

Corruption Fighters Form Close-Knit Club

By BOB DAVIS

BERLIN — The Corruption Hunter Network sounds like a band of comic-book superheroes. But there's nothing comic about the fraternity of investigators and prosecutors gathered here for a two-day meeting.

One is investigating the prime minister of Italy on allegations of tax fraud. Another is an appeal away from potentially jailing a former president of Costa Rica in an embezzlement case. A third convicted a top aide to South Africa's current president on corruption.

It is a stressful and often lonely job. The group's newest member, Ghulam Rahman, a reserved Bangladeshi, says he was stunned when his country's president decided to promote him last year from energy regulator to head of the nation's anticorruption commission. "When I retire from this job, I will have no friends," he sighs. "You can't do a favor for anyone."

The Corruption Hunter Network was born in 2005 when Eva Joly—a former French magistrate whose 1990s bribery investigation of state-owned oil company Elf Aquitaine targeted French politicians and convicted Elf executives—decided investigators and prosecutors needed a group to bolster morale. She convinced the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, or Norad, to contribute about \$300,000 annually so corruption fighters could meet twice a year in five-star hotels without their usual retinue of bodyguards.

While many international organizations target corruption, the low-profile Corruption Hunter Network is unusual in its informality and its loyalty, say members and World Bank officials. New recruits—ranging from high-profile investigators to greener officials in developing countries who seem to need help—are chosen by Norad without approval from other governments. A member fired at home remains part of the club, which helps them resettle outside their country if necessary.

The meetings are part reunion, part group therapy and part strategy sessions on how to build cases. On the first day, members report on anticorruption battles; the second day includes presentations from out-

side advisers. But the real business of the Network takes place during the less formal chats at dinners and coffee breaks—and at late-night drinking bouts, members say.

Costa Rican prosecutor Juan Carlos Cubillo says he has leaned on his pals in the Network for support over the past few years as he was pursuing a bribery case against his country's former president, Rafael Calderón.

"I needed *fuerza* [strength] and calmness to deal with this case," Mr. Cubillo says during the group's June meeting at Berlin's Albion Hotel. (Mr. Calderón, who has denied wrongdoing, was jailed, then freed, and is now appealing his conviction.)

The Network was formed at a time when combating corruption had become an international priority. Emboldened, members—from around 15 countries at the time, many of them developing nations—brought tough cases. But the more they focused on leading politicians, the more

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turbulence they faced.

In Nigeria, Network member Nuhu Ribadu was dismissed as chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission in 2008 after he had successfully prosecuted his boss—Nigeria's police inspector general—for corruption and then locked horns with the governor of an oil-rich state over corruption allegations. Mr. Ribadu says he fled Nigeria after an assassin tried to put a bullet in his back.

The World Bank, with Norad's backing, gave the Center for Global Development in Washington a grant to pay Mr. Ribadu as a visiting fellow, World Bank and Network officials say. Norad declined comment.

He became a leading critic of the Nigerian regime. Then Nigerian politics changed and Goodluck Jonathan became president this year, pledging to be tough on corruption. He met with Mr. Ribadu in Washington and now Mr. Ribadu is considering joining his administration.

"The message goes back to Nigeria that you can fight corruption and there is life after the fight," Mr. Ribadu says.

In January 2009, the Network met in Livingston, Zambia, to show support for Maxwell Nkole, who in 2007 won a \$46 million judgment in London against former Zambian President Frederick Chiluba for looting the country and moving assets overseas.

Such gatherings were supposed to "give strength to members," says Fridtjov Thorkildsen, Norad's project director for the Network. "If something happens to a member, it would be published in 15 countries" where members have ties to the press.

That effort failed. Mr. Nkole was fired in August 2009 after he appealed a different case that cleared Mr. Chiluba of criminal charges—an appeal the Zambian government scrapped—and left for a research slot at the University of Cardiff.

The Network "needs to do more than have meetings in Africa," says Mr. Nkole, who says the group needs to devise new strategies to attack corruption.

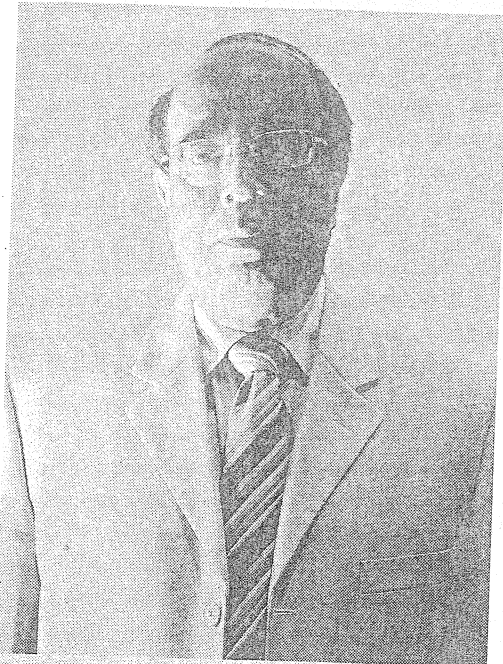
Spokesmen for Zambia's police, anticorruption agency and foreign ministry declined to comment on Mr. Nkole or the case.

By April 2009, a dozen prosecutors internationally—not all in the Network—had been fired, quit under pressure or forced to leave their countries, and two had been murdered during the proceeding year, according to a Network count. Meeting a month later, Network members debated whether to disband. They decided to expand instead.

At the group's meeting in Berlin, new member Alexius Nampota of Malawi struck up a rapport with his compatriots. He is investigating a former president for allegedly taking bribes.

Mr. Rahman of Bangladesh is considered more of a novice. Two of the Network's most experienced members—South African prosecutor Billy Downer and Helen Garlick, formerly of Britain's Serious Fraud Office, tell him war stories at dinner. Brightening, Mr. Rahman describes his effort to get Bangladeshi imams to talk about corruption at mosques.

The Network now is trying to expand further by recruiting from Brazil and India.



Ghulam Rahman | Bangladesh

- Chairman, Anticorruption Commission
- One of two new members of the Network
- Former energy regulator who didn't seek an anticorruption post; says his commission is seen at home as a 'toothless tiger'
- Looking to spread an anticorruption message at mosques



Helen Garlick | U.K.

- Special prosecutor investigating corruption on Turks and Caicos Islands
- Previously, as official in Britain's Serious Fraud Office, investigated British arms deals with Saudi Arabia
- Among the first members of the Network, she uses meetings to share experience in fighting corruption with newer members



Pauline Riak | Sudan

- Chairman, Southern Sudan Anticorruption Commission
- Member of Network since 2007
- Worked with Sudanese women's groups in Kenya when she was in exile during Sudan's civil war. She moved back in 2006.
- Forms 'integrity clubs' at high schools



Manuel Garrido | Argentina

- Quit as head of the Argentine anticorruption unit in 2009 after a run-in with government economic officials
- A longtime member of the Network, he runs a justice and transparency program for an Argentine think tank
- Wants the Network to take on a more active political role