

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Guinea-Bissau: Human rights defenders face increased government harassment**

"Human rights defenders and political opponents in Guinea-Bissau are facing a sustained clamp-down on peaceful opposition and criticism of government policy," Amnesty International warned today, adding that the government was also increasingly interfering in matters outside its jurisdiction.

Victims of the latest wave of harassment include Fernando Gomes, founder and former president of the *Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos*, (LGDH), Guinea-Bissau Human Rights League, and currently president of the political party *Acção para o Desenvolvimento* (ASG), Socialist Alliance of Guinea-Bissau, and João Vaz Mané, a vice-president of the LGDH. They were arrested and accused of misappropriation of LGDH funds donated by a foreign non-governmental organization (NGO) in 1999.

Fernando Gomes was arrested at his home in the morning of Saturday 2 February 2002 by three police officers. A warrant for his arrest had been issued on 25 January 2002 but was not carried out as he was abroad at that time. Reports say the arrest warrant was withdrawn on 30 January, the day after his return to the country. He is being held at the main police station in Bissau, known as *Segunda Esquadra*.

João Vaz Mané was arrested in the afternoon of Saturday 26 January 2002, also by three police officers who had tried to arrest him the previous day. He was held at the *Segunda Esquadra* until his release on bail on 1 February. He has to report to the Bissau court weekly.

Guinea-Bissau law stipulates that arrest warrants are carried out at the weekend only in exceptional circumstances, when the person sought is a highly dangerous criminal and there is a risk of the person fleeing the country.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the interference of the government in the internal affairs of the NGO, especially as neither the foreign NGO nor the LGDH have lodged a complaint against Fernando Gomes and João Vaz Mané; and there seems to be no evidence of wrong doing.

"The arrests of Fernando Gomes and João Vaz Mané appear to be politically motivated and part of the Guinea-Bissau authorities' attempts to silence criticism, including interference in the judicial process, the arrest of Supreme Court judges in November 2001, and the clamp down on the media," Amnesty International said.

On 4 January, João Vaz Mané and the current President of the LGDH were summoned to the President's office and questioned about a weekly radio program on human rights in which the LGDH had called on the authorities to present evidence of an alleged attempted coup in December 2001 which resulted in the arrest of about 40 former soldiers.

In related developments involving freedom of expression and the press, Carlos Schwarz, director of the local NGO *Ajuda e Desenvolvimento* (AD), Aid and Development, and Agnelo Regalla, the owner and director of *Radio Bombolom*, appeared before the Procurator General on 4 February 2002, to answer questions related, respectively, to the functioning and statutes of a community radio, *Voz de Quelele*, sponsored by AD and *Radio Bombolom*.

"The Guinea-Bissau government should immediately and unconditionally release Fernando Gomes and João Vaz Mané and any other people detained for criticizing government policy, or charge them with a recognizable criminal offence," Amnesty International said, urging the authorities to ensure that NGOs and the media are allowed to carry out their functions without governmental interference.

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