

SO CLOSE BUT SO FAR

PRESIDENT OLUSEGUN OBANSANJO'S ASSENT TO THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION BILL 2004 REMAINS ELUSIVE

**Media press release from the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
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With less than one month before Parliamentary and Presidential elections, Nigeria's Freedom of Information Bill 2004 still awaits Presidential assent. The Bill, that would guarantee Nigerians the right to access information held by the Government, has been long fought for. For over eight years civil society has pressed for such a law - the Bill has been with Parliament since 1999 and was finally passed by both Houses of the National Assembly in February this year. But now the Bill is stuck at the last hurdle before it can become law – Presidential assent.

President Obasanjo, who will stand down in the coming weeks in time for the April 21 election, has not given the Bill his assent. He has only a number of days to give assent, without which the Bill cannot become law. The impending elections leave very little time for the law to undergo the alternative method of assent that is available; where a two-thirds majority of the members of the National Assembly would have to vote in favour of the Bill before it could become law.

Signing the Bill into law is an opportunity for the President to leave a lasting mark of his leadership of Nigeria. A freedom of information law in Nigeria would not only be the first of its kind in West Africa, but it would provide a potent tool in the fight against corruption, which the President has been so vocal about leading. Such a law can also have many social, economic and political benefits, being a key tool to empowering people to take control of their lives and enabling their participation in governance.

Civil society organisations from around the world strongly urge President Obasanjo to realise his people's wishes and give his assent to the Freedom of Information Bill at the very earliest.

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