

Kenya rights group to sue Britain for colonial-era atrocities

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A Kenyan rights group said it would file suit in Britain this year to seek compensation for alleged colonial-era atrocities committed during the Mau Mau rebellion a half century ago.

The independent Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) said the lawsuit would be filed in London on October 20, the 54th anniversary of the arrest of famed Kenyan independence leader and the country's founding president Jomo Kenyatta.

"The intended suit seeks reparations from the government of the United Kingdom for the atrocities it committed against the Mau Mau in the colonial era," the commission said in a statement.

The Mau Mau, which started as a grassroots movement among the Kikuyu tribe to recover arable farmlands appropriated by British colonial settlers, evolved into a full-fledged rebellion in 1952 that demanded Kenyan independence.

Its hit-and-run tactics against white settlers prompted a heavy-handed response from colonial police and allied home guards who rounded up thousands of young Kikuyu men and allegedly brutalized and tortured many.

Surviving Mau Mau fighters, now in their 70s and 80s, claim they and their colleagues were made to suffer unbearable cruelty such as summary executions, torture, rape, beatings, forced labour and evictions.

"There is no question that the Mau Mau have a strong case against the British in terms of terrible things that happened to them back in the 1950s," said British lawyer Martin Day, whose firm Leigh and Day will handle the case.

"I am optimistic that justice in the end will prevail," he said of the suit, which will seek unspecified damages from the British government.

Day has long sought to put together a case on behalf of the Mau Mau but was stymied in 2003 when the British Legal Aid society denied a request to cover the legal fees.

The KHRC said it had put together a portion of the 85,000 dollars (67,000 euros) required to file the suit and planned several fund raising events in the coming months to make up the balance.

Commission members said they hoped their efforts would be boosted by the fact that a book about the Mau Mau uprising, "Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya," won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction last month.

Also titled "Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya," the book by US academic Caroline Elkins documents London's "draconian response" to the Mau Mau that she claims was to "treat and portray them as sub-human savages."