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Equatorial Guinea: Amnesty International welcomes the commutation of death sentences

Amnesty International welcomes the decree issued on 9 September by Equatorial Guinea President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo commuting the death sentences of 15 people (four of which judged *in absentia*) condemned on 1 June 1998 after a summary trial.

“We welcome the commutation and hope the prisoners’ incommunicado detention, which amounted to a slow execution, will end immediately,” Amnesty International said today.

The 15 death sentences were issued in Malabo, capital of Equatorial Guinea, after a summary and unfair military trial in May 1998 at which Amnesty International observers were present. On the day of their sentence, a firing squad was ready and graves were dug for them. At the very last minute, the President ordered a stay of the executions.

Since being sentenced to death, the 11 prisoners have been kept in appalling prison conditions and near starvation. They were not allowed to receive family visits and could only leave their cells for a few minutes a day.

“These prison conditions are endangering the lives of the detainees,” Amnesty International said. They suffer from dehydration and the mental health of one of them, Leoncio Coto, has reportedly been affected. He suffers from acute feelings of persecution.

While welcoming the commutation, Amnesty International is today calling for the improvement of the prison conditions of about 70 other people sentenced to prison terms during the same trial.

The prison where they are detained is by the sea, the climate is hot and humid and inmates are crowded into small and filthy cells. “We are concerned about their health and reports indicate that prison authorities are reluctant to send ill prisoners to hospital,” the organization said today.

These prison conditions have already claimed the life of Martin Puye (aged 58), one of the leaders of the *Movimiento para la Auto-determinación de la Isla de Bioko* (MAIB), Movement of the Self-determination of Bioko Island. Many other prisoners are very weak after being severely tortured during their pre-trial detention.

All these people were accused of involvement in the 21 January 1998 attacks on military barracks on Bioko Island which led to the death of three soldiers and several civilians. They were all sentenced on the basis of confessions extracted under torture. Many of them -- predominantly members of the Bubi ethnic group on Bioko Island -- seem to have been detained solely because of their ethnic origin.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to give enough food and water to all the detainees and allow those who need it to receive professional medical treatment.

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The organization is also urging the government to grant the prisoners access to an international humanitarian organization such as the International Committee for the Red Cross.

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