

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 26/001/2003

13 August 2003

UA 240/03 Prisoners of conscience

GABON	Hughes Bessacque (m), aged 33]
	Brice Obanda (m), aged 30] members of <i>Bongo Doit Partir</i> (“Bongo
	Gervais Amogo (m), aged 32] Must Go” or BDP-Gabon Nouveau)
	Abdul Allogo Mintsa (m), aged around 23]
	Pascal Nkoulou (m)]

Five members of the Gabonese opposition party *Bongo Doit Partir* (“Bongo Must Go” or BDP-Gabon Nouveau) have been detained for over one month. The leadership of the BDP has accused the authorities of holding the men hostage for political reasons. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful and legitimate expression of their political beliefs.

Brice Obanda, Gervais Amogo, Abdul Allogo Mintsa and Pascal Nkoulou were detained on 3 July after allegedly putting up posters around the capital Libreville calling for the departure of President Omar Bongo, who has been in power for 36 years. They reportedly also painted slogans in an area where President Bongo was meant to give a speech during a political tour. On 11 July, Hughes Bessacque, President of the BDP's National Coordination Committee, was also detained. All five men were accused of insulting the head of state and disrupting public order, though they have not been formally charged. At least some of the detainees were allegedly beaten immediately following their detention, but there have been no subsequent reports of torture or ill-treatment.

The men were initially detained at the *Direction Générale de la Recherche*, an intelligence service detention facility in downtown Libreville, where political prisoners are usually interrogated for their crimes. On 11 July, they were brought before a state judge who had them transferred to Gros-Bouquet central prison in Libreville for an unspecified period of time. During this hearing, they did not have access to legal representation, though under Gabonese law they should have been assigned a state lawyer. Family members were not allowed to be present during the court decision. Their private attorney was granted access to their file on 8 or 9 August.

Relatives of the men have had difficulty in gaining access to see them in prison. Hughes Bessacque has suffered two bouts of malaria during his detention, but was not given access to a doctor. His family was able to provide some medical care themselves. The family sometimes had to entrust medical supplies and clothes to prison guards, who reportedly asked for bribes before agreeing to pass them on.

The detainees have been on hunger strike since early August in protest at their continued detention. They have reportedly refused the medication which has been offered to them. According to reports, they are subsisting on milk and water, and appear to be very thin and weak.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in French or your own language:

- expressing concern at the continued detention of the five BDP-Gabon activists Hughes Bessacque, Brice Obanda, Gervais Amogo, Abdul Allogo Mintsa and Pascal Nkoulou;
- calling for their immediate release as prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful expression of their political beliefs;
- expressing concern for the health and wellbeing of the five detainees;
- expressing concern that their hearing did not meet minimum standards for fair trials according to international standards, and calling on the authorities to respect these standards;

- calling on the Gabonese government to permit their citizens to exercise their civil and political rights without fear of persecution.

APPEALS TO: *(It may be difficult to get through to fax numbers in Gabon. Please keep trying)*

President Omar Bongo
Office of the President
PO Box 546
Libreville, Gabon

Telegram: President Bongo, Libreville, Gabon
Fax: + 241 72 18 64
Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République / Your Excellency

Ms. Honorine Dossou Naki
Minister of Justice and Keeper of the Seals
PO Box 547
Libreville, Gabon

Telegram: Minister of Justice, Libreville, Gabon
Fax: + 241 77 35 79
Salutation: Madame la Ministre / Dear Minister

Gen. Idriss Ngari
Minister of the Interior, Public Security and Decentralization
PO Box 2110
Libreville, Gabon

Telegram: Interior Minister, Libreville, Gabon
Fax: + 241 76 38 65
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Mr. Ali Ben Bongo
Minister of Defence
PO Box 13493
Libreville, Gabon

Fax: + 241 77 86 96

and to diplomatic representatives of Gabon accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 24 September 2003.