joseph Kabila turned him into Congo's most prominent opposition figure, fled into exile last year saying he feared for his life after the clashes in

Kinshasa.

The MLC accused the ICC of timing Bemba's arrest to take place as Congo's opposition was preparing to make him its formal spokesman.

A presidency spokesman told Radio France International that Congo's government had "nothing to do" with Bemba's arrest but would give the ICC what help it needed to establish the truth.

Bemba has strong support in the Lingala-speaking west of the vast former Belgian colony, including Kinshasa. But some analysts his influence has waned since he went into exile in Portugal. (For full Reuters Africa coverage and to have your say on the top issues, visit: africa.reuters.com/) (Writing by Pascal Fletcher; Editing by Kevin Liffey)