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Togo: Rule of terror in a climate of impunity

A first step towards overturning the rule of terror in Togo will be to end the current climate of total impunity for murder, torture and other human rights violations, Amnesty International said today.

In a new report, the human rights organization describes how Togolese police and security forces have killed and “disappeared” people without being held accountable. Arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment -- sometimes resulting in deaths -- and extremely harsh prison conditions also form part of this disturbing pattern of organized repression which has developed over many years.

“Togo’s human rights crisis can only begin to be resolved if the authorities start bringing those who kill and torture to justice,” Amnesty International said. “The international community must also share the blame for what is happening in Togo and stop supplying the country with arms and other military assistance when there is a clear danger that they are contributing to human rights violations.”

The statement came as Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Pierre Sané, was preparing for a visit to Togo on 20-21 May, during which he hopes to engage in positive dialogue about human rights with President Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who has governed the country since 1967.

Some democratic changes were put in place in Togo in the early 1990s as a new constitution, approved in a referendum in 1992, opened the way to political pluralism and a degree of freedom of expression. However, it has so far failed to prevent serious human rights violations from continuing.

Repression has been especially harsh around the last two elections. After the results were announced in the June 1998 presidential election, hundreds of people, including members of the military, were killed by the security forces. Corpses were washed up on the beaches of Togo and neighbouring Benin for days afterwards.

The hundreds of political killings and dozens of “disappearances” in recent years in Togo are largely attributable to members of the *Forces armées togolaises* (FAT), Togolese Armed Forces, and the *gendarmerie nationale*, paramilitary police force. The perpetrators have rarely -- if ever -- been brought to justice.

Arbitrary detention also continues unabated. Scores of civilians and military personnel have been detained for months, even years, without charge or trial. The majority of those arrested over the past four years have been detained solely on suspicion of being “rebels” or members of an opposition party.

During the last decade the Togolese security forces have systematically tortured suspects. One former detainee, an opposition party member, told Amnesty International:

“I was received at the gendarmerie headquarters by blows from cables, rifle butts and batons all over my body. They asked me questions about my party and accused me of being an arms trafficker. Lieutenant S ... then ordered me to be put on a table surrounded by soldiers. They struck me with batons and belt buckles ... at a certain moment I fell down and had difficulty getting up again. No one helped me to get up; they continued to beat me to make me get up again on the table on my own ... the next day at four o'clock in the morning the police served me a ‘strong coffee’

(being woken up by beating with batons).”

Throughout the country, and particularly in the civil prison and the gendarmerie headquarters in Lomé, the capital, detention conditions are very severe and far from meeting international standards. Medical care and food supplies are completely inadequate and many detainees suffer from illnesses such as tuberculosis, for which they receive no medical treatment.

It is essential to challenge the part played by the army, and in particular its hierarchy, in human rights violations. However, it is no less important to reflect on the role played by those foreign governments which provide the Togolese authorities with arms and other military assistance, thereby facilitating human rights violations.

Togo continues to benefit from significant military aid from France, the former colonial power, particularly through an agreement on defence and on technical military assistance by which France may be called upon to intervene at any time in response to external invasion. The agreement reportedly also allows for French intervention in the event of internal unrest in Togo. It has never been made public. South Africa and Chad have also provided Togo with military, security and police equipment in the past.

In November and December 1998, an Amnesty International delegation discussed the seriousness of Togo’s human rights situation with senior officials, including the Ministers of Justice, the Interior and Defence. All expressed their commitment to protecting and promoting human rights. However, they refused to discuss their government’s human rights policies in detail. Despite extensive evidence of continuing human rights violations, the authorities denied most of the organization’s allegations and accused it of raking up the past.

“The situation in Togo demands concrete and immediate action,” Amnesty International said. “A country which has a constitution that guarantees human rights, and which has ratified almost the full panoply of international human rights treaties, must honour its commitments at the national as well as the international level.”

Amnesty International is calling on all members of the international community, and primarily France, to stop the transfer to Togo of equipment which could be used to violate human rights. The French government should also make all military aid conditional on a human rights training programme. Reports of human rights violations committed by the security forces should be investigated promptly and thoroughly and those responsible brought to justice.

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To receive a copy of the report, or to arrange an interview, please contact Amnesty International in London, UK, on +44 171 413 5566.