

Trump authorizes sanctions against ICC for war crimes probe



Washington, June 11 (RHC)-- U.S. President Donald Trump has authorized sanctions and additional visa restrictions against International Criminal Court (ICC) personnel probing whether American forces committed war crimes in Afghanistan.

In the latest attempt by the Trump administration to force the Hague-based tribunal out of the investigation into potential war crimes by US military and intelligence officials in the Asian country, Trump issued an executive order on Thursday, saying that the United States would block all American property and assets of anyone in the ICC involved in the probe.

Trump administration officials said the ICC threatens to infringe upon American national sovereignty and accused Russia of manipulating it. "We cannot -- we will not -- stand by as our people are threatened by a kangaroo court," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement to reporters.

"I have a message to many close allies around the world -- your people could be next, especially those from NATO countries who fought terrorism in Afghanistan right alongside of us." U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr claimed that Russia and other adversaries of the United States have been "manipulating" the ICC to serve a Russian agenda.

Barr said that the Trump administration was trying to bring accountability to an international body. "This institution has become, in practice, little more than a political tool employed by unaccountable international elites," he said.

Rights activists slammed Trump's executive order. Human Rights Watch said that Trump's order "demonstrates contempt for the global rule of law." "This assault on the ICC is an effort to block victims of serious crimes whether in Afghanistan, Israel or Palestine from seeing justice," said Andrea Prasow, the Washington director for Human Rights Watch. "Countries that support international justice should publicly oppose this blatant attempt at obstruction," she said.

ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda wants to investigate possible crimes committed between 2003 and 2014 including alleged mass killings of civilians by the Taliban, as well as US troops and members of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The ICC investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity in Afghanistan was given the go-ahead in March. "The prosecutor is authorized to commence an investigation into alleged crimes committed on the territory of Afghanistan since May 1, 2003," ICC judge Piotr Hofmanski said in a ruling on March 5.

"It is for the prosecutor to determine whether there is a reasonable basis to initiate an investigation" under the court's statutes, the judge added.

In 2006, the ICC's prosecutors opened a preliminary probe into possible war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the Asian nation since 2003.

In 2017, prosecutor Bensouda asked judges to allow a full-blown probe, not only into Taliban and Afghan government personnel but also international forces, US troops and members of the CIA. Bensouda's move angered Washington, which in April last year revoked the Gambian-born chief prosecutor's visa as part of broader restrictions on ICC staff probing American or allied personnel.

Former U.S. national security adviser John Bolton warned in 2018 that the US would arrest ICC judges if the court pursued an Afghan probe.

Over 100,000 Afghans have also been killed or injured since 2009, when the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan began documenting casualties.

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