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Burkina Faso: a year after Norbert Zongo's death -- still no justice

No one has yet been brought to justice for the murder of journalist Norbert Zongo and three others on 13 December 1998, Amnesty International said today, calling for an end to impunity in Burkina Faso.

"No decisive action has been taken by the government of Burkina Faso to prosecute those responsible for Norbert Zongo's death, despite the public outrage generated by his death a year ago," Amnesty International said.

An Independent Commission of Inquiry concluded in May 1999 that Norbert Zongo had been murdered for political motives. He had vigorously and persistently investigated the death of David Ouédraogo, the chauffeur of François Compaoré, brother of President Blaise Compaoré. David Ouédraogo was arrested in December 1997 and died the following month after being tortured while held by the presidential security force in Ouagadougou.

The commission of inquiry named six members of the presidential security force, the *Régiment de la sécurité présidentielle*, as serious suspects in the murder of Norbert Zongo and recommended that judicial proceedings be instituted against them. Although a judge was subsequently appointed to the case, there has been no further progress and no one has yet been charged with the killings.

"Those suspected of being responsible for the murder of Norbert Zongo and his companions should be promptly brought before the judiciary, acting with complete independence, for further investigation."

Those calling for an end to impunity, both in the case of Norbert Zongo and in other violations of human rights, have been repeatedly harassed, arrested and detained. Most recently, on 1 December 1999, leading members of the *Collectif d'organisations démocratiques de masse et de partis politiques* -- a coalition of political parties, human rights organizations, trade unions, journalists and students' organizations formed after Norbert Zongo's death -- were arrested. They had issued a statement calling on the security forces to ensure the safety of demonstrators during a protest against impunity on 27 November.

Among those arrested on 1 December were Halidou Ouédraogo, president of the human rights organization *Mouvement burkinabè des droits de l'homme et des peuples*; Tolé Sagnon, a leading trade unionist; Bénéwendé Sankara, a lawyer; and André Tibiri, a student leader. They were detained for three hours by the State Security Department in Ouagadougou. They have since appeared twice before the public prosecutor on accusations of inciting rebellion and disobedience in the armed forces and attacking the security of the state but have not yet been charged.

Two journalists, Boureima Sigue of *Le Pays* newspaper and Paulin Yaméogo of *San Finna* newspaper, were also arrested on 1 December for having published the *Collectif's* statement. It appears that Paulin Yaméogo's arrest was also linked to the publication by *San Finna* of a photograph of Hamidou Ilboudo, who had been arrested with David Ouédraogo in December 1997, which showed clear signs of the torture which he had undergone while held by the presidential security service. Although Boureima Sigue was released the same day, Paulin Yaméogo was held until 3 December.

"Those defending human rights in Burkina Faso must be allowed to undertake legitimate activities without fear of harassment, arrest and detention," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

In December 1998 the badly burnt body of Norbert Zongo, editor-in-chief of the independent weekly newspaper *L'Indépendant*, was found with those of two other passengers in a vehicle about 100 kilometres from Ouagadougou, on the road to Sapouy. A fourth body was found beside the vehicle. The other victims were his brother, Ernest Zongo, his chauffeur, Ablassé Nikiéma, and Blaise Ilboudo. The death of Norbert Zongo resulted in widespread social unrest. Demonstrations and strikes have taken place throughout the country since his death.

François Compaoré was charged on 18 January 1999 with the murder of David Ouédraogo and with harbouring the body. He was not, however, arrested nor detained and the charges against him were not made public until 30 March 1999. On 31 March, after François Compaoré had requested that the charges against him be withdrawn, the Criminal Appeal Court in Ouagadougou ruled that it was not competent to hear the case and referred it to a military court. The judge of the military court is reported to have been obstructed in pursuing the case and it has failed to advance.

Three members of the presidential security force also suspected of being responsible for the death of David Ouédraogo were arrested in June 1999 at the request of the *Collège des sages*, a committee of prominent people, established by the government to address the deepening political and social crisis caused by the death of Norbert Zongo. All three were also among those identified by the commission of inquiry into the death of Norbert Zongo.

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