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Niger: The people of Niger have the right to truth and justice

One year ago, on 9 April 1999, the President of the Republic of Niger, General Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara, and three others were killed by the Presidential Guard at the military airport at Niamey. One year later, in spite of promises made by the Niger authorities, the truth about these killings is yet to be established.

“After two successive military coups in 1996 and 1999, Niger needs truth and justice in order to prevent further human rights abuses in future,” Amnesty International said today.

The truth about the political killings of 9 April 1999, as with all other human rights abuses committed in Niger since the beginning of the 1990s, is vital so that the victims’ families may complete their mourning and so that Niger can be reconciled with its past. The organisation emphasises, in particular, the need to investigate fully the 150 dead bodies discovered in a mass grave at Bouloungoure, in the east of the country, in January 1999, while the country was still governed by President Baré Maïnassara. The families of the victims, all members of the Toubou ethnic group, need to know the reasons for the killing of their relatives and they have the right to justice and to financial and moral redress.

This truth and justice currently cannot be brought to light because of an amnesty for the perpetrators of the coups of 1996 and 1999, which was included in Niger’s new Constitution, adopted by referendum in July 1999. This amnesty was confirmed in a law passed by the Niger Parliament, in January 2000, thereby laying the final stone on the edifice of impunity.

“Amnesty International calls on the Parliament of Niger to annul the amnesty so that an independent and impartial inquiry may take place and those responsible for these killings may be brought to justice,” Amnesty International said today.

Several consistent eyewitness accounts have gradually uncovered the truth about the events of 9 April 1999. According to these accounts, collected by Amnesty International, President Baré Maïnassara was hit in the back by a bullet, at the military airport when making his way to his helicopter. He was then allegedly killed by bullets fired from an automatic machine gun.

In place of the truth, the authorities, installed as a result of the military coup of 9 April 1999, presented an absurd version of the facts, then held a rushed inquiry. The killing of President Baré Maïnassara was, first of all, presented as the result of an “unfortunate accident”, which therefore required no investigation.

Finally, an inquiry by the national gendarmerie was opened in August 1999, under pressure from human rights organizations and from the European Union, in particular. Amnesty International has been able to obtain a copy of the conclusions of the inquiry report. “Reading this text, one could not regard the inquiry as exhaustive and independent”, the organisation said today.

The inquiry contained serious omissions. It lasted for only three days, which seems rather short for a matter of such gravity. Furthermore, the gendarmes did not judge it necessary to summon and hear evidence from eyewitnesses or from the forensic medical officer who examined the body of the assassinated President.

Nonetheless, the need for truth and justice persists both in Niger and outside the country. On 12 February 2000, several hundred individuals – the majority of them women – demonstrated in Niamey in an attempt to obtain an international inquiry into the circumstances of the assassination of President Baré Maïnassara. On 27 March 2000, members of the European Parliament who were visiting the country also stressed that Niger should respect the Lomé Convention and, in particular, the principal of good governance which holds that “impunity should neither succeed nor gain control”.

The necessity of fully investigating human rights abuses was also recognised, on 2 March 2000, by President Mamadou Tandja who declared publicly that he was committed to “seeking out and establishing the truth” about the circumstances of President Baré Maïnassara’s assassination.

Amnesty International welcomed this declaration by the new head of state, but also stated that: “The truth is not enough, justice must also prevail, and for that to happen, the obstacle of the amnesty must be removed.”

During President Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara’s rule, Amnesty International, on several occasions, denounced serious human rights violations committed by the Niger authorities and demanded that those responsible be brought to justice. It is therefore in all impartiality that, having denounced violations committed by President Baré Maïnassara’s government, Amnesty International is now calling for an investigation into the killings of the four individuals on 9 April 1999 and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

Throughout the last decade, none of those responsible for human rights violations have been brought to justice. “It is imperative that this impunity ends,” Amnesty International said. “So that the country’s future may be built on a basis of truth and justice.”

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