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## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **Togo: Continued attacks against human rights activists**

*"We will show you what democracy means"*

(Togolese policeman to a student shortly before he was beaten unconscious)

Attacks by the Togolese security forces against trade unionists, teachers and students vividly illustrate the Togolese government's continuing clampdown on dissent, Amnesty International said today.

"The beatings and arrests of human rights activists by the security forces reaffirm the government's complete lack of respect for civil society and basic human rights," Amnesty International said.

On 7 December five Togolese students -- leaders of the the Council of the University of Benin (CEUB), a students union -- were arrested after addressing a public meeting of students at Ablapedogan high school in Lomé on the problems of the Togolese education system.

The public meeting, reportedly agreed by the director of the school, was interrupted by the arrival of the security forces who beat up the five students, arrested them and threw tear-gas canisters into the gathering of high school students attending the meeting.

The five student leaders of the CEUB -- Alphonse Lawson-Hellu, Lorempo Lamboni, Souradjou Karimou, Kokou Segbeaya and Justin Akakpo -- were taken to the Djidjolé police station, and were reportedly beaten up again before being transferred to the Department of Judicial Police. The following day they were transferred to Lomé's civil prison after being charged with vandalism. The five individuals were given 18 month suspended sentences and eventually released on 10 December.

Although some acts of vandalism were allegedly carried out in the high school after the intervention of the security forces, according to information received by Amnesty International, none of the five students arrested were responsible for carrying out or advocating any act of vandalism or violence.

This incident was not unique. In the afternoon of 7 December, Attisso Bouamé, a staff member at Nyékonakpoé high school, was beaten up in Lomé by two members of the presidential guard. He had been handing out union leaflets about a demonstration being held the following day calling for payment of teachers' unpaid salaries. He was forcibly taken to a military camp in

Lomé where he was reportedly severely beaten up. Attisso Bouamé suffered head injuries and was twice threatened with execution before being released the next day.

On 8 December, the day of the demonstration, at least six other members of students' and teachers' unions -- including Bernardin Zekpa, philosophy teacher at Nyékonakpoé high school and Eloi Nouwossan, mathematics teacher at Gbényédji high school -- were arrested as they gathered in the Lomé suburb of Bé, the starting point of the demonstration.

The demonstration, called by the CEUB and three teachers' unions, had been banned by the Interior Ministry because it might have disrupted law and order and the arrangements put in place on the occasion of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and West African Economic and Monetary Union summits in Lomé.

Most of those arrested were taken to the so-called "chambre de correction", room of punishment, at the central police station where they were punched and beaten with rubber and plastic sticks. One of those arrested was forced to undress and made to lie on the floor. A chair was placed on his stomach to prevent him from moving, at which point he was kicked and beaten until he lost consciousness. All the detainees were released later the same day without being charged.

Amnesty International calls on the Togolese authorities to respect the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and allow human rights defenders to work without fear of intimidation and arrest. The organization also calls on the Togolese authorities to conduct an immediate investigation into the allegations of ill-treatment and torture of those teachers and students arrested on 7 and 8 December and to bring those responsible to justice.

### **Background**

In the past few years the Togolese security forces have arbitrarily arrested and harassed human rights defenders, including trade unionists and journalists. Some of them have been extrajudicially executed.

In May 1999 at least three members of a Togolese human rights organisation, accused of passing false information to Amnesty International, were arrested, detained for several weeks and charged with criminal offences. They were released in June 1999 but the charges are still pending. For the same reason, a Togolese member of Amnesty International was arrested, beaten and threatened with death while in detention. Other Togolese human rights defenders were forced into hiding or to flee the country with their families. A Nigerian member of Amnesty International was also detained and tortured.

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