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Burkina Faso: Those responsible for the death of Norbert Zongo must be brought to justice

As demands for the government to bring to justice those responsible for journalist Norbert Zongo's death intensify, those defending human rights in Burkina Faso are facing arrest, threats and intimidation, Amnesty International said today.

Since 7 May, when the independent commission of inquiry made public its conclusion that Norbert Zongo had been killed for political motives, prominent members of a coalition of political parties, human rights organizations, trade unions, journalists' and students' organizations formed after Norbert Zongo's death have been harassed and arrested.

"The government must take measures to protect those defending human rights in Burkina Faso," Amnesty International said.

Halidou Ouédraogo, president of the coalition and also of the *Mouvement burkinabè des droits de l'homme et des peuples* (MBDHP), a human rights organization, was arrested and detained for two hours on 17 May. On 10 May his home had been surrounded by a group at least 100 people who threatened and insulted him, apparently at the instigation of the mayor of Ouagadougou, the capital, who is also Secretary General of the ruling party, the *Congrès pour la démocratie et le progrès*. Opposition leader Hermann Yaméogo, who was also arrested on 17 May, remains in detention.

"Hermann Yaméogo must be immediately and unconditionally released if, as it appears, he is held solely because of his legitimate political activities and his demands for an end to impunity for human rights violations," Amnesty International said.

The commission of inquiry established to investigate the deaths of Norbert Zongo and three others who died with him concluded that he had been killed because of his work as an investigative journalist. In particular, Norbert Zongo had persistently and vigorously pursued the case of David Ouédraogo who died in January 1998 while in the custody of the presidential security force. David Ouédraogo was the chauffeur of the head of state's brother, François Compaoré.

The commission of inquiry named six members of the *Régiment de la sécurité présidentielle* as serious suspects in the murder of Norbert Zongo, although proof of their culpability had not been established, and recommended that judicial proceedings be instituted against them.

"Those responsible for the murder of Norbert Zongo should be identified and brought to justice and the judiciary must be allowed to act with complete independence," Amnesty International said.

Although the government announced on 10 May that the report of the commission of inquiry would be referred with a minimum of delay to the judiciary, Amnesty International fears that the political will to act decisively on the findings of the commission of inquiry and to bring to justice

those responsible for the death of Norbert Zongo is lacking.

Background

On 13 December 1998 the badly burned 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. Few in Burkina Faso believed that the deaths were the result of an accident.

Norbert Zongo, who was also President of the *Société des éditeurs de la presse privée*, Association of Independent Newspaper Editors, in Burkina Faso, was renowned and respected for his independence and fearless criticism of the government.

François Compaoré was charged on 18 January 1999 with the murder of David Ouédraogo and with harbouring his body. He was not, however, arrested or detained and the charges against him were not made public until 30 March. The following day, 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.

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