

PUBLIC

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Unlawful detention/detention without charge/incommunicado detention/
prisoner of conscience

GUINEA-BISSAU

João Vaz Mané (m), human rights defender

João Vaz Mané, vice-president of the *Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos* (LGDH), Guinea-Bissau Human Rights League, was arrested at about 3pm on 29 January at his home in the country's capital, Bissau. He was arrested without a warrant, and is being detained incommunicado, without charge. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience.

He was arrested after participating in a radio program in which he criticised President Kumba Ialá for making funds available to the country's Muslims for the pilgrimage to Mecca. João Vaz Mané reportedly said that as Guinea-Bissau's state is secular, state funds could not be used for that purpose and the government should instead pay the salaries of the country's civil servants, who have not been paid for several months.

João Vaz Mané was arrested by members of the state security force, who did not have a warrant, and have no powers of arrest. He was taken to the Ministry of Internal Administration in Bissau where he was held for several hours. He was interrogated from 1am to 4am on 30 January and then taken to the *Segunda Esquadra* (Second Squadron) police station in Bissau, where he remains in incommunicado detention. He has not been charged with any offence.

Amnesty International is concerned that João Vaz Mané is a prisoner of conscience who was arrested solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression and for his work as a human rights activist with the LGDH. He has been detained briefly on several occasions over the last two years, often in connection with human rights issues he has spoken about on radio programs.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The arrest of João Vaz Mané follows a pattern of government attempts to silence criticism and attack civil society groups. It has particularly focused on disbanding the LGDH, which was temporarily closed in 2002 following government interference in its internal affairs. Leading members of the LGDH have been threatened and arrested on several occasions for publicly denouncing human rights abuses by the authorities.

Freedom of expression has been increasingly curbed in Guinea-Bissau since President Kumba Ialá dissolved parliament in November 2002 and called new elections for April 2003. Trade union and political leaders have been briefly detained for criticizing the government. Soldiers have been accused of attempting to overthrow the government and detained incommunicado without charge for several months.

Since its creation in the early 1990s the LGDH has been tirelessly promoting and protecting human rights in the country. It has always criticised the human rights abuses of successive governments and has been at the forefront of the fight for justice. Over the years it has grown in numbers and strength and has delegations in all provinces, and has encouraged the development of other human rights groups in Guinea-Bissau. Because of this, it is perceived as a threat by the authorities.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Portuguese or your own language:

- expressing concern at the incommunicado detention without charge of João Vaz Mané;
- expressing concern that he was reportedly arrested without a warrant, by security personnel who had no powers of arrest;

- calling on the authorities to ensure that João Vaz Mané has immediate access to his lawyer, relatives and any medical treatment he may need;
- stating that you consider him a prisoner of conscience detained solely for criticizing the government and for his work as a human rights activist;
- calling for his immediate and unconditional release;
- reminding the authorities of their obligations to human rights defenders, as laid out in the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

APPEALS TO: *(Please note that it may be difficult to get through to fax numbers in Guinea-Bissau. Please keep trying)*

President of Guinea Bissau

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Salutation: Excelência / Your Excellency

Procurator General

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Salutation: Excelência / Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

Sua Excelência
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COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Guinea-Bissau accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 26 March 2003.