

AI INDEX: AFR 34/02/99
17 December 1999

Liberia: Human rights defender charged with sedition

The detention and prosecution for sedition of James Torh, a Liberian human rights defender, violates the fundamental right to freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today.

"By bringing vague charges of sedition against James Torh, the government has yet again attempted to silence its critics," Amnesty International said.

"James Torh is a prisoner of conscience who should be immediately and unconditionally released."

Police arrested James Torh -- the executive director of Forerunners of Universal Rights for Growth and Development (FOCUS) -- on 15 December in the capital, Monrovia, where he remains in the central prison. If convicted, he would face up to five years in prison.

Reports reaching Amnesty International say that police intimidated James Torh with threats of violence when they took him into custody.

James Torh has regularly been outspoken about human rights concerns in Liberia, in particular on children's rights. In recent weeks he has publicly clashed with President Charles Taylor about the need for a truth commission to be established in the country to look into violations committed during Liberia's seven-year civil war.

The sedition charges arise from comments he made while giving a talk to secondary school students on 8 December. According to the police arrest warrant, James Torh is accused of saying that "...the government of Liberia is in the pocket of the President", that "...the government is crying no money, no money, no money but we are seeing flashy cars in the street", and that "...the people of Liberia who voted in this government must repent because the government put into office is the wrong government".

"James Torh is perfectly entitled to speak about his non-violent political opinions -- it is a fundamental right accorded to every person," the organization added.

The human rights organization urges the Liberian government to respect the right of all human rights defenders to carry out their work without harassment or fear of arrest.

Background

Human rights defenders, including journalists, continued to be threatened and harassed in Liberia because of their work.

In March FOCUS and the Justice and Peace Commission of Liberia (JPC), a human rights non-governmental organization, were sued by parliamentarians from Sinoe, Maryland, Grand Kru and Bong counties after publishing a report on child slavery. The lawmakers said reports of forced labour by the JPC and FOCUS damaged the image of their counties, making it difficult to obtain international assistance. The legislators asked for damages of US\$10 million.

The JPC also had been intimidated by President Taylor in 1998 after it urged investigations into human rights violations during the September fighting. Four JPC members were summoned for questioning by senior government officials.

In 1989, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) started the war which lasted until 1996 and resulted in the downfall of President Samuel Doe's government. During the seven years of war, all sides to the conflict committed widespread and systematic human rights abuses with impunity. No one has been brought to justice for these abuses.

In 1997 the Liberian civil war ended with the signing of peace accords by all parties to the conflict. The elected government, headed by Charles Taylor, a former armed opposition leader, assumed control of the country. Since the end of the war there has been a significant decrease in the level of human rights abuses. However, the human rights situation remains fragile *and threats to journalists and human rights defenders continue.*

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