

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index AFR 05/003/2001 - News Service Nr. 59

Embargoed for : 09/04/2001 00:01 GMT

## **West Africa: Human rights defenders under attack**

*Amnesty International today expressed deep concern over the continued persecution of human rights defenders in West Africa, and called on the international community to take all necessary measures to protect them.*

*"In many West African countries, human rights defenders are harassed, detained, tortured, 'disappeared', forced into exile or killed because of their activities," Amnesty International asserted in "Be careful, you talk too much": Human rights defenders under attack, a major new report prepared for the launch of a six-month campaign with and for human rights defenders in West Africa.*

*The campaign, to be launched in Dakar, Senegal on 11 April 2001, is aimed at drawing international attention to the risks faced by human rights defenders working for fundamental human rights and at obtaining the commitment of West African governments and the international community to protect them. The launch will be attended by Hila Jilani, UN Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders, and human rights activists from across West Africa.*

*Amnesty International's report highlights the armoury of repression used by West African governments to deter and punish human rights defenders. "Even when West African governments are keen to demonstrate to the international community that they do not see human rights activism as a criminal activity in itself, they often use the judicial system to pursue and silence human rights defenders, rather than upholding their rights," Amnesty International added.*

The dangers and difficulties faced by human rights defenders in West Africa, the human rights organization stressed, underscore the urgent need for governments and the international community to take steps to guarantee their freedom and personal safety. More specifically, Amnesty calls on West African governments to:

- commit themselves explicitly and publicly to promoting respect for human rights and protecting human rights defenders;
- bring to justice state officials who abuse the judicial system to harass human rights defenders in performing their legitimate activities in defending human rights;
- ensure that state officials respect the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders and allow them to freely carry out their work;
- fully incorporate the principles of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders into national law.

### **Background**

The West African Human Rights Defenders Campaign is a follow-up to a series of sub-regional and regional workshops of human rights workers, particularly the All-Africa Human Rights Defenders Conference of November 1998 in Johannesburg.

The launch event in Dakar will include the publication of a 48-page report on the situation of human rights defenders in West Africa and a guide, entitled *Ukweli*, for human rights defenders on monitoring and documenting human rights abuses.

The launch event will be followed by a workshop with NGOs on the protection of human rights workers in Africa and on the role of human rights defenders consolidating democracy in Africa.

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public document

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**Documents on the launch event in Dakar can be obtained by contacting:**

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