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Burkina Faso: Amnesty International calls for a full explanation of the death of Norbert Zongo

Amnesty International is calling for an urgent, full and independent investigation into the circumstances of the deaths on 13 December 1998 of Norbert Zongo, a prominent journalist and outspoken critic of the government of Burkina Faso, and three others who died with him.

"The exact circumstances of the violent death of Norbert Zongo and his companions must be clarified", Amnesty International said today, "and, if it is found that they were deliberately killed, those responsible must be brought to justice".

The badly burned body of Norbert Zongo, editor-in-chief of the independent weekly newspaper *L'Indépendant*, was found with those of two other passengers in a vehicle about 100 kilometres from the capital, Ouagadougou, on the road to Sapouy. A fourth body was found beside the vehicle. The other victims were his brother, Ernest Zongo, his chauffeur, Ablassé Nikiéma, and Blaise Ilboudo. There appears to be no evidence that the vehicle was involved in an accident and the exact circumstances of how the four men died remain unclear. Few in Burkina Faso believe that the deaths were a result of an accident.

Norbert Zongo, who was also President of the *Société des éditeurs de la presse privée*, Association of Independent Newspaper Editors, in Burkina Faso, was renowned and respected for his independence and fearless criticism of the government. He had persistently and vigorously pursued the case of the death in custody earlier this year of R. David Ouédraogo, the chauffeur of the President Blaise Compaoré's brother and *Conseiller à la Présidence*, François Compaoré. R. David Ouédraogo had been arrested in December 1997 and died the following month, apparently as a result of torture, while held in the custody of the Presidential Guard in Ouagadougou. No autopsy was carried out.

Opposition political parties, the *Mouvement burkinabè des droits de l'homme et des peuples*, Burkinabè Movement for Human and Peoples' Rights, and Amnesty International had called on the government to undertake a full, independent investigation into the death of R. David Ouédraogo but official investigations have been obstructed by the refusal of the President's brother to cooperate with the judicial authorities. Although he has been requested to give evidence to the judicial authorities, he has failed to do so.

The government said yesterday that an inquiry into Norbert Zongo's death would be opened but in the past such inquiries have never been concluded. If the deaths of Norbert Zongo and the three men who died with him are not clarified and, if they were deliberately killed, those responsible are not brought to justice, impunity for human rights violations in Burkina Faso will continue, Amnesty International argues.

"The names of Norbert Zongo, Ernest Zongo, Ablassé Nikiéma and Blaise Ilboudo will be added

to those of Guillaume Sessouma, Boukary Dabo, Clément Ouédraogo, David Ouédraogo and others whose deaths either in custody or in suspicious circumstances during the last 10 years have never been officially explained. The government must now act decisively to establish accountability and to end impunity", Amnesty International said.

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