

UA 335/94 Death Penalty

9 September 1994

SIERRA LEONE

Amara CONTEH, aged 77

Amara Conteh, a 77-year-old warrant officer in the Sierra Leone army, was sentenced to death by a court martial in Freetown, the capital, on 7 September 1994. The sentence was handed down by a civilian judge after Amara Conteh had been convicted of collaborating with rebel forces which have been fighting government troops since 1991. Although the death sentence has to be confirmed by the government, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), before it can be carried out, there are fears that Amara Conteh may be executed within a short time.

It is not known whether Amara Conteh has been allowed any right of appeal. Twenty-six people - nine civilians and 17 military and police officers - were executed hastily in December 1992 apparently after trial by a special military court which tries treason cases. The government later ruled that the court would in future hold open hearings, be chaired by a civilian judge and would allow appeals to the Court of Appeal.

Amara Conteh and three other soldiers were also convicted but were sentenced to prison terms of between 16 and 22 years. They were accused of taking part in rebel attacks in March and April 1994 in the area around the town of Matotoka, Tonkolili District, in Northern Province, in which some 100 people were killed. They were also accused of supplying information about government troops' movements and armaments. Amara Conteh joined the army in 1940 and retired more than 25 years ago; however, he re-enlisted in 1993 after the NPRC called on former members of the armed forces to help fight the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

Armed conflict between government forces and the RUF began in 1991 when the RUF invaded from neighbouring Liberia. Fighting continued after the NPRC came to power following a coup in April 1992. The conflict has been characterised by gross human rights abuses by both sides, including the torture and killings of captured opponents and civilians.

Although by the end of 1993 government troops had recaptured most of the areas previously held by rebels in the south and east of Sierra Leone, fighting has continued and worsened during 1994 with incursions and attacks by rebel forces reported in areas, such as Northern Province, previously unaffected by fighting. However, there have been persistent claims and mounting evidence that many attacks on both civilians and government troops have been carried out by disloyal soldiers and others who have deserted from the army rather than by rebel forces of the RUF. Hundreds of civilians have been killed since the beginning of the year in attacks on their villages or on Sierra Leone's major road ways. Thousands of others have been displaced from their homes.

Amara Conteh and the three other defendants are believed to be the first people accused of collaboration with rebel forces to have been brought to trial. Since 1991 suspected rebels and people accused of supporting them have been extrajudicially executed by soldiers. Hundreds of others have been held indefinitely without charge or trial in the Central Prison, Pademba Road, Freetown, on suspicion of involvement in rebel activities.

In 1993 there were reports that other soldiers had been sentenced to death by courts martial but no executions were carried out.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/express and airmail letters either in English or in your own language:

- expressing concern that Amara Conteh was sentenced to death by a court martial in Freetown on 8 September 1994;
- explaining that, while it does not condone, or question the gravity of, the offences reported to have been committed, Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases on the grounds that it is a violation of the right to life and the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment;
- urging that this, and all other death sentences, be commuted and that no executions take place.

APPEALS TO:

Captain Valentine E.M. Strasser
Chairman, Supreme Council of State
National Provisional Ruling Council
State House
Independence Avenue
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Telegrams: Captain Strasser, NPRC, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Telexes: 3230

Salutation: Dear Captain Strasser

Captain Julius Maada Bio
Deputy Chairman and
Chief Secretary of State
National Provisional Ruling Council
State House
Independence Avenue
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Telegrams: Captain Maada Bio, NPRC, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Telexes: 3230

Salutation: Dear Captain Maada Bio

COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:

Captain Samuel Komba Kambo
Under-Secretary of State for Defence
Department of Defence
Tower Hill
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Colonel Kellie Conteh
Chief of Staff
Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (RSLMF)
New Office
Wilkinson Road
Freetown, Sierra Leone

Mr Franklyn Kargbo
Attorney General and Secretary of State for Justice
Department of Justice and Office of the Attorney General
Guma Building
Lamina Sankoh Street

Freetown, Sierra Leone

and to the editors of following newspapers:

The New Citizen, 5 Hannah Benka-Coker Street, Brookfields, Freetown, Sierra Leone

Daily Mail, 29-31 Rawdon Street, PO Box 53, Freetown, Sierra Leone

and to diplomatic representatives of Sierra Leone accredited to your country

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 21 October 1994.