

AI INDEX: AFR 44/07/98
20 March 1998

Nigeria: Repression unabated on eve of Pope's visit

Arrests and beatings of human rights activists and journalists have shamelessly continued right up to the Pope's official visit to Nigeria this weekend, according to Amnesty International today.

"Even the Pope's impending visit has not been enough to stop the Nigerian authorities from brutally suppressing dissenting opinions in the country," the organization asserted.

"If the government can go on arresting and intimidating people just for attending seminars or marches while the media spotlight is focused on Nigeria, it sends a very clear message to the Nigerian people -- that fundamental freedoms are still not tolerated even during the government's proclaimed 'transition to democracy'."

Pope John Paul II will be holding an open-air mass and will be meeting the head of state, General Sani Abacha, on his visit to Nigeria, scheduled between 21 and 23 March, for the beatification of a Nigerian monk.

On 18 March human rights lawyer Femi Falana was released from six days' detention. He and Joe Ajaero, labour correspondent for the independent *Vanguard* newspaper, were among a group of people detained without charge since 12 March for attending a seminar on labour legislation in Ilorin, Kwara State.

On 3 March another leading human rights defender, lawyer Olisa Agbakoba, was beaten and gun-butted in the face by police when he attempted to negotiate with police officers. He was detained for two days and charged with public order offences, with about 30 others, for organizing a pro-democracy march in Lagos in response to a pro-government rally the same day in the new capital, Abuja.

Both he and Femi Falana were leading defence lawyers in the Ogoni trials which resulted in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni in November 1995.

Government officials have warned journalists not to speculate about the grossly unfair and secret treason trial, which started on 14 February, of deputy head of state General Oladipo Diya and 25 others. Since 1983, when the military overthrew the last elected civilian government, nearly 90 people have been executed following grossly unfair and politically-motivated trials. Amnesty International has urged the Nigerian Government not to impose death sentences in this case.

The military authorities have openly threatened the press not to risk facing the same fate as four journalists -- Kunle Ajibade, George Mbah, Chris Anyanwu (f) and Ben Charles Obi -- who are serving 15-year prison sentences for reporting the gross injustices of the last treason trials by Special Military Tribunal in 1995.

Amnesty International is calling on the Nigerian government to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience and to put an immediate end to repeated human rights violations.

BACKGROUND

Following the December 1997 deaths in prison of former deputy head of state Major-General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua and another prisoner of conscience, Staff Sergeant Patrick Usikekpo, Amnesty International has been appealing for urgent medical care for some of the 1995 treason prisoners and other prisoners of conscience detained in life-threatening conditions.

Human rights lawyer Ebun-Olu Adegboruwa is reported to have been chained in an underground cell at the detention facility in Apapa, Lagos, of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) and to have contracted typhoid fever and scabies. He has been detained incommunicado and without charge or trial since November 1997.

Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti and Shehu Sani, Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively of the Campaign for Democracy, exposed the unfair treason trials of 1995 and were themselves sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment by Special Military Tribunal. They have both required emergency hospital treatment recently after becoming seriously ill in prisons far from their homes.
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