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Togo: Credibility at stake -- attacks against human rights defenders continue despite Togolese government's acceptance of international investigation

The willingness of the Togolese government to allow an impartial and independent investigation into human rights violations reportedly committed at the time of the June 1998 presidential elections, will only be credible when attacks against human rights defenders cease, Amnesty International said today.

Although Amnesty International welcomes the Togolese government's letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on 10 March reaffirming its commitment to an international commission of inquiry, the fact that criminal charges are still pending against human rights defenders -- including Pierre Sané, Amnesty International's Secretary General -- reveals the double standards of the Togolese authorities.

"On the one hand they accept an international commission of investigation to uncover the involvement of government security forces in human rights violations in Togo, but on the other hand they continue to persecute or attack people who speak out for human rights," the organization said.

Amnesty International -- which has been calling since May 1999 for a commission of inquiry to be established -- urges the United Nations to establish an international commission of inquiry without any further delay.

"The longer the establishment of the commission of inquiry is delayed, the more difficult it will be for the commission to collect evidence and meet witnesses to shed light on the killings," the organization stressed.

"Bribery and death threats have already been used by the Togolese authorities in an attempt to discredit human rights reports and destroy evidence of violations," the organization added.

Amnesty International also calls on the Togolese government to cease all attacks on and drop all criminal charges against human rights defenders.

Background

Following publication of Amnesty International report on Togo in May 1999, human rights defenders in Togo -- including Amnesty International members -- have been harassed, intimidated, arrested and tortured. Others have been forced into hiding or have fled the country with their families.

The human rights violations documented in Amnesty International's report of May 1999 were corroborated by other independent organizations such as the League for Human Rights Defence of Benin (LDH) as well as by Togolese independent journalists and Patrick de Saint Exupéry, a French journalist from Le Figaro, who travelled to Benin in June 1999 to undertake his own investigations.

Legal action was taken against Pierre Sané -- Secretary General of Amnesty International -- who was ordered to appear before a Togolese judge on charges of contempt, dissemination of false news, incitement to revolt and conspiracy against the external security of the state. Legal proceedings against him were suspended in November 1999 pending the outcome of the international commission of inquiry, but they have not been dropped. The criminal charges against Togolese human rights defenders, including Nestor Tengue who were arrested in May 1999, are still pending.

In December 1999, five leaders of the Council of the University of Benin -- Alphonse Lawson-Hellu, Lorempo Lamboni, Souradjou Karimou, Kokou Segbeaya and Justin Akakpo -- and other members of teachers' unions were arbitrarily arrested, beaten and released shortly afterwards. In December 1999, the Amnesty International section in Togo received a letter from the Togolese Interior Minister questioning the organization's legal status in the country.

Additionally on 23 December 1999 and 28 January 2000 respectively, Roland Kpagli Comlan, director of *l'Aurore*, a weekly independent newspaper, and two trade unionists, Norbert Gbikpi-Benissan and Pierre Allaga-Kodegui, were arrested for "spreading false information". They were all released on 4 February after the government withdrew the complaint.

A student demonstration protesting against the curtailment of their right to strike and against the presence of security forces in the campus was dispersed with tear gas by the Togolese security forces on 1 March 2000. Some students were injured and beaten by the Togolese security forces.

The following day, during another demonstration, 12 students were arrested, some of them beaten at the time of arrest, and charged with gathering illegally. They were tried on 7 March but were all released after being acquitted or given suspended sentences. However, five students leaders of the Council of the University of Benin (CEUB) -- Lorempo Lamboni, Kokou Segbeaya, Justin Akakpo, Daniel Kolani, Anif Tchadjobo -- were charged with vandalism and organizing illegal gatherings. They were tried in absentia and sentenced to 18 month prison terms.

A new press bill was passed in early January 2000 by the Togolese National Assembly tightening press freedom and making defamation of the government an imprisonable offence. Amnesty International believes this is a further measure to silence critics, in particular independent journalists who play a key role in exposing human rights violations.
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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>