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Kenya: Human rights defenders arrested for acting in front of primary school children

Kenyan authorities now seem to believe that acting is a crime: eleven human rights activists were arrested yesterday for performing theatre to a group of children while conducting a civic education program with the Ogiek community.

“This is yet another example of harassment of human rights defenders by the authorities in Kenya,” said Amnesty International.

The 11 activists included three members of the Kenya Human Rights Commission -- a leading human rights organization in Kenya -- and eight members of the 5 Cs theatre group attached to the civic mobilization office of the Citizens Coalition for Constitutional Change. They were arrested yesterday, 30 March, in Sotiki primary school, Tinet, Rift Valley province and charged with holding an illegal meeting. They were hurriedly taken to court, denied bail and remanded until 13 April.

In May 1999 the government gazetted Tinet forest, where the Ogiek -- an indigenous people -- have resided for hundreds of years. Authorities ordered the community to leave on the grounds that the forest is protected. This order has been legally challenged by the Ogieks as a violation of their constitutional rights. In the past a number of Kenya's protected forests have been sold illegally or handed over to developers.

Attacks continue on human rights defenders attempting to engage in civic education programs in rural areas. A legal amendment that should allow cultural or educational meetings to go ahead without prior police notification is apparently being flouted by police.

This is not the first incident of human rights activists being arrested. In February a similar meeting organized by the Center for Governance and Development was stopped and members of their theatre group arrested. That case is due to come to court on 13 April 2000. In Kenya, theatre is used by a number of groups to engage the public in discussions on constitutional reform.

“These groups are being targeted because they use a powerful weapon: theatre,” Amnesty International said. “The Kenyan government must release them immediately and ensure that human rights defenders are not persecuted.”

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