

EXTERNAL

AI Index: AFR 17/01/98

UA 07/98

Prisoner of conscience / Health concern
Cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment

8 January 1998

CAMEROON Pius Njawé, journalist, director of *Le Messenger*

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Pius Njawé, a prominent journalist and director of the independent newspaper *Le Messenger*, who was arrested in late December 1997. The conditions in the prison where he is being held could pose a threat to his health.

Pius Njawé was arrested on 24 December 1997 and detained by the *police judiciaire* (the police investigation department) following an article in *Le Messenger* two days earlier by another journalist which questioned the state of health of President Paul Biya. On 26 December Pius Njawé was charged with dissemination of false news (*propagation de fausses nouvelles*) and transferred to the Central Prison, New Bell, in Douala. His trial has been scheduled for 13 January 1998. If convicted, he faces a sentence of three months' to two years' imprisonment and/or a fine.

Amnesty International considers Pius Njawé to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely because of his legitimate professional activities and in violation of the right to freedom of expression.

Pius Njawé has been denied visits from members of his family, lawyers and colleagues. On 31 December five members of the Committee to Free Pius Njawé (*Comité de libération de Pius Njawé*) were arrested and held briefly by police when they attempted to visit Pius Njawé in New Bell prison. On 3 January 1998 the security forces were reported to have surrounded the area around New Bell prison to deter Pius Njawé's supporters.

Prison conditions are extremely harsh throughout Cameroon and fall far short of international standards for the treatment of prisoners. Both criminal and political prisoners are held in conditions which deny their basic rights, which pose a threat to both health and life and which amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Most prisons are severely overcrowded and sanitary facilities are non-existent or inadequate. Health care and nutrition are also seriously deficient. Disease is rife and there is a high mortality rate among prisoners.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since 1995 an increasing number of journalists have been convicted on criminal charges and sentenced to terms of imprisonment for criticizing government authorities. Attacks on freedom of expression in Cameroon continued and intensified during 1996 and into 1997 as both legislative and presidential elections approached. Prosecutions of journalists have appeared to be attempts by the authorities to inhibit criticism of prominent members of the government, those closely associated with them, or government policies. In some cases there have been serious irregularities in judicial procedures.

Pius Njawé and other journalists working for *Le Messenger* have been imprisoned on several occasions in the past. In October 1996 he and a colleague, Alain Christian Eyoum Ngangué, were convicted of insulting the President and members of the National Assembly (*outrage par injure fait au président de la République ainsi qu'aux membres de l'Assemblée nationale*). Initially only fined when the case was first heard earlier in 1996, they had their sentences increased to

finances and prison terms: Pius Njawé received six months and Alain Christian Eyoum Ngangué one year. Pius Njawé was imprisoned in New Bell prison where he was denied access to his doctor and medical treatment. He was conditionally released after 17 days (see UA 250/96, AFR 17/06/96, 31 October 1996 and updates). Alain Christian Eyoum Ngangué was arrested in January 1997 and imprisoned for more than two months before being conditionally released.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in French, English or your own language:

- expressing concern about the imprisonment of Pius Njawé, whom Amnesty International considers to be a prisoner of conscience, and urging his immediate and unconditional release;
- requesting assurances that Pius Njawé is being treated humanely in prison and in conditions which conform to international standards for the treatment of prisoners;
- urging that he be allowed immediate access to members of his family, lawyers and a doctor of his choice.

APPEALS TO:

President

Son Excellence M. Paul Biya
Président de la République
Palais de l'Unité

1000 Yaoundé, République du Cameroun

Telegrams: President, Yaounde, Cameroon

Faxes: +237 22 16 99

Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République / Dear President Biya

Prime Minister

M. Peter Mafany Musonge
Premier Ministre
Cabinet du Premier Ministre
Immeuble Etoile

1000 Yaoundé, République du Cameroun

Telegrams: Premier Ministre, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Faxes: + 237 23 57 65

Salutation: Monsieur le Premier Ministre / Dear Prime Minister

Minister of Justice

M. Laurent Ezzo
Ministre de la Justice, Garde des Sceaux
Ministère de la Justice

1000 Yaoundé, République du Cameroun

Telegrams: Ministre Justice, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

Minister of Communication

M. René Zé Nguélé
Ministre de la Communication
Ministère de la Communication

1000 Yaoundé, République du Cameroun

Telegrams: Ministre Communication, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Dr Solomon Nfor Gwei, President, National Commission on Human Rights and
Freedoms, PO Box 20317, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Le Messenger, BP 5925, 11 Boulevard de la Liberté, Douala, Cameroon

Cameroon Post, BP 1981, Yaoundé, Cameroon

The Herald, BP 3659 Messa, Yaoundé, Cameroon

L'Expression, BP 15333, 12 rue Prince de Galles, Douala, Cameroon

and to diplomatic representatives of CAMEROON accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 21 February 1998.