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Côte d'Ivoire : The murder of the RFI journalist, Jean Hélène, illustrates the atmosphere of impunity that reigns in Abidjan

Amnesty International today strongly condemned the murder of Jean Hélène, a journalist with Radio France Internationale (RFI), who was killed in cold blood by a Côte d'Ivoire police sergeant on Tuesday 21 October 2003. The organisation requests that the killer, who has been identified and apprehended, is brought to justice as soon as possible and that clear and energetic measures are immediately taken by the Côte d'Ivoire authorities to make sure that such acts are not repeated.

Jean Hélène was shot outside Abidjan central police station where he was awaiting the release of several government opponents, who were recently imprisoned after an alleged attempted coup d'état. According to information released by the Côte d'Ivoire authorities, moments before the killing, the sergeant, who deliberately shot the journalist, was ordered by his superior officer to let the journalist get on with his work in peace.

"The fact that a sergeant can kill a journalist who posed no threat to him in cold blood shows the atmosphere of impunity in which Côte d'Ivoire security forces have been operating, especially since the September 2002 uprising", the organisation affirmed today.

On several occasions this year, Amnesty International has denounced grave violations committed by the security forces against presumed opponents and foreigners, mostly from the sub-region and who have been the victims of rackets, expulsions and extrajudicial executions. To the knowledge of Amnesty International, none of the people responsible for these actions has been punished.

In recent years, this atmosphere of impunity, which is conducive to all kinds of abuse, has been accompanied by a violently xenophobic discourse, aimed especially at the Dioulas. This is a generic name for the inhabitants of Côte d'Ivoire who have a Moslem name and who come from the north of the country or from countries in the sub-region (Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal etc.).

Moreover, certain self-proclaimed "nationalist" media have stoked up hatred against certain foreign journalists by supplying, for example, the telephone numbers and addresses of journalists accused of systematically criticising the government and security forces.

"Certain media and political circles have continued with these attacks for some months now, without receiving any firm criticism from the authorities, and this has infected certain individuals, including members of the security forces, with hatred, especially towards foreign journalists," Amnesty International said today.

For example, in January 2003, Anne Boher, a French journalist working for the British press agency Reuters, was arrested without apparent motive by government forces in the town of San Pedro in the southwest of the country and was released the following day. In March 2003, a French television team and AFP journalists were insulted and harassed within the Presidential grounds while they were covering a press conference given by President Laurent Gbagbo. These journalists were verbally and physically assaulted by military and civilian personnel and other men in uniform, who threatened them with death. None of these individuals has been asked to account for these very serious acts.

“The assassination of Jean Hélène constitutes an unprecedented event in Côte d'Ivoire. All acquired rights to freedom of expression in the country are threatened. The authorities must take measures as soon as possible and these measures cannot be limited to more never-to-be-kept promises to put an end to impunity,” affirmed the organisation today.

Amnesty International therefore appeals to the Côte d'Ivoire authorities to bring the person responsible for the murder of Jean Hélène to justice as soon as possible. More generally, the government must send a clear and unambiguous message to the security forces and the general public condemning the xenophobic discourse that has whipped up hatred and resulted in the killing of the RFI journalist.

Public Document

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