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**Mali must release 17 prisoners of conscience detained for two months**

The Malian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release 17 prisoners of conscience, including a village chief and the director of a radio station, arrested for peacefully protesting and detained now for two months, Amnesty International said today.

On 18 August 2015, around 200 people peacefully protested in the southern town of Yélimané, in the Kayes region, against heavy taxation, which they deemed was not being used for the development of their locality. The protest march lasted for nearly one hour and the protestors were not able to submit their complaints to the Prefect. The police arrested 17 people and they were later charged by a judge for “inciting revolt”, “opposing legitimate authority” and “participation in an unauthorised protest”.

The 17 people including Sadio Niakate, village chief of Guidime and Djibril Marega, director of Radio Dambe, are still in detention in the Yélimané prison, and have not yet been tried. Amnesty International has a list of all the villagers who have been arrested and detained for two months.

Amnesty International considers that neither the act of submitting a letter of grievance to the relevant authority, nor its content can justify being arrested and detained. The protestors did not commit any crime in exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly. Amnesty International considers that they have been arrested and detained solely for expressing a peaceful political opinion. The organisation considers them to be prisoners of conscience and therefore calls for their immediate and unconditional release.

The rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are fundamental human rights and the arrest of these peaceful protestors directly violates Articles four and five of the Malian constitution as well as Articles 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 9.2 of the African Charter also protects the individual’s rights to express his/her opinion within the law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Mali is party, also recognises the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of association.