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Cameroon

Prison Break: Amnesty International condemns use of excessive lethal force and calls for independent inquiry

Amnesty International is concerned at the killing by prison guards of at least 17 prisoners, on the 29 and 30 June 2008, at New Bell prison in Douala, Cameroon.

Amnesty International condemns the use of a shoot-to-kill policy employed by the security forces in response to prisoners' attempt to escape from New Bell prison. Such a policy violates prisoners' right to life. The organisation acknowledges that Cameroonian authorities have an obligation to maintain law and order and to ensure that detainees do not escape from lawful custody. However, force used by security agents must be proportionate and necessary.

Cameroonian security forces have a history of using excessive and unwarranted lethal force. In late February 2008, members of the security forces killed as many as 100 civilians, some of whom were involved in riots that erupted in many major towns, including the capital, Yaoundé, in Cameroon. The people were demonstrating against escalating cost of living, low wages, and plans by the government to amend the constitution and remove a provision that bars President Paul Biya from standing as a presidential candidate in 2011. Photographs that Amnesty International has seen suggest that some of the victims were shot in the head at point blank range and could therefore have been arrested. In Douala, some civilians are reported to have drowned after they were forced to jump into the Wouri river under fire. Many civilians who sustained severe injuries were not provided medical care by the state and some subsequently died from gunshot wounds.

In June 2007, at least 17 prisoners from Yoko prison in Adamaoua province were shot dead in similar circumstances as those at New Bell prison. The government is not known to have taken any action to bring any members of the security forces responsible for unlawful killings to justice or compensate the families of those who were killed.

According to human rights defenders in Cameroon, tension had for several weeks been building up in New Bell prison, with some prisoners planning to break out of the prison. Although these plans were reportedly known to the prison authorities, they failed to take measures to prevent a mass prisoner escape. On the afternoon of 29 June, dozens of prisoners forced their way out of the prison. Fifteen prisoners were reportedly shot dead, by prison guards and other members of the security forces, in the ensuing manhunt,

while two others were killed on 30 June. In one case on 30 June a 23-year-old man, René Mireille Bouyam, who lived near New Bell prison was shot and fatally wounded when members of the security forces found a prisoner hiding in his house. He and the prisoner were reportedly pinned to the ground and shot, killing the prisoner instantly. René Mireille Bouyam died the following day in hospital. At least two prisoners are known to have been critically shot and injured and are currently hospitalized.

During a visit to the prison on 1 July 2008, the Secretary of State for Justice in charge of penitentiary administration is reported to have thanked the prison administration for the action they took against the prisoners who tried to escape. This is deplorable. Amnesty International calls upon the Minister of Justice to order an investigation into the prison outbreak and fatal shootings.

Amnesty International calls on the Cameroonian government to immediately set up an independent, impartial and competent inquiry into the circumstances of the prisoner escape and the killings that ensued. Any officials identified by the investigation to have ordered, condoned or perpetrated any unlawful killings or wounding should be brought to justice. Furthermore, the investigation should make recommendations to the authorities on how to prevent similar prisoner escapes that could result in killings or other human rights abuses. The government should ensure that those wounded in the February and June 2008 shootings are provided adequate medical care and all victims of unlawful killing or wounding by government agents are afforded compensation.

Background

Prisons and other detention centres in Cameroon are habitually overcrowded and unhygienic. New Bell prison was built in the 1930s for a prisoner population of 700 inmates but houses nearly 4,000. It lacks adequate toilet facilities and the lack of hygiene results in many prisoners falling ill. The government generally does not provide medical care to inmates and dozens of them die each year. Detainees often depend on their families for food and medical care; many of the families do not have the money to provide these services to the inmates and/or live too far away to pay regular visits. These conditions, in conjunction with a high percentage of detainees held for long periods without trial, often lead to riots and attempted escapes. Poorly trained and equipped, as well as inadequately paid prison guards and other members of the security forces, often use lethal force as a first resort to quell violence in prisons or demonstrations on the streets.