

EXTERNAL

AI Index: AFR 51/04/98

UA 35/98

Fear of torture and ill-treatment/
Prisoner of conscience

5 February 1998

SIERRA LEONE Michael Lawson, student

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the safety of Michael Lawson, who was arrested on 30 January 1998, and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience.

Michael Lawson, a university student at Fourah Bay College, in the capital Freetown, is apparently accused of passing information to a radio station broadcasting in support of the government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, ousted in a military coup in May 1997. President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah had come to power in March 1996 following elections. The radio station, 98.1 FM, has been broadcasting clandestinely since July 1997. Many people suspected of providing information to the radio station, or knowing from where broadcasts are transmitted, have been arrested and ill-treated.

Michael Lawson is believed to be held at the police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) headquarters in the centre of Freetown. Torture and ill-treatment of those perceived to oppose the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which came to power following the coup, are routine.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the military coup on 25 May 1997, soldiers, together with members of the armed opposition Revolutionary United Front (RUF) who have joined forces with them, have committed serious human rights violations. Hundreds of people have been arbitrarily arrested and detained; many have been tortured and ill-treated. Some of those suspected of opposing the AFRC have been extrajudicially executed. Victims of human rights violations have included people associated with the ousted government, journalists, students and human rights activists.

In October 1997 the AFRC agreed to return power to President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah by 22 April 1998. However, there have been serious set-backs to the implementation of this agreement. Fighting has intensified throughout the country between soldiers and RUF forces on the one side and local hunters, known as *kamajors*, who support President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, on the other. The serious human rights abuses, including torture, ill-treatment and deliberate and arbitrary killings of unarmed civilians by both sides, which characterized the internal armed conflict between government forces and the RUF from 1991 to 1996, are once again occurring.

In October 1997 Amnesty International published a report - *Sierra Leone: A disastrous set-back for human rights* - which documented the serious human rights violations that have occurred since the coup and made specific recommendations to the AFRC for ending these abuses. It also called on the international community, which has condemned the coup and sought to resolve the political crisis in Sierra Leone, to ensure the protection of fundamental human rights in any decisions and actions it takes.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Due to disruptions in communications with Sierra Leone, since May 1997, Urgent Action coordinators are asked to organize a limited number of appeals only: up to FIVE per section. A restricted international

postal service is operating through neighbouring Guinea but delays are inevitable. Fax machines operate but on an intermittent basis.

Please send faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Michael Lawson, a student at Fourah Bay College, arrested on 30 January 1998 and considered to be a prisoner of conscience;
- urging immediate measures to ensure that he is protected from torture and ill-treatment and is humanely treated;
- urging that he be allowed immediate access to a doctor, a lawyer and members of his family.

APPEALS TO:

Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Paul Koroma
Chairman, Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
State House

Independence Avenue

Freetown, Sierra Leone

Faxes: + 232 22 24 21 26 / 232 22 22 78 78

Salutation: Dear Lieutenant Colonel Koroma

Colonel Abdul K. Sesay
Secretary General, Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
State House

Independence Avenue

Freetown, Sierra Leone

Faxes: + 232 22 22 94 73

Salutation: Dear Colonel Sesay

Mr Allieu Kamara
Spokesman, Armed Forces Revolutionary Council
State House

Independence Avenue

Freetown, Sierra Leone

Faxes: + 232 22 22 88 99

Salutation: Dear Mr Kamara

Mr Alimamy Paolo Bangura
Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs
Department of Foreign Affairs

14 Gloucester Street

Freetown, Sierra Leone

Faxes: + 232 22 22 56 15

Salutation: Dear Mr Bangura

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 20 March 1998.