

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: AFR 44/011/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 73
31 March 2003

Nigeria: Legal Defence and Assistance Project (LEDAP) and Amnesty International Joint statement on increasing political violence in the run-up to elections

(Lagos) Legal Defence and Assistance Project (LEDAP) and Amnesty International today express their deep concern about human rights violations as political violence increases in the run-up to the Nigerian federal and state elections scheduled for April and May 2003.

Reports of political violence, including assassination of political leaders, clashes between supporters of different political persuasions both within political parties and between rival parties, and intimidation and harassment of candidates and sympathizers have risen considerably in recent months. Human rights violations have been widely reported during local elections over the past four years and are alleged to be part of the struggle for power at state and federal level.

Amnesty International and LEDAP are concerned that rising political violence results in violations of the fundamental rights to life and physical integrity and inhibits genuine participation and freedom of expression.

An appeal to political parties and leaders

Political assassinations are currently being perpetrated throughout Nigeria in the run-up to federal and state elections. Marshall Harry, a prominent member of the All Nigeria People's party (ANPP), was killed by unidentified armed men who entered his residence in Abuja on the night of 5 March 2003. On 10 February 2003, Ogbonaya Uche, an ANPP candidate to the Senate, died in Owerri days after he had been shot by unidentified armed men, in what seems to be a politically motivated assassination. Dele Arojo, a leader of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and a contender to the governorship of Ogun State, was killed, apparently for political motives, in Lagos on 27 November 2002.

Allegations of politically motivated acts of violence, harassment and intimidation of political opponents and other citizens by individual members of state governments and political parties within the State Houses of Assembly have also been reported throughout the country. Political violence at state level has been particularly acute in Ebonyi, Anambra and Bayelsa States. For example, on 1 September 2002, Barnabas Igwe, president of the Nigerian Bar Association in Anambra State, and his wife were killed by a group of people armed with machetes. Barnabas Igwe had publicly opposed state-endorsed vigilante groups in Anambra and openly criticized the Governor of the state.

Political parties and leaders are also reported to have incited violence among voters and

sympathizers. Three people were reportedly killed and several others injured in November 2002 after supporters of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and the PDP clashed in Effurun, Delta State.

Violence in the quest for political power within local constituencies is of particular concern for LEDAP and Amnesty International as it often takes place in remote areas with little publicity. Local elections take place throughout the year unlike the state, federal and presidential elections which are held over a limited period of a couple of months. There is, however, the risk of violence intensifying during state and federal elections as political factions and groups take sides in supporting candidates competing for executive and legislative power.

LEDAP and Amnesty International urge all candidates in the elections to do their utmost to prevent political violence, whether generated by leaders or supporters of their own political parties in internal disputes or against other political party leaders or sympathizers. Candidates must refrain from inciting ethnic or religious tensions among the electorate at federal and state level which could lead to inter-communal or inter-religious violence based on political affiliation.

LEDAP and Amnesty International urge all political parties to express publicly their commitment to curb political violence among their supporters and, independently from the action of the law enforcement officials and judiciary, to carry out exhaustive internal investigations on allegations of politically motivated acts of violence sponsored by their members. Parties are also urged to make their findings public and establish firm disciplinary measures for those within their parties found responsible for such acts.

An appeal to the federal government

LEDAP and Amnesty International call on the Nigerian government to provide urgent protection for politicians and other individuals particularly at risk during the electoral period. It is deeply worrying that in some of the cases of apparent political killings, the victims had reportedly requested protection from the police but without effective security measures having been taken.

Over the past four years, Amnesty International and LEDAP have denounced the increasing flow of firearms into Nigeria and the creation of armed groups, including vigilante groups which are used by politicians to foment political violence and harass and intimidate political opponents at local and state levels. LEDAP and Amnesty International fear that unless immediate and sustained action is taken to prevent human rights violations by vigilante and other armed groups, further violations are inevitable.

All acts of political violence and the existence of armed groups must be promptly investigated and those suspected of being responsible for human rights violations must be brought to justice in accordance with international standards of fair trial.

An appeal to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the security forces

Noting that INEC has the constitutional responsibility to ensure the peaceful organization of the elections, LEDAP and Amnesty International call on INEC to liaise with the Nigerian police for a proper and effective coordination of the deployment of security personnel and equipment before, during and after elections, to ensure that there are no violations of human rights of those exercising their right to vote in the elections.

In particular, INEC and the Nigerian police should collaborate effectively in designating the key areas of deployment of the security forces during the electoral period, giving maximum priority to considerations on how human rights violations can be prevented. INEC should assist the Nigerian police to mobilize and train police officers in electoral conflict management and properly equip them to respond to acts of political violence according to international standards of law enforcement.

An appeal to national and international observers and the international community

Amnesty International and LEDAP welcome the significant increase in the number of international election monitors assigned to the April and May 2003 elections compared to the 1999 elections. The two organizations call on governments, institutions and organizations which have commissioned observers, including the European Union and the Commonwealth, to give priority in their briefs to monitoring respect of the human rights of voters and candidates. Observers must be thoroughly trained to deal with the numerous cases of political violence and should be instructed to collaborate with the Nigerian police and INEC in identifying and reporting human rights violations during the electoral process. Monitors must observe the whole electoral process, including federal and states elections to the executive and legislature, and continue their monitoring in the post-election period.

LEDAP and Amnesty International call on the international community to express publicly its concern about mounting political violence during the elections and urge governments to prioritize the assessment made by national and international observers of the human rights situation in Nigeria during elections in their contacts with the Nigerian government.

Background

Legal Defence and Assistance Project is a non-profit organisation engaged in the legal protection and promotion and human rights and good governance in Nigeria.

Amnesty International is a non-profit, worldwide human rights movement independent from any government.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>