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Togo : Bribery claim is "utterly ridiculous"

Amnesty International today described allegations that it had accepted a bribe as "utterly ridiculous and deeply insulting to the victims of Togolese terror ." The organization's Secretary General Pierre Sane branded Togolese interior minister General Sizing Walla, who made the accusation yesterday, "a desperate man employing the tactics of a desperate government."

General Walla claimed that the human rights organization had received a US\$500,000 payment from Togolese opposition leader Gilchrist Olympio in return for writing a report that was critical of human rights standards in Togo.

"These false allegations are designed to distract people from the systematic violation of human rights and the culture of impunity in Togo," Pierre Sane added. "It is a tactic with which we have become familiar, and one which can only be described as pathetic."

*A Joint Commission of Inquiry was set up by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity to investigate the claims made by Amnesty International in its 1999 report *Togo: Rule of Terror*. The Commission is due to publish its findings in the very near future and Amnesty International believes that yesterday's accusations demonstrate panic within a Togolese government faced with the prospect of damning findings.*

Togo: Rule of Terror, published in May 1999, found that hundreds of civilians and soldiers had been the victims of extrajudicial executions, ill-treatment and torture. During an investigative visit an Amnesty International delegation had been told of unusual movements of helicopters sometimes flying at low level altitude out to sea. Bodies were retrieved from the beaches of Togo and Benin and corpses were seen at sea.

"The only incentive Amnesty International needed to compile this evidence and write this report was the desire to reveal the appalling standard of human rights in Togo," added Mr Sane. "To say we were bribed is deeply offensive to the victims and to the courageous researchers who compiled this report."

The allegations of bribery are not new. Last November, the Joint Commission of Inquiry received letters purportedly from Mr Gilchrist Olympio, in which he purportedly offered Pierre Sane payments totalling US\$500,000 in relation to the Amnesty International report. When informed of these allegations, Pierre Sane wrote to the Commission of Inquiry categorically denying that he ever received any payment whatsoever from Mr Olympio or anyone else from Togo.

Amnesty International also wrote, on 10 January 2001, to the UN secretary General Kofi Annan and the OAU Secretary General Salim Ahmed Salim urging them to make public the report of the Joint Commission of Inquiry, and to ensure the protection of witnesses.

Background notes

Immediately after Togo: Rule of Terror was published, the Togolese government described it as "a pack of lies" and "an attempt by an interested party to misinform the public." The government subsequently ordered the arrest of local human rights defenders - including Amnesty International members - who were suspected of having provided information for the report. Some were tortured, while others fled the country fearing for their lives.

The Togolese authorities then instigated legal proceedings against Pierre Sane.

Mr Olympio, leader of the Union For Change, has dismissed the allegations and has initiated legal proceedings against the government.

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